

Laurie J. Sears. *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996. 349 pp.

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The *wayang* shadow theatre of Java has long captured the imaginations of Westerners studying Indonesia, and with good reason. The music of the gamelan, the voice of the *dhalang* (puppeteer), the colors and shadows of the puppets, the richness of the Mahabharata and Ramayana stories, to say nothing of the sounds, tastes, smells, and social interactions of the performance occasion itself—all make for an experience which can be analyzed and interpreted endlessly, from Javanese and Western perspectives and from the combined perspectives of both. The sense of complex interaction derived from watching *wayang* performances is such that it is not surprising that so many scholars have studied *wayang* with the belief that they would gain important insights into Java and Indonesia thereby.

In this book, Laurie Sears widens the scope of inquiry beyond *wayang* as exemplifying traditional culture to look at the various negotiations—between colonizer and colonized, court and village, and others—that constitute the often-overlooked and dynamic background within which *wayang* performance takes shape:

To use Javanese shadow theatre as a metaphor to introduce the terminology of *colonial discourse*, the puppet master's lamp, which illuminates the darting shadows enclosed with the carefully fabricated frame, conceals much more than it reveals. In the demystifying light of dawn, as the puppets are returned to their box and audiences disperse, intersections of labor, art, ritual, and power are exposed to show the maintenance of an intricate system of hierarchy and patronage in which everyone knows his or her place. Colonial discourses are similar to artfully constructed shadow plays—as sites of surveillance and resistance—concealing machineries of power as they reveal stories packaged to please particular audiences, even though both performers and patrons know the value, in monetary and symbolic terms, of the labor and goods required to produce the show. (xv-xvi)

At the same time, Sears does not lose sight of the particular intersections of worlds that make *wayang* interesting to both Javanese and outsiders. She provides ample descriptions of performances and texts which allow the reader to apprehend some of the sensory and social aspects of *wayang* while delving into the many roles it has played in Javanese culture and observing how those roles have been perceived and constructed. The result is lively and complicated, and is especially valuable for the historical perspective it gives on early Dutch and Javanese *wayang* scholarship. In addition, the book has a reasonably complete glossary for mostly Indonesian and Javanese terms, and a substantial and useful bibliography.

Taking the Mahabharata and the Ramayana stories as the basis of the particular genre of *wayang* she is investigating (*wayang purwa*), Sears traces the various ways these stories have interacted with different religious, social, and political realities through several centuries. Sears sees *wayang*, and art generally, as existing on the interface between daily life and our perception of it:

. . . artistic expressions serve to communicate how people feel, think, embrace, or resist the forces that impinge upon their lives. In this sense, shadow play performances reenact power relations in order to negotiate the terms under which those relations are recorded in memory. (6)

The negotiations between the colonized and colonizer's versions of *wayang* (especially in the context of Western assumptions about the superiority of written, scientific, rational discourse over the oral, magical, and mythical tales of the "natives") are a particularly rich area of investigation, and these constitute the core of Sears's inquiry; she has looked at how these negotiations developed, and also at how they have continued into the post-colonial period as part of the nation-imagining apparatus of modern Indonesia.

In the introduction Sears gives an overview of the various perspectives from which she is looking at *wayang*, and asserts that

Although the shadow theatre of Java served as a transmitter and preserver of Ramayana and Mahabharata stories and as a vehicle for texts and performances to travel through the centuries, this book questions whether it ever was the dominant expression of a Javanese philosophy, religion, or "worldview." . . . To argue that *wayang purwa* theatre and its stories were more than a shifting assemblage of puppets, performers, and plots held together by repeated voicings of Ramayana and Mahabharata stories, I ask what powers and purposes were served by the preservation of the storyrealms these characters inhabited . . . (11-12)

The intention, then, is to look at stories in motion, and to try to expand the view of *wayang* to include its users in a wide variety of dynamic cultural and political settings; this is truly a complex undertaking.

Chapters One and Two deal with the colonial period, with the emphasis in Chapter One ("Hearing Islamic Voices in 'Hindu-Javanese' tales") on what Sears sees as the substantial and often overlooked role of Islam in the purportedly Hindu *wayang* world. Perceiving Islam as a threat, especially after the Java War of 1825-30, Dutch scholars tended to discount Islamic elements of *wayang*, but Sears looks at particular poets and texts (specifically, various tellings of Rahwana's birth) as a means of tracing the Islamic ideas that were emerging in eighteenth and nineteenth century Java.

