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Jasjit K. Sangha and Tahira Gonsalves (Eds), South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood (Bradford: Demeter Press, 2013), ix + 192 pp.

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This book of collected essays is the first of its kind that brings together South Asian studies and motherhood studies, with a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches. It focuses on the diversity of South Asian mothering rather than on motherhood and mothering as represented or taking place in South Asian contexts. Demeter Press as the Toronto-based first feminist publisher in the field of motherhood studies has probably influenced the geographical focus of the contributions, most of which pertain to the South Asian diaspora in Canada. Only four contributions (out of 15, the introduction included) feature an analysis of the discourses about and by mothers in India, with issues such as surrogate pregnancy, representations of Indian mothers in literature and film, and daughters getting prepared for marriage and leaving the native home.

The issues discussed will interest researchers in South Asian studies from a variety of perspectives. Some chapters may serve as comparative evidence for scholars interested in similar topics, working on South Asian materials or conducting fieldwork in this specific geographic area. Much scholarship about gender in the cultural and religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent in various historical periods exists. Many studies have focused on 'mother goddesses' and some have explored motherhood as an institution in this context. But little attention has so far been paid to experiences of and discourses about mothering in India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka, nor to South Asian mothers in the diaspora (with the exception of the anthropology of medicine).

In the Introduction, the editors stress both the internal diversity of South Asian mothers and the common issues they face. Most contributions try to shift the discussion away from motherhood (as an institution enforced on women) to put it on mothering (the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children), or attempt to pay attention to both issues. This fundamental distinction between mothering and motherhood, first proposed by the feminist philosopher Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: Norton, 1976) is at the core of motherhood studies as a distinct field emerging from women's studies, feminist studies and gender studies.

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Among the recurring topics we find differences in status and experience between mothers of sons and of daughters, the particular mother–daughter relationship in a patriarchal system in which arranged (or, at least, approved) virilocal marriage is still the norm, the role played by mothers and other actors in the mothering process and in the transmission of traditional rituals, of a distinctive community identity, and of the notion of 'honour', as

defined in particular traditions and expressed through different terms such as *izzat* or *lāj* to daughters.

After the introduction, the book is divided into four sections and ends with biographical information, reflecting well the various positions from which contributors write about their own experience as activists or as (mostly) Indian or Pakistani mothers, or about their academic research as scholars. In a few cases, they write about both and as both. Their standpoints, methodologies, practical and theoretical backgrounds (or lack thereof) are varied. Readers should not expect to find only social sciences and humanities approaches, but also some very personal narratives, framed with more or less reflexivity and sometimes taken as the basis for an analysis that claims greater relevance to a better understanding of South Asian mothering.

The opening chapter, 'Reshaping, Reclaiming, Resisting', explores the ways in which contemporary Indian Hindu upper class mothers view their daughters' marriage and divorce, and how their mothering of daughters differs from that of sons. Though bringing up a daughter also means letting go of her for the purpose of marriage (*kanyādān*), their 'mothers' love' (p. 17) can also at times be framed as an act of resistance. Other chapters deal with how the traditional notion of *izzat* (p. 33) is imprinted on daughters and how young women can start reclaiming this notion for themselves. Another chapter explores the roles played by Sikh mothers in the USA, Canada and Britain in forming the identity of their children, especially of sons. Particularly interesting is evidence of some mothers' commitment to maintain their sons' kes, a distinctively Sikh hairstyle. Another contribution explores a personal experience of step-mothering children of a different cultural background and is actually an excerpt of another book by Sangha, one of the editors, also published by Demeter Press (*Stepmothering: A Spiritual Journey*, 2012). Finally, the last piece of this section, by the two editors, features their research on activist mothers who resist gender roles and nurture resilience by 'speaking out about politics, sexuality, health and mothering' (p. 70).

