

*A State of Ambivalence: The Feminist Movement in Singapore.* By Lenore Lyons. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004. Series: *Social Sciences in Asia*. 191 pp.

Feminism has no seminal book or founding philosopher that gives it unity worldwide. It is often protean, defined differently by different protagonists and critics. Second-wave feminism that emerged in the United States in the 1960s is now seen as having been white, middle class, and oblivious to differences between women. Since then a myriad “other” feminisms have emerged creating what is known in feminist theory as a “politics of difference”.

Lenore Lyons’s book on the Singaporean women’s organization AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) engages the politics of difference. It is “a localised account of the negotiation of difference during the course of political activism” (p. 19). For AWARE, “the imperative to deal with difference does not arise out of the politics of difference debate as it has emerged in western feminisms. It arises through, and is constrained by, the realities of living in a multicultural, multiracial society” (p. 19). The Singapore government’s policy of multiracialism embeds race as a social identifier, but AWARE deliberately avoids collecting racial data on members thus subverting, at the same time as it is moderated by, state power.

AWARE was founded in 1985 as a research and advocacy group to promote gender equality. It is the only feminist organization in Singapore as indicated by the book’s subtitle in which “the feminist movement in Singapore” is synonymous with AWARE. Lyons quotes a founding member as saying that feminism in Singapore is a one-organization movement. Yet neither all the members nor the organization as a whole identify themselves as feminist. (Surprisingly, many of Lyons’s subjects associate feminism with bra-burning — that ubiquitous and mythically metonymic western stereotype.) Lyons argues that AWARE maintains a shifting, fluid, ambivalent identity that adapts to an “over-determinist state” (p. 173). On a positive note, she sees it as governed by “an ethical framework of acceptance and respect” (p. 18): “AWARE accepts that women’s choices vary.

Feminism is about giving women choices, not dictating what those choices should be” (p. 170). Women come together in AWARE, Lyons notes, not because of a shared experience of victimization as women but as feminist activists who share the goal of building a better society (p. 116).

An Australian who joined AWARE in the early 1990s while living in Singapore, Lyons is both an insider and an outsider to the organization. When she returned to Australia she began a study of AWARE for her doctoral dissertation out of which this book grew. Her research is based on 147 questionnaire responses (out of 631 sent out to AWARE members) and 34 interviews done between 1995 and 1997.

The book is skillfully organized, going from the global to the local. The introduction discusses the politics of difference and Asian feminism. Chapter One moves on to a history of the women’s movement in Singapore up to the foundation of AWARE in 1985. Subsequent chapters discuss AWARE’s objectives and activities; members’ perceptions of feminism; how members construct their identities; men in the organization; and the functioning of an ethics of respect to deal with difference within the organization. The book ends with a discussion of the ever-present state and its “over-determinist role” in the organization (p. 173).

AWARE was established after a lull in women’s activism in Singapore following the passage of the Women’s Charter (1961) that guaranteed marriage and property rights to non-Muslim women. In the early 1950s, the Singapore Council of Women had organized to push for gender equality, particularly the abolition of polygamy. Once the charter was passed, the drive for change petered out. A short-lived National Council of Women was formed in the 1970s, and in 1980 the Singapore Council of Women’s Organizations was organized at the government’s behest as an umbrella body for all women’s organizations.

In 1983 Lee Kuan Yew, then prime minister, rued that better-educated women in Singapore were having fewer children. Fearing a possible “thinning of the gene pool” (p. 30), the government acted

to encourage marriage between educational equals, and reproduction. The so-called Great Marriage Debate is the context in which AWARE emerged. It grew out of a 1984 National University of Singapore Society forum, "Women's Choices, Women's Lives". An audience member threw down the gauntlet by asking what the women present planned to do next. On studying existing women's organizations some of the women agreed on the need for an organization "directed toward the goal of improving women's social [and] legal status" (p. 37), and AWARE was registered in 1985.

