

# Women in the Shadows: Gender, Puppets, and the Power of Tradition in Bali

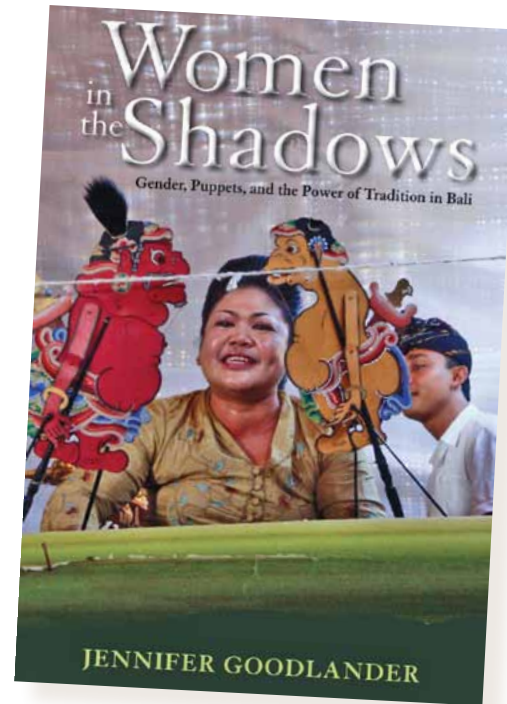
by Jennifer Goodlander

Ohio University Press, 2017  
199 pages, 21 b/w illustrations

We are fortunate to have Jennifer Goodlander's *Women in the Shadows* in print. This groundbreaking study explores the unusual position of a handful of women *dalang* (puppeteers) in Bali, including Goodlander herself.

Professor Goodlander's knowledge, experience, and caring for her subject matter comes through on every page. She opens the book with a first-hand account of a coming-of-age ceremony in Bali, and then describes the process of her special friendship with *dalang* Pak Tunjung whose mentoring she calls "a privileged window." Goodlander offers detailed descriptions and analysis of her own training as a *dalang*, a training made possible by her respect for the codes in place and, somewhat paradoxically, by her ability to move outside some of them because of her status as a foreigner. Through these carefully orchestrated details, the reader gets the sense that he or she is right there behind the screen, puppet in hand, participating in the varied aspects of a *wayang kulit* performance (action, narration, commentary).

Goodlander describes *wayang kulit* in Bali as both a sacred ritual and a social event, and women *dalang* perform in both sacred and secular festivities. The puppet theatre becomes a symbolic space with the screen as the world, the puppets as all the things in the world; the banana log as the earth; the lamp as the sun; music as a sign of harmony, and the *dalang*



as a god who "calls the world of shadows into being." According to Goodlander, most watch the shadow side, but the audience is multi-focused and never quiet. She noted in her own training how she needed to learn to watch the shadow of the puppet together with the actual puppet (64).

Goodlander instructs us about the symbolism of the material objects of a *wayang kulit* performance, and criticizes the static way they are displayed in the Museum Bali in Denpasar.

Her detailed writing on the process of obtaining the essential puppet box is nuanced and eye-opening. "The puppets are not a fixed text," she reminds (94). Instead she delineates their various roles as: "commodities with a certain kind of value, they are performers with the *dalang*, ritually powerful objects in their own right, and prized objects that can be sold" (95).

While Goodlander herself overcomes some of the resistance shown to women *dalang*, she cannot completely escape the controversy associated with that unusual role. This is reflected in the opening quotation of the book, by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:

If in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.

*Women in the Shadows* is divided into two parts: *Sekala*: The Visible Realm, and *Niskala*: The Invisible Realm. The latter part includes her interviews with five female *dalang* who have been active during the past four decades. This "reflexive ethnography" draws as well on the writings of Pierre Bordieu, Stephen Snow, Felix Guattari, Kathy Foley, Arjun Appadurai, Judith Butler, John Berger, and Victor Turner, among others.



THE AUTHOR PERFORMS IN UBUD, BALI

While women are rarely in the *wayang kulit* audience in Bali, several talented women have decided to study for the supreme role of *dalang*. Although these (mostly middle-aged) women rarely perform publically, their roles as *dalang* help raise their self-esteem and open the path for other women. Although Goodlander is clearly delighted to see Balinese women as *dalang*, her conclusions are more guarded. Two primary ideas that arose from her research are:

- (1) Change and tradition are not incompatible.
- (2) Changes "reveal tradition's special relationship to habitus [structuring structures] in Balinese society" (191).

