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## WOMEN IN THE SHADOWS: GENDER, PUPPETS, AND THE POWER OF

**TRADITION IN BALI.** Jennifer Goodlander. Ohio University Research in International

Studies, Southeast Asia Series No. 129. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016; pp. 199.

~~This Jennifer Goodlander's~~ admirable analysis of the problematic position of female practitioners of Balinese *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) takes its place ~~in~~ among a growing range of works examining the complexities of gender roles and expectations in Asian performing arts, including Christina Sunardi's study of cross-gender performance in East Java and Arya Madhavan's edited collection, ~~et. al. on~~ *Women in Asian Performance*. ~~Although it is focussed upon a very specific regional tradition, Goodlander's book examines conceptions of a woman's place in society and the arts that are relevant to a variety of cultures and forms.~~ While ~~it~~ *Women in the Shadows* is of particular interest to Balinese and Southeast Asian specialists, the book is also useful for scholars of women's studies, gender studies and performing arts, ~~as it examines how conceptions of a woman's place in society and in the arts are relevant to a variety of cultures and forms.~~ ~~Goodlander's~~ ~~Its~~ central thesis posits that, although changes in education, politics, and society have ~~provided~~ increased opportunities for women to enter realms previously held to be exclusively male, traditional performance cultures and religious conventions still present special difficulties for women who dare to disrupt the gender hierarchy.

The six carefully argued chapters are organised so that even readers unfamiliar with the complexities of Balinese culture can grasp the intricate interactions of religion, custom, social relations, and entertainment that come into play in *wayang kulit* performance.

Throughout, Goodlander places first-person accounts of her own training and interactions with performers alongside detailed critical analysis of the form, its training methods, and its

**Comment [BRI]:** This half of the sentence feels slightly tricky to me – what exactly would “are relevant to a variety of cultures and forms” mean in practice? Might there be a way to be slightly more precise here?

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socio-religious context ~~to~~ give the reader a clear understanding of not only the physical realities of the shadow puppeteer's work, but also the larger issues of ethics and aesthetics that come into play when the *dalang* (puppeteer) is a woman.

After an introductory chapter establishing the nature and context of ~~the~~ Balinese shadow puppet performance, and the fundamental concepts regarding power and agency that underpin Goodlander's analysis, the book is divided into two parts reflecting the cosmological conceptions that are at the centre of all aspects of Balinese life. Part One, which deals with the visible (*sekala*) realm of human life, ~~and~~ considers performance practices and puppet objects in their relation to society and tradition. Part Two (*niskala*) deals with the invisible, spiritual aspects of *wayang kulit*, its rituals and taboos, and the mystical significance associated with both performer and puppets. The writing is accessible yet densely packed with insights and analysis exploring the *dalang's* special place in Balinese society and spiritual life.

Chapter 2 situates the contemporary practice of *wayang kulit* within a culture seeking continuity in an era of globalisation and rapid, dynamic change. *Wayang* has traditionally been a source of religious instruction, moral authority and cultural cohesion, with the puppeteer serving as a conduit linking the ancient and divine with the real world of here and now. Goodlander explains the process of becoming a *dalang*, combining detailed descriptions of the physical and spiritual practices required with critical reflections upon her own traditional training. She describes how techniques for puppet manipulation and vocal characterisation are transmitted in a visceral, physical manner—"body to body" (30)—a process that may be made more difficult if the student is female and the teacher male, because of social inhibitions. The work of the *dalang* also requires comprehensive understanding of the stories from the epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, as well as language

**Comment [BR2]:** "the performance" here seems maybe a tad vague. Is there a way to reword?

**Comment [BR3]:** Descriptions of \_\_\_\_?

**Comment [BR4]:** I'm wondering if in this paragraph, you might foreground and elaborate the particular issues related to gender—"a process that may be made more difficult if the student is female" and "even moreso for girls who may lack the physical and material resources required." Could you, for example, elaborate what these resources are, and how these issues are made more difficult by the gender issues involved?

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and vocal skills to characterise a range of puppets from the most refined court figures, to dangerous demons (*raksasa*), to the clown figures who translate the story for the audience.