AWARE provides community services for women, notably a Helpline, which women with problems can call and have trained Helpliners listen to and counsel them. It organizes support groups such as the Expat Help Support Group for expatriate women in Singapore and has a Legal Clinic that offers free legal advice. It conducts public campaigns, undertakes research, brings out publications, and enters into dialogue with government on gender issues.

Given its reluctance to identify openly as feminist, at AWARE feminism is as feminism does. Lyons writes: "there has been little attempt to delineate or define 'Singaporean feminism' or 'AWARE feminism', except in the broadest sense — what AWARE does" (pp. 133–34). Discussion of feminism could alienate some women and "send potentially dangerous messages to the government about AWARE's interests and agenda" (p. 134). But its reticence about unabashedly identifying itself as feminist means that "AWARE's activities remain essentially reformist and consensual in character because they are evacuated of sustained attention to the transformative potential of 'feminist' goals and objectives" (p. 173). This is a good point. Given the limited scope for political action in Singapore and general wariness of feminism as western and corrupting of "Asian values", AWARE's strategy is pragmatic — "[its] goal is not so much to address structural systems of inequality as to alleviate some of its effects" (p. 106). But as long as within the organization there is little theoretical analysis of feminism and its potential to effect a deep transformation of society, AWARE's contribution to the women's movement remains in its activities.

The looseness in an organizational ideology cuts two ways. It probably attracts more women to AWARE than might otherwise join. But it also created one of the most wrenching, divisive episodes in the organization's history. In 1994–95, a few members drew up a Blueprint for future orientation which did not pass muster. Its most controversial aspects were an AWARE manifesto and insistence on the need to “conscientize” new members. This, for many in what Lyons calls the “Old Guard”, smacked of a rigid, doctrinaire party line. Had the Blueprint gone through, AWARE would have had to give up its “shifting and fluid identity”, publicly identify itself as “feminist”, and cease being “everything to all women” (pp. 150–151).

Lyons's analysis is theoretically sophisticated and nuanced. AWARE is reformist, consensual, and moderate because of the nature of the Singaporean state; because many members share a state vision of social change; but also because they live by an ethics of respect for difference which, while not confrontational, subtly subverts state imperatives. Lyons does not see AWARE as simply reactive to state authoritarianism. Instead, its ethics of respect dictates “all women should be given the freedom to negotiate their own life choices within the unique frameworks provided by their culture and religion” and “opens up the possibility of dialogue with all women” (p. 170).

My only critique of *A State of Ambivalence* is less indicative of a flaw in the book than of a gap in the recorded history of women's activism in Singapore prior to the 1950s. This history largely remains to be written. AWARE's establishment in the wake of the Great Marriage Debate is legendary in the organization's oral tradition. Lyons takes issue with AWARE's “big-bang version of history”. She sees this as implying “that feminism did not really exist prior to AWARE's formal registration as a society” (p. 20) such that “the history of the Singaporean women's movement is inevitably a history of AWARE, replete with mythological struggle and foundational moments” (p. 23).

But it seems that both AWARE and Lyons confront the same lacuna in the historical record. The book's first chapter, an overview of “The Women's Movement in Singapore”, is the shortest, and of its

sixteen pages more than half are about AWARE and the socio-political climate in which it emerged. Lyons does point to the vegetarian halls or anti-marriage sisterhoods of Cantonese women migrants to Singapore in the early 1900s as early examples of a women's movement. But a chronological history of women's activism in Singapore remains to be written, and just as AWARE as an organization does not have this history to situate itself in, neither is Lyons able to situate AWARE in such a history.

This does not detract from the value of the book. *A State of Ambivalence* will appeal to those interested in local studies of global feminist issues; feminism in Singapore; the Singaporean polity and society; and particularly the workings of civil society in Singapore. Lyons skillfully contextualizes AWARE in the social and political history of Singapore and engages theoretically with the politics of difference. Stories from AWARE members bring alive the narrative which throws light on how women who are active in civil society moderate and regulate their activism in view of the nature of the Singaporean state and society.

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