Over time she came to realize that "women *dalang* did not change Balinese hegemony but rather revealed the ways in which that hegemony functions" (192).

One of the difficulties for the woman *dalang* is the fact that the *dalang* must study in channels beyond formal training. Since social life in Bali centers on gender and community, what happens when the expectations for gender are stretched? What happens to the three traditional roles for Balinese women: domestic care, earning money, and maintaining tradition (72)? Women are rarely in the audience of a puppetry performance because they are too busy with other preparations. In addition, it is difficult for women to master the less-refined language needed for some of the more *kasar* (rougher, more aggressive) puppet characters. The voice and movements of the *penasar* (clown puppet character) is particularly difficult for Balinese women, because clown characters' behavior falls outside of expected behavior for Balinese women. Another obstacle is that women are not supposed to touch the puppets during their menstruation. Some women may even be afraid to study *wayang kulit* because they feel they wouldn't be able to get a husband then!

It is intriguing that female puppets are rarely exhibited in museums, although the puppet of Kunti, the mother of the Pandawas, is one exception. Rangda offers another representation, of the "unsuspected dangers of uncontained female power" (115). Goodlander also discusses a new performance of the play *Guger Niwatakwaca*, a story with several female characters, and other stories with powerful female characters (such as the heavenly nymph Suprabha) and female comic characters. She cautions, however: These do not guarantee a radical change. "Gender complicates the relationship between power and tradition within and around our puppet performances" (151). But "complication" does not necessarily mean radical change.

While Goodlander celebrates the female *dalang*, she does not see any significant change in the gender hierarchy because of these pioneering women puppeteers. While she praises the bravery and ingenuity of the female *dalang*, she

also notes the difficulty of their establishing *taksu* (connection) with the audience. There is even a sense of "danger" in a woman *dalang*'s performance in case traditions are not carried out well.

She asks poignantly: "How can a woman become a *dalang* if that is not a socially appropriate role?" (131). She views it as a process of "transformation (ongoing change) and balance (a move towards stasis)." Although Goodlander herself attempted to "rewrite" scenes to avoid the sexism in some of the stories, she found that, ultimately, "the dynamics of gender and power could not be altered" (172).

She notes the crucial role of teachers, especially for women *dalang* who do not have family lineage. Goodlander's teachers and mentors are to be praised for expertly undertaking her training. In the pages of *Women in the Shadows*, she expresses deep gratitude to them.

Among the testimonies of other women *dalang* is a transcription of recorded dialogues with Ni Wayan Rasiani and with Ni Wayan Suratni. The engaging color photograph on the cover shows Ni Wayan Suratni performing the daytime *wayang lemah*, part of a cremation ceremony performed without a screen.

When Ni Ketut Trijata performed as a *dalang* in 1977, it was probably the first performance by a woman *dalang* in Bali. Ni Wayan Nondri's father was a *dalang* but he died young. She had originally studied dance, and is better known as an *arja* dancer with Odin Teatret, an international company in Denmark led by Eugenio Barba. In these cases, government scholarship helped the women develop their skills as puppeteers.

This book forms part of the Ohio University Research in International Studies/Southeast Asia series. It is heavily notated, with a glossary and list of references. A useful note on language and terms helps us navigate words in Indonesian, Balinese, and Kawi.

Goodlander has been working on this general topic for a long time (note her *Asian Theatre Journal* essay from 2012, for example). Many of the images come from the author's own collection, and reveal backstage views, methods of instruction, and different character types among the puppets.

In the wake of the 2002 bombing in a nightclub, the Balinese look for *rwa bhineda* (balance and harmony) and *ajeg* (a desire for stability). These are both qualities that point towards stasis rather than change (18). On the other hand, Goodlander reminds us in *Women in the Shadows*:

In performance, women *dalang* trouble the power of seeing as a means to connect the visible and the invisible worlds (p. 103).

—review by Linda Ehrlich,  
Independent scholar