

**Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi,
ed. 2009. *Violence:
Ethnographic Encounters*
Oxford: Berg, 176 p.**

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The book *Violence: Ethnographic Encounters* edited by Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi (2009) is about anthropologists' personal experiences with violence during fieldwork. The volume contains nine chapters written by nine different anthropologists and an introduction and guide for further reading written by the editor. On the basis of the various contributions, Ghassem-Fachandi offers us eight observations that, he argues, ought to be part of any analysis of violence in anthropological research. One of these observations is: "In violent contexts female sexual subjugation seems to be the preferred mode of humiliation across cultures" (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009, 8). In other words, this collection of stories demonstrates that gendered violence against women happens so often that it transcends cultures. It is, therefore, of specific concern to female fieldworkers. In this review, I discuss two chapters in the volume that drive this point home particularly well. I also argue, however, that the editor of the volume seems not to recognize the importance of his own observation.

In the first chapter, *Written on my Body*, Billy Jean Isbell describes her ethnographic research in Peru in the 1980s, at the time of the military interventions of the *Shining Path*. Isbell writes how she and others around her were subjected to violence in multiple

ways. In one harrowing example, she describes an encounter with a male police officer who took both her hands and placed one of them on his crotch and the other on his gun. Such violent displays of power are not uncommon in Peru, Isbell claims (Isbell 2009, 28), and are a powerful way in which the hierarchy at the heart of gender relations becomes confirmed. Isbell also shows us, however, that fieldwork is not the only place where female ethnographers are confronted with female subjugation. In another example, she tells us how a male colleague questioned her research in a derogatory way, shifting the focus to unequal male-female relations within American academia. This example underscores Ghassem-Fachandi's argument that violence towards women transcends cultures. Whereas Isbell draws our attention to symbolic forms of gendered violence, Ghassem-Fachandi, however, maintains a limited focus on female subjection as it takes place within "violent contexts". I argue therefore that Ghassem-Fachandi could have improved his argument by considering gendered violence as a mode of subjugation that structures societies in general.

The importance of this ordering principle also surfaces in the chapter by Annarose Pandey, *Unwelcomed and Unwelcoming Encounters*. In this moving chapter, Pandey shares how her life as a junior ethnographer changed drastically by doing fieldwork. Her experiences in Sidi Ifni, a conservative village in Morocco, include abuse and intimidation by several villagers. These events eventually made Pandey decide to leave anthropology as a discipline and academia in general. Pandey (Ibid., 135) writes how, without a visible present male protector at her side, she was imagined to be sexually available by the people in the village. This assumption caused her to be sexually intimidated and taught her not to look straight into the eyes of men but to keep her eyes trained on the ground (Pandey 2009, 141). In this context, she became a victim of sexual abuse by a male informant. Like in Isbell's case, Pandey's experiences of female subjugation do not stay neatly within the

confines of ethnographic fieldwork, but spill over to other contexts. She describes how an American woman who lived in the village before her reacts to Pandey's account of the sexual abuse. "Well, what did you expect?" the woman told her, "You spent time with a man" (Ibid., 143). With this reaction, the woman justifies the sexual assault by confirming the gendered power relations at play.

The contributions to *Violence: Ethnographic Encounters* thus not only share experiences of ethnographers in the field, but also make the argument that violence is structured by unequal gender relations across time and place. Ghassem-Fachandi (2009) has edited a book which is indispensable in anthropology. Not often enough do we hear personal stories of the ethnographer in the field, especially in the context of violence. This book provides access to an important element of ethnographic research and thereby contributes to a debate about the conflicting roles anthropologists at times have in the field. However, I would like to make some critical notes. Almost all authors are from the Global North and give a critical reflection on their research sites which are mostly in the Global South. The collection therefore runs the risk of reproducing hegemonic dominant ideas about 'us' and 'them', especially because the editor in my opinion does not sufficiently reflect on its composition. With this, the book can be placed within a long Orientalist practice that is still visible today.

Furthermore, all chapters that deal with gendered symbolic violence are written by women and discuss gendered violence committed by men. The volume would have been stronger if other experiences could have been included. The book tends to reproduce dominant notions of gendered violence and the heterosexual assumptions that underlie them by, for example, leaving out the experiences of male ethnographers. It thereby keeps a strong taboo intact.

Yet besides these issues, the most important shortcoming of the volume lies with the editor's lack of emphasis on the importance and

complexity of gendered symbolic violence. Although Ghassem-Fachandi observes the universality of female sexual subjugation in the introduction, he also, quite naively, remarks: "For the editor of this volume this was unexpected and in no way foreseen" (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009, 8). In his closing chapter, *Guide for Further Reading*, he fails to include works on gendered violence, while so many of the chapters in the volume itself underscore the importance of this subject. I would like to urge us all to critically examine what and how we would like to publish about these issues and be critically aware of the potential our writings have to reproduce the very structures we try to critique. Ghassem-Fachandi started a conversation with this book, let us keep on talking.

References

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