

EDITORIAL: Should I care about everyone else?

As I type this editorial, I am sitting in my air-conditioned office. But I am still feeling uncomfortably hot because we are in the middle of a heatwave. And heatwaves are no longer climatic anomalies – according to the United Nations, the “last four years were the four hottest on record” (<https://www.un.org/en/un75/climate-crisis-race-we-can-win>). I feel a niggling tension – I am aware that my use of the air conditioner is not helping combat the rising heat (indeed, is actively hindering efforts to tackle climate change), but it is simply too hot to be able to function effectively without the blessed respite it provides. Should I suffer, secure in the knowledge that I am doing the ‘right thing’, or should I be selfish and put my comfort first? In other words – should I care about the rest of the world?

This is the fundamental point that the editors of our special issue, Om Dwivedi and Isha Malhotra, seek to make through the articles published here. Referencing Margaret Thatcher, they suggest that the prevalent lack of care for ‘the rest of the world’, i.e. society, came from her claim that there “are individual men and women and there are families”, and that rather than looking outside themselves (to society, to the government) for help, “people look to themselves first”.

This attitude has, over the decades, led to an insistence on individual effort, and the gutting of many social safety-nets, as well as the demonizing of the less fortunate as ‘deserving’ of their positions.

Dwivedi and Malhotra have gathered together a number of articles which address this issue by looking at precariousness in human life, and how the urge to care can help stem the suffering, at least at the local level. They point out that “the future of the planet and possibilities of life conditions for human and more-than-human survival need to be invested with components of care and repair right here, right now”.

The special issue approaches the idea of care from a number of angles – postcolonial ecology, germ warfare (a fear that runs close to the surface in the post-pandemic world), aging, threats to oceanic resources, refugee experiences, and food scarcity. What becomes clear, looking at these topics, is just how vulnerable and fragile we are. Of course there are the physical threats posed by climate change and ecological degradation. But we also have to fear man-made dangers such as biological weapons. And on a smaller, human level, we need to have empathy for the struggles and challenges faced by refugees, as well as older women facing cognitive decline and dependent on care from others.

Some of these ideas of giving voice to the most vulnerable or least heard are also reflected in the General Section of this issue. Chithira James and Reju George Mathew highlight resistance to the homogenising forces of Hindutva fundamentalism in India, showing how beef has emerged as a symbol of carnivalesque transgression of constructed religious hierarchies. Jianbo Su and Shantini Pillai examine a somewhat related topic – where James and Mathew refer to Kerala, a state with a substantial population of Muslims and Christians, finding a precarious balance in Hindu-majority India, Su and Pillai focus on Hong Kong as a space of ambivalence, with “Hong Kong nativism” hanging between “lingering nostalgia for colonial times and the increasing force of nationalism from the mainland”. And finally, Anshul Dhankar and Devendra Kumar Sharma write about the precarious bodies of Dalit women, showing how the author of *Sangati* voices resistance to dominant, oppressive voices.

This ties in with the interview with Kalyani Thakur Charal, by Debdatta Chakraborty and Sarbani Banerjee; the interviewee asserts that she has chosen her name specifically to assert her Dalit identity, as a way of putting forward an under-represented community. Muhammad Syaukat Mustafa Kamal, Zainor Izat Zainal, and Noritah Omar interview Malaysian poet Cecil Rajendra, who has, since almost the beginning of his writing career, been focused on the

environmental degradation he sees going on in Malaysia. He speaks about “needing to talk” about issues such as pollution and logging, since little is being seriously done.

The General Section continues with poems from three authors. Christian Benitez uses the metaphor of wind, sand, and weathered boulders to examine a fraught relationship. Two Malaysian poets, Soon-vin Lim and Rex Tan Chwan Shiuh, set their poems in specific locales. Lim’s poem centres around the suburb of Bandar Sri Permaisuri, while Tan uses his three poems to focus on three areas of Kuala Lumpur. The works of both poets are evocative, recreating the sights and sounds of these areas.

Finally, we end with four book reviews which showcase something of the variety of writing coming out of Asia. Of the books reviewed, three are critical volumes centred around either gender and sexuality, or children’s literature. The final review is of a collection of short stories focusing on Singapore’s Tamil Brahmin community. Again, all four reviews can be said to be looking at individuals or communities which are marginalised.

While it was not planned, it has happened that the contributions in the General Section echo the concerns of the Special Issue, ranging from gender issues, to marginalization, to ecological destruction, to ethnicity, to space. This is, perhaps, a sign of how central these issues are to all our lives, and how much we should show that we care.

I would, finally, like to acknowledge my colleagues who have helped with putting this issue out. Farid Mohammadi, formerly our Journal Manager, has taken on the role of Deputy Editor, and we are joined now by Looi Siew Teip, who is now Journal Manager. Many thanks to them, as they lightened my burden considerably.

Susan Philip