

SYINAT SULTANALIEVA, *“Nomadity of Being” in Central Asia: Narratives of Kyrgyzstani Women’s Rights Activists*. Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023. Viii, 169 pages, EUR 128.00. ISBN 978-981-19-5445-0 (hardcover)

Syinat Sultanalieva’s book *Nomadity of Being* is based on her dissertation for the special programme in Japanese and Eurasian Studies at the University of Tsukuba, Japan. The author researches the field of women’s activism in Kyrgyzstan by analysing narratives of female women’s rights activists using qualitative research methods. Sultanalieva conducted 28 individual interviews and facilitated 14 focus groups, involving a total of 78 women in six cities, in addition to ethnographic observations between 2017 and 2019. From this extensive set of data, Sultanalieva has identified the main characteristics of women’s rights activism in Kyrgyzstan, thereby contributing to an understanding of non-Western feminisms while offering an alternative to the impasse of the coloniality of being (p. 5). By highlighting the complexity of the postcolonial, post-Soviet, neo-liberal, patriarchal context in which this activism is situated – considering the influences of different agencies, socio-political factors, histories and the “porosity” of cultures – the author challenges the “simplified picture of Western feminism colonizing non-Western feminisms often developed by postcolonial critiques of feminism” (p. 12).

After the introduction, the work commences with a comprehensive literature review and a historical overview of Western and post-Soviet feminisms. Sultanalieva explains the existing critiques of the universalising approach of Western feminisms and the international women’s rights discourse, which include a disregard for the experiences of Soviet and post-Soviet women (pp. 27–28). These women had, after all, experienced an early shift into the public sphere, decades before their European and American counterparts, which entailed the strict policing of their clothing (such as being encouraged to unveil themselves in the Central Asian Soviet Republics) and the double burden of a life of labour while still bearing the responsibility of household chores and motherhood (pp. 21–23). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, international organisations came to the region with financial aid, coupled with the promises of capitalist development goals, which gave birth to gender studies in the region.

After the book’s elaboration on feminist theories and histories in and outside of Central Asia (Chapter 2), the author continues in Chapter 3 with a well-written journey all the way from the very foundations of coloniality at the roots of the Enlightenment, to postcolonial critical theory and finally decolonial thinking. The author complements this overview with (post-)Soviet postcolonial theories, subsequently analysing the universal (in)applicability of feminist theories from the point of view of decolonial theory. Sultanalieva offers a critical look at Western feminisms and the system of international NGOs championing the so-called liberation of Central Asian women. At the

same time, the author also remains critical of “nationalist” discourses that dismiss anything related to foreign discourses and feminism. Sultanalieva reminds the reader of the “porosity” of cultural boundaries (p. 53). While arguing that decolonial thinking suffers from a theoretical impasse that presumes there is no way for the postcolonial subject to escape coloniality, Sultanalieva offers her own exit from this impasse, which she conceptualises as a “nomadity of being” (pp. 57–58), drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic subjectivity (1994), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s nomadology (1987) and Kyrgyz and Kazakh nomadic philosophies (Jyldyz Urmanbetova 2009, 2016 and Auezkhan Kodar 2009, 2015, respectively)¹:

[“Nomadity of being”] suggests a nomadic attitude to anything foreign as something that is either temporal or something that can be picked apart and selected in accordance with own needs. Nomadic subjects remain in the interstices between a colonized land and one that was only temporarily subjugated until better times are around. This approach suggests agency and not victimization of non-Western peoples, in this case – of Central Asia, of Kyrgyzstan. (p. 58)

In Chapter 4 Sultanalieva situates her research within the history of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia as a whole. The author analyses why the Russian Empire was considered a coloniser in Central Asia, whereas the Kokand Khanate was not. The Soviet Union, Sultanalieva suggests on the other hand, should be analysed as a “hybrid of colonialism and modernization” (p. 84). Eventually, the overview arrives chronologically in the post-Soviet sphere, depicting the context in which women’s rights activists operate today. The author explains how the years after the Fourth World Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995 can be marked as the first wave of women’s rights activism in Kyrgyzstan. Ever since, the field has known divisions along several lines (capital vs. rural, generational, NGOs vs. grassroots) and has only managed to unite sporadically in order to fight clear common threats.

Finally, in Chapter 5 Sultanalieva presents her own data. She shares different stories of the initiation of activists and divides them into three categories: initiation based on their own experiences of discrimination or abuse; initiation based on experiences of friends; or becoming an activist through professional engagement in NGOs. In these accounts, the reader can notice how some women explicitly do not identify as feminists. A meaningful characteristic among the

1 See Rosi Braidotti: *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. Columbia University Press, 1994. Gilles Deleuze / Felix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Jyldyz Urmanbetova / Savetbek Abdrasulov: *Istoki i tendentsii razvitiya kyrgyzskoi kultury* [Origins and Trends in the Development of Kyrgyz Culture]. Bishkek: Ilim, 2009. Jyldyz Urmanbetova: Traditsionnye nomadi Tsentralnoi Azii I sovremennye tsifrovye kochevniki [The Traditional Nomads of Central Asia and Contemporary Digital Nomads]. Conference presentation, 25 May 2016, Connect – Universum Conference, Tomsk State University, http://connect-universum.tsu.ru/blog/connectuniversum2014_ru/967.html. Auezkhan Kodar: Tengrianstvo v svete nomadologii Deleza-Gvattari [Tengrism in the Light of the Nomadology of Deleuze-Guattari]. *Novye Issledovania Tury* 4, 2009, p. 87. Auezkhan Kodar / Zamza Kodar: Gendernaya kulturologia v primenenii k kochevoi kulture [Gender Culturology as Applied to Nomadic Culture]. *Tamyr: Iskusstvo, Kultura, Filosofiya* 29, 2011, <https://tamyr.org/?p=1700> (accessed 12 December 2023).

staff members in international organisations is the “double-layered mentality”, as they combine their belief in the virtues of the patriarchy with their “gender equality work objectives” (p. 102). Women’s rights activism in Kyrgyzstan often follows a “core-periphery” direction (from Bishkek to the rest of the country) when it comes to knowledge transfer. In addition to this, international organisations often have pre-defined agendas, which results in a lack of relevance or topicality for trainees from other regions (pp. 103, 113).

