

Claiming Draupadi: Performing Gender and Power in Balinese *Wayang Kulit*

By Jennifer Goodlander

I do research on the performing arts and I am also a theatre director. I believe scholarship and artistic practice are related and complementary projects. But sometimes it feels like the stage is very far away from the page; like I am occupying two distinct worlds. I wonder if it might be possible, by combining performance and scholarship, to explore, question, and hopefully understand a topic more thoroughly than by either method alone.

Wayang kulit, in Balinese society, serves to instruct, entertain, and is religious in intent. Hobart asserts that *wayang kulit* is an “active force and organizing principle in the daily life of people” (172). It is both potent ritual and popular entertainment. The characters of *wayang* dominate the imagination similarly to sports heroes here in the United States. A *wayang kulit* that I developed to perform in Ohio and later was able to share in Bali provided just such a case to test my desire.

In this paper I will strive to combine academic investigation with details from my final performance that explore and possibly explode some of the power dynamics in Balinese *wayang kulit*. I argue that, *wayang*, because of its role in Balinese culture, can interrogate and challenge gender dynamics of power, and that exploring this thesis in performance provides unique insight into my understanding of Balinese culture, gender, and *wayang*.

The *Mahabharata*, a Hindu epic, is a common source for *wayang kulit* performance. I was intrigued by the story of Draupadi, because she became the wife of all five Pandawa brothers. In the story, Draupadi’s father, Draupada, wishes her to marry Arjuna. To this end, Draupada created a test of skill with the bow and arrow that only Arjuna could pass. When she goes home with Arjuna she discovers that there are four more brothers, all commanded to share Arjuna’s prize by their mother. Draupadi agrees to wed them all. The focus of my story would be on Balinese conceptions of women and power.

The triad of harmony: *tri hita karana*, is important to Balinese notions of power. These three elements of divinity, humanity, and nature must be kept in balance. Human beings act as the intermediaries between divinity and nature and are responsible for maintaining the balance. This balance, or duality permeates every part of life, religion, and space in Bali. Rituals, expressed through the arts, are an important instrument for negotiating this balance (Sedana 82-83). For example, if there is an illness in the village it is caused by an imbalance of the spirits. A ritual performance is held to appease the spirits and restore balance. *Wayang* is one such ritual.

In *wayang* the balance is expressed through *alus* and *kasar*. These roughly translate into refined and unrefined, or crudely good and evil. Unlike Christian cosmology where good is supposed to triumph over evil, in Bali, good and evil must exist together. Too much of one or the other is not a good thing. Through conventions such as

size, color, shape of the facial features, and tilt of the head and audience can quickly identify a puppet as *alus* or *kasar*. Female characters are generally smaller than the male, which begs the question: are female characters more *alus* than the male ones? The answer is not simple. Marc Benamou notes three different answers to this question: “1) men are more *alus* than women, 2) women are more *alus* than men, 3) men are both more *alus* and more *kasar* than women” (176). In puppetry, as in life, it seems the wider range of action belongs to the men. Or does it?

It was important to me that Draupadi was the most *alus* character in the performance. It was not enough that her puppet was the smallest in the story. I wondered if there were other ways I could communicate her *alusness*? Benamou explains that art in Indonesia cannot be understood in isolation. Each art is interwoven in context and meaning with the other arts. Music and movement are just as important indicators of *alus* or *kasar* as the physical traits of the puppet (271-273). After I introduce Draupadi there is a section where she dances alone. Slow flute music plays and her movements are lingering and gentle.

A central moment in the Draupadi story, and central to understanding women in Bali is the institution of marriage. Marriage is when a child becomes an adult and both men and women can then participate fully in the community. It is another aspect of harmony because it creates a balance between a man and woman. Unmarried men and women cannot own property or participate in the governance of their community unit within the village.

If marriage is the joining of two separate, but equally balanced halves, how is it possible to account for Draupadi’s ability to marry five brothers? Does this not tip the balance and create unrest? Perhaps Draupadi has more power than any one of the five brothers. But these are the mighty Pandawa! How is it possible that one female can balance five males?

Megan Jennaway in her ethnography on women, sexuality, and desire makes a connection between the ability to speak and the ability to express desire. Women are often denied subjectivity or agency. “Women can never occupy the role of *cogito*, the subject of contemplation. Instead they are condemned to serve as its object, the object of male contemplation” (22). Desire, and especially the capability to speak that desire, is linked to political power. She concludes that in Bali, as elsewhere, “societies which proscribe female sexual desire frequently proscribe women’s political representation, or right of speech as well” (27). The word has political and personal significance. I wanted to harness this significance in my performance.