The second section contributes to a better understanding of how South Asian mothers of the diaspora view issues of 'Mothering, Mental Health and Well-Being' (p. 83) and how they do (or do not) access medical and social services run by the government (in their case, programmes set up by the province of Ontario or the federal government of Canada). Interviews of Tamil mothers from Sri Lanka who had their first baby in the greater Toronto area show how 'new mothers in a new land' (p. 85) negotiate their homesickness and isolation at that crucial time of pregnancy, birth and postpartum, during which they are left without support from their immediate family. Surprisingly, some mothers report that lacking such support may have empowered [page 267] them through more autonomy and agency in acquiring for and by themselves the necessary skills of mothering.

The next two contributions show, however, that the immediate ethnic community of mothers of children with special needs or chronic disease can play supporting roles only to a limited extent. Mothers in such situations also have to negotiate access to and intervention by state social services that may not be sensitive to cultural differences. These issues are not addressed in depth in this short piece, but one may wonder if this situation is specific to South Asians in diaspora, or arises also in their countries of origin, or in other communities that form the intricate landscape of multicultural Canada. Comparison at a larger scale, with the South Asian diaspora in Australia for instance, would be fruitful.

The chapter on 'Mothering the South Asian Mother' is a great example of engagement with feminist and motherhood studies theories. Based on the personal experiences of a midwife who narrates a fictional story constructed on the basis of many true encounters with

her South Asian patients in Ontario, this explains how some expectant mothers are drawn into the option of a homebirth for administrative or financial reasons. The last chapter of this section presents an instance of culturally sensitive 'integrated holistic counseling' (p. 126) for Punjabi mothers going through a divorce or another crisis, from the point of view of a male social worker. The overall originality of this section gives voice not only to South Asian mothers themselves, but also to the professionals who provide them with services and options viewed as potentially empowering and transforming.

'Complicating Women's Work', starting the third section, takes us back to India with extensive ethnographic research on commercial gestational surrogacy. Indian regulations in this regard are less strict than in other parts of the world. The author convincingly argues that the comprehension by the surrogates, the 'womb mothers', of their gestating and birthing work as 'sweat and blood' (p. 135) contributes to redefining motherhood in contemporary India. The other contribution in this section return to the greater Toronto area with an exploration of discourses of South Asian mothers who work from home and whose home-based businesses often allow them to contribute, sometimes quite significantly, to the family income while remaining available to their children.

Scholars working on texts and images will find the book's last section, 'Iconic Mothering, Outlaw Mothering' most relevant to their interests. The first contribution here explores two examples of iconic mothering in two films, Mother India (1957) and Pyar Mein Twist (2005), showing the evolution, from 'selfless to selfish' (p. 165), of the mother figure in Indian cinema. The last chapter explores the Marathi writer Barburao Bagul's short story Mother (1992), using textual analysis to present the mother portrayed in this novel as 'a case of outlaw Dalit mothering' (p. 176).

This volume is probably meant to address a readership interested in motherhood studies to highlight the specificities of South Asian mothering and motherhood. It is of wider interest to scholars who study kinship systems or literary and artistic [page 268] representations of mothers and children in a variety of South Asian contexts. South Asian studies have taken the gender-critical turn longer ago than other more conservative disciplines of the humanities. The time might be right now to engage at a deeper level with this specific issue of mothering, and not only with motherhood or mother–goddesses. The large scope of theories and concepts developed by motherhood studies could be useful to enhance our comprehension of culture, family and selfhood in South Asian cultures. Further, several examples drawn from South Asian historical or contemporary discourses, practices, and representations, whether in literature, religion or the arts, could provide scholars of motherhood studies with a glimpse of what mothering could be (and is) outside the institution of Western patriarchal motherhood that remains the principal focus of their analysis and criticism. As is the case with certain feminist theories, some of the 'maternal theories' developed by (mostly) Western scholars reach their limits when confronted with South Asian examples. Though this book may not have developed to its full extent the fruitful interdisciplinary potential of bridging South Asian studies with motherhood studies, it sketches innovative paths and lays foundations for further research at this overlooked connection between these two specialised areas of scholarship.

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