This work is challenging enough for boys who are born into the tradition, but even more so

for girls who may lack not only the same physical strength required for effective manipulation, but also and the material resources, required such as time away from domestic chores, money for lessons and her own collection of puppets. Here Goodlander's foregrounding of her own position as a practitioner is key to providing a deeper understanding of the impediments facing female *dalang*. ~~Throughout we are reminded of the author's foreignness and gender so that, while much of the text is concentrated on the functions, ritual initiation and activities applicable to all *dalang*, the fundamental anomaly of a female functioning in this role is never forgotten.~~

Chapter 3 examines the materials required for performance: puppets, puppet box, *cepala* (a wooden knocker held between the puppeteer's toes and used to signal musicians and punctuate performance), the screen, and the oil lamp. All of these objects have both material value and mystical significance and gain in "power" through use. Thus, it is not just the personal charisma of the gifted performer that makes an impact, but also the quality of

~~*taksu*, a sense of divine inspiration and sacred power that derives not just from talent or skill, but~~ is inherited from one's teachers and, significantly, the performing objects themselves.

Goodlander here interrogates the inherently gendered and hierarchical nature of the notion of 'tradition' in Balinese culture, relating this to colonialism, New Order politics, and contemporary societal changes. 'Tradition' implies something immutable and unchanging, whereas many elements of this living performance genre, especially puppet design, are continually evolving. In light of this Goodlander also looks at the design of female puppets, used for the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* stories, which reflect a more narrow expressive

**Comment [BR5]:** I'm wondering in this paragraph about the specifically gendered angle? And also about Goodlander's unique contribution regarding the materials?

**Comment [CM6]:** This gets into a very big area that will take a lot of space to cover. I've added some material here but tried to keep it condensed. Please let me know what you think.

**Comment [CM7]:**

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~~waveband than male puppets, exploring how they often reinforcing gender norms of the passive, submissive and maternal. By contrast, puppets of the magically powerful and rarely performed *Wayang Calon Arang*—the story of a powerful widow-witch and her daughter—have a greater variety and reflect a certain moral ambivalence. These objects are regarded as dangerous because of their spiritual power, which says much about the way traditional Balinese society perceives strong, dominant women as inherently dangerous.~~

The second part of the book goes more deeply into the ritual aspects of the *dalang*'s training and the spiritual power that adheres to this role. Chapter 4 takes the reader through the complex series of purification and initiation rituals required to transform her from neophyte to practitioner. The rituals are essentially gender-less, so perhaps the female *dalang* is only an anomaly because she is a rare phenomenon. However, sacral power accrues to practitioners not only through the prestige of their teachers, but also their puppets and puppet box, which are possessed of mystical power acquired by accretion through many performances. Young women who begin their training in the arts high school or university generally do not have access to these power-rich physical performance materials, since they are usually acquired via father-to-son inheritance. Thus, female performers are disadvantaged from the outset, and can rarely catch up.

The story goes that the renowned performer and teacher I Nyoman Sumandhi was so impressed with the work of the female students he encountered while teaching in the US that he returned to Bali determined to train his niece in *wayang kulit*, and so opened the door for women *dalang*. Yet, in spite of the support of Sumandhi and some of his colleagues at the arts high school and university, female performers are still rare. Chapter 5 deals directly with the experiences of female *dalang* working in Bali and includes includes interviews with five such women. These discussions give a vivid picture of the social, cultural and religious

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complications that discourage female participation in this art. For example, while the New Order government (1965-1998) promoted women's education and political equality, it also insisted upon adherence to *kodrat*, their "essential nature" as wives and mothers. Women are thus burdened by social expectations and household responsibilities and are often too busy with ritual and family obligations to find the time to practice. Moreover, Balinese women are hindered by *etika*, an Indonesian neologism that conflates ethics and etiquette in a concept that might be characterised as "appropriate behaviour." Most performances happen at night, and *etika* insists that it is inappropriate for women to be out after dark, or to sit cross-legged, the posture most useful for puppet manipulation. In addition, menstruation makes women ritually "unclean," so there are days when they are not allowed to touch sacred objects—including puppets. Balinese Hindu belief mandates that marriage, children and family are essential to societal and spiritual harmony, so would-be female *dalang* are concerned that their pursuit of this vocation might hinder their ability to attract a husband and establish a family life. So, often, women who have trained as *dalang* must find ways to make use of these skills in more conventionally acceptable spheres—teaching or dance performance—rather than as puppeteers.

In her final chapter, Goodlander muses on the ways in which the traditional power hierarchies persist and undermine the efforts of female performers in this genre. The problems seem intractable, yet changes in society may yet create opportunities for greater female participation as practitioners of *wayang kulit*.

*Women in the Shadows* provides important insights into the world of Balinese shadow puppetry and the continuing difficulties for women who seek to become masters of the form. Uniquely, Goodlander is able to marry critical theory to real experience of embodied practice to give the reader a comprehensive understanding of this complex world.

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