Most of my performance was spoken in third person narration. I framed the story as a mother telling her daughter a story. They could speak, but all of the characters in the “story” remained silent. Draupada’s desire to marry his daughter through a contest was spoken by me, a female *dalang* (puppeteer), and not him. The contestants in the contest were described and never spoke. This changed at the moment of Draupadi’s decision. The narrator asked “what was Draupadi going to do?” And then Draupadi speaks, declaring “I will marry all five of you. You will each be my husband.” Draupadi voices her desire. It was important for me in performance to emphasize her power and my tool for that was to emphasize her speech.

Jennaway found that women connected marriage to desire. Women marry to experience desire, sexual relations, “and hitherto forbidden erotic pleasures” (73).

Draupadi magnifies her desire, sexual power, and therefore her potential for political power in marrying five men rather than one.

At the center of *wayang* is the *dalang*. He, and traditionally it has always been a “he,” controls the puppets, story, and directs the music. He is the central figure and is often compared to a “king” or “god.” There is much more than the manipulation of puppets to the *dalang*’s art. *Pedalangan* is the knowledge of his art. It is the interweaving of myth, religion, philosophy, manipulation, and many aspects of this complicated art. Traditionally this art has been passed down from father to son. The power wielded by the *dalang* is central to my performance. At the beginning of the performance I walked out to the “shadow” side of the screen. With me I brought a bowl of water, a necessary element in all of Balinese sacred rituals. By carrying the water I hoped to indicate the movement of the performance from the secular to the sacred. I wanted to create the possibility for a feminine *wayang* to occupy the full ritual potential that is often denied women *dalangs*. After rinsing my hands in the water I sit quietly while a flute played and images of women in Bali flashed on the screen. I wanted to show women young and old doing everyday activities. These images were an attempt to situate this performance as their story.

When the music stopped I opened my eyes. Only the *kayon* puppet remains. The *kayon* at the beginning of the play performance creates a lineage that links the audience and storyteller to the past. Kathy Foley explains that it serves to “center and energize the performer by (1) calling up memories of individuals who have empowered him [the *dalang*], (2) drawing in the energy from the right, left, and four directions into the centered body of the performer, and (3) allowing the *kayon* to act as a kind of lightning rod to pull power into the performance field for the duration of the play” (85). I took the *dalang*’s hat and put it on my head, placing myself into the lineage invoked by the *kayon*. Even as I attempt to wear the mantle of the *dalang* and imagine the feminine voice within the story I am aware of my white body speaking through an Indonesian art form. Perhaps it is only possible for me with my status as an outsider to claim the ritual role of the *dalang*. This position may be denied Balinese women and thus my performance loses much of its effectiveness. With this in mind, the other characters who “speak” in the performance are a mother and daughter who appear at the beginning and end of the story. The mother was the most *kasar* female puppet and the daughter the most *alus* female puppet. Their iconography reclaims both sides of the spectrum, by being the “most.” They frame and complicate my assumption of the *dalang* role. They beg they question, “Whose story is it?”

After the invocation I cross back behind the screen and begin to use the puppets. The images of the slides bring the audience through the rice fields and into a house. The narration, spoken by my partner’s voice, is, “It was early morning. Mother was already up and at her work. As usual she sang quietly to herself as she did her household duties.” The mother’s daughter, Usha, wakes up and asks about one of the names she heard her mother sing. “Who is Draupadi?” Her mother does not answer this question right away. Finally she says, “Draupadi was a heroic princess. One who was firm, a woman with an unbending will. She was greatly devoted to Lord Krishna. Usha, now read your lessons. In the night I shall tell you the story of Draupadi.”

At the end of Draupadi’s story I returned to Usha and her mother. They have been up all night telling stories. The mother reminds Usha of Draupadi’s power, “that she is in

no way less than Bima or Arjuna in strength and spirit, valor and virtue.” Usha thinks for a moment, and then thanks her mother for the story. Usha promises never to forget it, indicating that the lineage will continue. Like the art of the *dalang* passes from father to son, this will pass down from mother to daughter.

In observing the trend of the arts academies to teach practice alongside theory and history, Sedana writes: “Although the effort is young, it seems to offer great promise of success. Thus the twentieth century will see a new type of Balinese *dalang* – one who can perform *wayang* and explain it for the modern world as well” (97). I share Sedana’s hope for the intermingling of research and practice and the influence they might hold. He speaks specifically of the *dalang*, but I think it is a valuable model for the current generation of theatre practitioners and academics.

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