Given that Islam came to Java via India, it is not surprising that Javanese Islam has considerable compatibility with the Hindu stories; more interesting is that this synthesis provided sites of contestation among various authoritative voices. The role of *wahyu* (from the Arabic, signifying spiritual/religious merit bestowed as a boon by the gods) and the importance of genealogy are two particular features of *wayang* which Sears sees as linked to Islam, but it is difficult to reconstruct a clear picture of Islam from *wayang* in Java at this time. A key factor here, according to Sears, is the role played by the Dutch in this contestation. As they tried to maintain a safe distance between the royal courts and what they saw as the dangers of Islam, the Dutch interpreted the Mahabharata cycle as a cautionary tale of a divided kingdom, depicting as it does the progression towards civil war between the Pandhawa and their cousins,

the Korawa. Thus, the Bharatayuddha war (traditionally considered dangerous to perform) would symbolize the kind of chaos the Dutch feared from an Islamic *perang sabil* ("holy war"). Sears argues that the Dutch could see and project themselves as playing a Kreshna-like role with relation to the courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, maintaining a protective stability in anticipation of inevitable violence. The Javanese would also have seen parallels between the *wayang* characters and the Dutch, though it is likely they would have identified the colonizers not as diplomats, but as foreign interlopers, resembling the *wayang's* giants and ogres.

Still, it was not so much that the Dutch sought to insert themselves into the *wayang* tradition, but rather that they encouraged the Indic vs. Islamic view of that tradition. Chapter Two ("Colonial Discourse and Javanese Shadow Theatre") provides an especially valuable tracing of the intellectual history of *wayang* study and examines the feedback loops among Dutch, Eurasian, and Javanese scholarship with fascinating detail. Sears argues that a fundamental source of power in *wayang* is the multi-valence of stories, plots, and characters, such that Islam, Hinduism, mysticism, and history could provide simultaneous layers of meaning. The Dutch scholars who investigated these stories in the mid-nineteenth century, however, judged *wayang* to be disorderly rather than complex and perceived the tales as "degenerate" myths, badly in need of Dutch philology. Thus, Ranggawarsita's effort to organize *wayang* and other stories in the *Pustaka Raja* ("Book of Kings") was rejected as a hopeless mish-mash of myth and history. In fact, Sears points out, Ranggawarsita was trying to situate the Mahabharata and Ramayana stories relative to historical Javanese kings by assigning more or less historical dates to them and placing them as intermediate between the Islamic cosmogonic genealogies and the kings of Java. (96) Perhaps this was an effort to contribute to Javanese scholarship in a way that he thought the date-obsessed Dutch would appreciate, but unfortunately Ranggawarsita lost all credibility, since the Dutch could not accept this kind of dating for what they saw as clearly non-historical material. On the other hand, Kusumadilaga's *Serat Sastramiruda*, a later work which made no attempt to link *wayang* stories with historical events, was seen as acceptable, and became an important guide for later Javanese followers of the tradition. (106–107) As the Dutch increasingly imposed a "tidy" colonial authority over the "messy" multiplicity of a *wayang* tradition that had participated in both court and village notions of power, the reification of *wayang* as the key to understanding Java began to take shape towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The next two chapters consider the role of *wayang* in the development of Indonesian nationalism, especially in Java, and examine how this role changed along the court-village axis. Chapter Three, "Failed Narratives of the Nation or the New 'Essence' of Java?" continues the intellectual history of previous chapters, looking at the role played by Theosophy in Indonesian nationalist views of *wayang*. Trying to follow the interpretations of Eastern intellectuals who sought to extricate themselves from Western domination by analyzing Western readings of Eastern mystical thought can be a torturous exercise, but Sears gives a cogent look into the complexity of the interactions between Javanese nationalists and Dutch intellectuals. A related discussion of the interactions between the Javanese elite view of *wayang* and that of village *dhalang* is put forth in Chapter Four, "Javanese Storytellers, Colonial Categories,

Mahabharata Tales," as Sears discusses the dynamics between written and oral aspects of the *wayang* tradition. The role of the *dhalang* as exorcist in performing the *ngruwat* ceremonies itself constitutes an exemplification of layered meaning as stories of the purification of ogres overlay those of the Mahabharata heroes and, simultaneously, invoke the powers, natural and supernatural, which are at work in the outside world, powers which could be seen as a threat to the control of the Dutch-dominated courts. The development of schools for *dhalangs* in part grew out of this tension between rural exorcists and the distant courts that endeavored to train, and thus tame, them.

