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Book Review

Unforgotten: Love and the Culture of Dementia Care in India (Life Course, Culture and Aging: Global Transformations). Bianca Brijnath. Oxford, NY: Berghahn Books, 2014. ISBN-10: 1782383549, 240 pp. Price \$95.00 (Hardcover)

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In “Unforgotten: Love and the Culture of Dementia Care in India”, Bianca Brijnath writes, ‘I am explicitly concerned with the transformative processes that illness and degeneration create and how this transformation occurs in contemporary urban India, which has undergone substantial economic, social and material changes in the last decade’ (p.9). Indeed, Brijnath fulfills her objective to explore these perspectives among physicians and patients’ families through the lens of cultural anthropology. She holistically shows how the diagnosis and undetermined cure for dementia impacts patients’ everyday life outside the medical setting.

Brijnath’s writing style is so fluid and readable that her book will appeal to academics, medical students, and the general public. However, her intended audience may choose to read authors she has referenced to truly maximize their experience of reading her work. She cites Sarah Lamb’s ethnographies of elder care in India as a source of inspiration saying, “Lamb (2009) also observed in her later study that while the wicked spectre of modernity continued to loom over the gerontological and media landscape in India, its shadow had diminished and that in actual practice older people and their carers enunciated far more ambiguous and complex understands of ageing and care” (p.8).

What Brijnath does to further contribute to the field of aging studies in India is that she is not afraid to challenge Lamb’s findings and provide a picture of how these social trends are changing saying, “the social ties that bound Lamb’s (2000) Mangaldihi villagers endures but has thinned. That dialogue between India and abroad is occurring at all levels and the conversations are more ambiguous and less certain” (p.191). Brijnath’s critical lens of her own literature review foreshadows how honest she will be when it comes to assessing her own understanding of her fieldwork. Her most brilliant point emerges when she notices that “inconsistent stories” from informants about Alzheimer’s disease and age related dementia reflect the devastation brought on by “the contrariness of the disease itself” which still has no biomedical or therapeutic cure (p.138).

The strengths from Brijnath’s arguments come from her ability to evoke feeling and memory from her readers. In one chapter she asks, “can you smell the writing?”, suggesting that she hopes to engage readers’ understandings of memory through their sense of smell and taste (p.33). In her book, elders long to savor their human existence and still possess the power to

value, and be valued, as they experience their culture through their senses (p.135). By gently asking readers to consider how they use their senses to connect with their environment, Brijnath shows how vulnerable patients are when they lose their relationships and memories due to social isolation and aging (p.101). She further explores how in an age of medical pluralism, patients' families turn to alternative herbal medicines instead of biomedicine because they fear the side effects of the latter (p.77). Brijnath also acquiesces that there is ultimately "no language for emotion" that can convey the feelings internalized by patients and their families (p.98).

Although love serves as a major theme for this book, it is difficult to discuss it as a cultural phenomenon. Perhaps the best way to understand love for this ethnography is to define it as "seva", the responsibility to care for one's elders (p.189). Brijnath focuses on how love and social relationships motivate people to care for older family members beyond what is expected of them in contemporary society (pp.184-185). To clarify, studying expressions of love and care is not a weakness in the research, but readers may be able to understand Brijnath's ideas best in terms of the negotiations and limits of agency and power (p. 27). For example, in her formal and informal interviews, Brijnath observes that women caregivers and elderly women patients are at risk of being neglected and even abused if public and health policies are not enforced to protect them (p.167). By attending to the conflict between acts of service and positions of power, Brijnath identifies patterns between informal and formal expressions of social control (p.114). This tension relates to earlier work concerning the differences between "de facto power", expressed in private domestic spaces by women, and "de jure power", expressed in public settings and supported more readily by a legal authority (1983 Cool and McCabe). Ultimately, her findings contribute to the field where researchers continue to write about social actors transitioning between roles within their culture.

Bibliography

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