In her final chapter, Sultanalieva comes up with yet another creative concept: she describes the portrait of a Kyrgyzstani *kurak* feminist, a composite figure made up of the different currents she identified among the women’s rights activists (p. 125). With the metaphor of the *kurak*, the author is referring to the traditional Kyrgyz patchwork technique. This proves a creative way of presenting and tying together the highly heterogeneous, and at first glance fragmented group of women. At the head of the *kurak*, Sultanalieva imagines women over the age of 40, based in the capital, who paved the way for gender studies in the region, and who attended the Fourth World Women’s Conference in Beijing in 1995. The torso consists of the rural-based activists that fight against domestic violence and for economic rights in their towns and who “sincerely believe in the value of marriage and family, in keeping up the long-held traditions of their people, and in ensuring their peaceful coexistence with women’s freedoms” (p. 126). The arms represent the staff of international organisations, who were only introduced to gender-based discrimination and violence after entering the NGO scene. They often share the aforementioned “double-layered mentality”, segregating their professional and private ideologies. Finally, the legs of the portrait represent grassroots feminist initiatives, who self-organise and who march on International Women’s Day with provoking slogans (p. 127).

Before proceeding to the conclusion, Sultanalieva gives an honest account of how her research did not match the romantic picture of the heroic feminist she had imagined. In contrast, what the author found were women creatively manipulating, negotiating and strategising their stakes (p. 132, where she quotes Aksana Ismailbekova²). However, by analysing these narratives through the lens of “nomadity of being” Sultanalieva offers a more inspiring understanding:

Nomadity of being – a productive force that provides a way out of the postmodern condition of oppressive hopelessness. It takes what it likes from global feminism and neoliberalism, a process that could even be described as plagiarism or appropriation, and forgets to attribute, forgets where it got it from, as the borrowed becomes a part of the living and breathing bricolage, a *kurak*. (pp. 131–132)

[...] nomadity of being makes a volitional choice to let go and let it be, making productive existence a priority. (p. 133)

2 Aksana Ismailbekova: Constructing the Authority of Women through Custom: Bulak Village, Kyrgyzstan. *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 44(2), 2016, pp. 266–280.

The reader might notice some annoyances while reading, such as the lengthy run of theory before reaching the actual data in Chapter 5 (and when the data is finally discussed, one could have enjoyed a longer discussion, given the richness of the interview excerpts), or some repetition in the last two chapters. However, this is offset by the invigorating main argument and the inventiveness of the metaphors that couldn't be more grounded in Kyrgyz tradition: the *kurak* and the nomad. The work also contains a few inevitable paradoxes, such as the fact that the author needed to draw upon established European theorists, not raised in nomadic culture, in order to present her own argument. Sultanalieva justifies this by noting that her work would not have been “accepted into the global knowledge production system without the founding of the conceptualization on the shoulders of these giants” (pp. 132–133). The same goes for the contextualisation of the women activists within the larger frame of established feminist theory, which contradicts her call for “de-grand-narrativizing of theories and histories of feminism, giving due credit to local stories and nuances” (p. 11). Surprisingly, she does not further contextualise her cases within the scholarship on feminisms and women's rights movements in Asia and the Middle East, with which her cases reveal similarities. Her cases and analysis resonate with the concepts of “governance feminism” by Lila Abu-Lughod (2010), as well as with “missionary feminism” and the solution of “nonideal universalism” proposed by Seren J. Khader (2019).³ This choice might be due to the Soviet legacy that grants the Kyrgyz case a particular status in relation to the Middle East and the non-post-Soviet countries in Asia.

In her extensive elaboration of theories, Sultanalieva takes no theory for granted, dissecting and questioning every statement to its root before building upon it, interrogating it and forcing the reader to rethink every assumption. She also gives credit and refers often to non-Western and especially Central Asian scholars.

Her work should thus be celebrated as a necessary contribution to the fields of Decolonial Studies and Central Asian Studies, as there is still a need for more Central Asian academics who not only document but also theorise the evolutions in the region. As Sultanalieva puts it: “[Kyrgyzstan] often remains as a testing site for the application of various theories, and never as a site for the origination of a theory based on the country's specificities” (p. 140). In this sense, this dissertation reads as a refreshing and bold manifesto of the *kurak*, calling for a revolution in feminist and decolonial theory.

Naomi Ntakiyica

3 See Lila Abu-Lughod: The Active Social Life of “Muslim Women's Rights”: A Plea for Ethnography, Not Polemic, with Cases from Egypt and Palestine. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 6(1), 2010, pp. 1–45. <https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2010.6.1.1>. Seren J. Khader: *Decolonizing Universalism: A Transnational Feminist Ethic*. New York et al.: Oxford University Press, 2019.