In Chapter Five, "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Postcolonial Performance Domains," one discovers that negotiations between interpreters and interpretations of *wayang* continued after Indonesia gained independence, as scholars such as Clifford Geertz saw post-colonial Java/Indonesia in terms of the *wayang* tradition constructed in the colonial period. Sears credits the work of scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Ruth McVey with providing valuable insights through their analyses of *wayang* in the context of political rhetoric during the Soekarno years, but she argues that "*wayang* was, in many ways, less substantial and more persistent than the work of these scholars suggests." (232) The implications of this are further explored in this chapter as Sears looks at three contemporary performance environments—the *ruwatan* exorcistic performances; the *Rebo Legi* monthly performances at the home of the famous *dhalang* Ki Anom Suroto, and the *padat* condensed performances created at the Arts Academy in Solo—and considers the ways in which "[c]olonial, modern, and postmodern *wayang* authorities intertwine." (265)

Who is manipulating whom in *wayang*, and to what ends, remains a matter of contestation in present-day Indonesia. In Chapter Six, "Fictions, Images, and Allegories," Sears considers the commodification of *wayang* via cassette recordings and business-sponsored *wayang* performances. She notes that while the trend toward entertainment-oriented *wayang* may represent a departure from the more esoteric aspects of the court tradition, these popularizing innovations can also be seen as part of the "stress on pleasing audiences that seems to have been an important part of the tradition for as long as it has been known." (270)

Sears goes on to consider several other modern writers and artists working in a variety of media, including R. A. Kosasih, whose *wayang* comics have played an important role in bringing the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and other *wayang* stories to a wider Indonesian-reading audience. This audience includes writers and intellectuals such as Leila Chudori, whose short story "The Purification of Sita" gives a feminist spin to the episode at the end of the Ramayana when Sita has to prove her chastity. What about Rama—was he faithful to Sita? is the question posed by Chudori's heroine, though only to herself.¹ Another area of contestation swirls around the image of the *ksatriya* or warrior/ruler. Claimed by Indonesia's military as part of its tradition, the *ksatriya* ethos is frequently re-negotiated by modern writers, especially through humor. Yudhisthira Ardi Noegraha's humorous novels (casting Arjuna, et al. as spoiled and self-indulgent teenagers in modern Jakarta) were seen by the Javanese-Indonesian

¹ Leila Chudori, "The Purification of Sita," in John H. McGlynn, ed., *Menagerie, 1: Indonesian Fiction, Poetry, Photographs, Essays* (Jakarta: The Lontar Foundation, 1992), pp. 93–100.

establishment as undermining the dignity of the *wayang* heroes, and, while not banned, were felt to be dangerously disrespectful. Putu Wijaya takes an often playful, post-modernist approach in using *wayang* imagery as he gives us *wayang* characters who seize control of their own stories. His work, especially the novel *Perang* ("War") which Sears discusses in some detail, also contains flashes of violence that recall the bloody events that marked the country's transition to the New Order in 1965.

For Pramoedya Ananta Toer, whose works are banned in New Order Indonesia and whom Sears discusses briefly in the Introduction, the image of the puppeteer manipulating the puppets is emblematic of the manipulation of colonized by colonizers, and, more importantly, of the Javanese by their own oppressive tradition. Sears acknowledges the extent to which the co-optation of *wayang* can be part of an oppressive discourse, but also emphasizes the ways in which "the subaltern is always speaking. The problem and challenge for postcolonial intellectuals—whether they have inherited the subject position of colonizers or that of the colonized—is how to listen when the subaltern speaks." (301) The way to do this, she suggests, is to recognize the creative and dynamic evolution that allows new storytellers to continue to fill the essentially empty categories of *wayang* tales. (I happened to observe an example of this at an official performance of *Wayang Pancasila* that took place in Malang, East Java, on Indonesian Independence Day, 1989. In an interesting parallel to the kind of co-optation that Sears relates in Chapter One, the Dutch were presented as Korawas to the Indonesian nationalists' Pandhawas, with native, e.g. Indonesian, bandits and brigands filling the role of the ogres who live in the forest.)

At the beginning of the last chapter, Sears quotes from John Smail's field notes, showing him grappling with the difficulty of an historian trying to know the past when, as he says, "what he comes to know through his studies is himself—though this, indeed, if he is aware of it, is a precious thing, as valuable as the past-as-it-was-lived which he is searching for." (266). Continuing this analytical trajectory, and bringing the insights of a considerable range of post-modernist scholarship to bear on the topic, Sears shows the multiple perspectives from which one can more usefully observe the role of *wayang* in Java and Indonesia. Furthermore, her detailed descriptions of a large variety of performances and storytellings, and of the circumstances around them, give the reader plenty to observe. In providing real historical depth to her study of the ways in which performance context and story have interacted over time, Sears has made a valuable contribution to our understanding of *wayang* past, present, and future.

