
BEYOND SCHOLARLY DISCIPLINES AND GENDER-ESSENTIALISM¹

Kathrin Oester

Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, eds. *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. 309 pp.

Laurie J. Sears, ed. *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996. 349 pp.

Two books on gender in Southeast Asia, both based on conferences held in the United States: plenty to think about from an anthropological point of view. The first of these conferences took place in 1991 at the University of Seattle and led to a collection of articles, *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, edited by Laurie J. Sears. The second collection, *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz, is based on a conference held at the University of California, Berkeley in 1992.

Both collections include scholars from a variety of disciplines: anthropology, cultural studies, comparative literature, and political economy. But although research on women is the centerpiece of both books, neither male authors nor the topic of masculinity are excluded. While Sears's collection, as the title indicates, is limited to Indonesia, Ong and Peletz's collection includes research from the wider field of Southeast Asia; discussion touches on Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand.

¹ I would like to thank Amrih Widodo, Heinzpeter Znoj, Ann-Marie Hilsdon, and Jürg Schneider for many critical comments and thoroughful reading of previous versions of this essay.

But it is the kinship between the two books that is perhaps most striking, a kinship in approach and even motive that has led me to shape my discussion below as if these were two volumes of a single work, richly cross-referenced. The two books share a rejection of essentialist positions in gender-theory and focus instead on a multiplicity of influences, modeling the ever-shifting categories of masculinity and femininity in postcolonial nation-states. They also turn away both from intra-disciplinary discussions concerning methodological and theoretical questions, and instead prefer to address research from a wide range of disciplines and cultural areas. While this multidisciplinary approach could easily be seen as the natural effect of *Southeast Asia's* cultural richness and diversity, it is in fact the outcome of transformations in *Western* knowledge formation.

Not so long ago cultural anthropology tried to emancipate itself from its former entanglement with colonialism by identifying with indigenous people. Some anthropologists started to fight for indigenous people in their own right and sometimes even for the survival of "societies without a state." The common vocabulary at the time was marked by politically charged terms like "resistance" and "self-determination," and it made sense to represent ethnic groups in their singularity, giving the reader the opportunity to identify with them and to resist the overwhelming powers of markets and states.

Those times seem to be long gone. As anthropologists slowly and with the help of other disciplines (colonial history, for example) have become aware of the fact that "their" indigenous peoples never were the "resisting noble savages" they appeared to be, many scholars have started to acknowledge the existence of postcolonial states and their populations as modern citizens. Nevertheless, in their research, anthropologists still tend—according to Renato Rosaldo²—to focus either on the indigenous culture *or* the modern citizen. It is still hard to think both together: as soon as the modern citizen appears in an anthropologist's focus, the subject's cultural background disappears, and vice versa.

Not only for Southeast Asia's local groups, but for anthropologists as well, state- and market-integration are often ambivalent, conflict-ridden processes, and it is precisely this ambivalence which informs most of the research presented in the two volumes. It is the merit of Sears's and Ong/Peletz's collections to reconsider postcolonial citizens on their own cultural ground.

A new level of analysis is also reached in the field of gender studies. Gone are the days when scholars, disappointed with an overwhelming rationalism in the Western world, set their hope on women and the female in an essentialist and nostalgic "search for the Other." Instead of re-constructing an imagined Other—female or indigenous—the authors represented in these volumes seem to be ready to accept the challenge of foreign men and women living under conditions Western scholars partly share with them.

Gone are the days also when each discipline thought it had developed the only true methodology, ignoring scholarship in different traditions. Winning new self-

² Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 198, quoted by Jacqueline Siapno, "Alternative Filipina Heroines," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men. Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, p. 219.

confidence in a postcolonial world, editors and authors proudly overcame such constraints and vanities, and those who were once the Westerners' "Others" become his/her colleagues and friends.

The editors of both collections celebrate this new position, giving the postcolonial nation-states an example of how to integrate the most diverse disciplines, scholars and cultures, and, last but not least, the most diverse genders—straights, gays, bi- and transsexuals.

However, it would be too easy to stop the reflection at this point. Starting from the fact that our human thinking cannot function without constructing and re-constructing its Other in a constant attempt to reach beyond its own limitations, the matter seems much more complicated. Now that the former Other has finally become part of the scientific community, who then takes his/her place? I think it is precisely at this point that the disparate interests of different authors, shaped by class, race, and gender, emerge most clearly against the background of an exquisitely tolerant postcolonial open-mindedness, sometimes—in a "return of the repressed"—re-introducing what was thought to have been overcome long ago.

Let me make a very brief *tour d'horizon*—even though I know the vainness of such an attempt and recognize that it won't do justice to the richness and wide range of the research displayed in the two volumes.

Starting with Dan Lev,³ I want to illustrate what could be meant by my statement that "the return of the repressed" might appear in the midst of a postcolonial open-mindedness. Lev was given a most prominent place by Sears, providing him with the opportunity to comment on other articles of the collection—a privilege obviously not extended to the rest of the contributors. Under the title "On the other hand?" Lev relativizes research presented by Indonesian authors who show in various examples how the government controls women in Indonesia. These Indonesian authors include Sita Aripurnami,⁴ who analyzes the way women are represented in Sinetron-series on Indonesian TV; Saraswati Sunindyo,⁵ who writes about the way the Indonesian government and media reacted in two cases of a woman's (attempted) murder; Julia I. Suryakusama,⁶ who reflects on how the state deals with women's sexuality; and Sylvia Tiwon,⁷ who finally describes the way the Indonesian government tries to push women into a "being-for-others" as wives and mothers. However, in his article Lev teaches the reader that it is not Indonesia's women who are confronted with repression in the first place, but everybody in general and (ethnic) minorities in particular. Compared to officials in the former Sukarno regime, Lev argues, state officials under Suharto are less educated, and therefore more traditional. According to Lev this is one of the reasons why repression grows in today's Indonesia. And, challenging the female

³ Daniel S. Lev, "On the Other Hand?," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, pp. 191-203.

⁴ Sita Aripurnami, "A Feminist Comment on the Sinetron Presentation of Indonesian Women," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 249-258.

⁵ Saraswati Sunindyo, "Murder, Gender, and the Media. Sexualizing Politics and Violence," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 120-139.

⁶ Julia I. Suryakusama, "The State and Sexuality in New Order Indonesia," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 92-119.

⁷ Sylvia Tiwon, "Models and Maniacs," *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 47-70.

Indonesian authors, Lev argues rhetorically "Who, after all, is more traditional in Indonesia than women?"⁸ Although the author explains to the reader that it is not his intention to tone down the critique of a regime which gives women formal rights but undermines their self-esteem in everyday life, Lev, with Sears's help, implicitly repeats the same pattern of domination: although Indonesian authors are given the right to express themselves in the collection, it is Lev alone who has the right to comment on them. Surely the political situation Suryakusama, Sunindyo, Aripurnami, and Tiwon describe in their articles merits a much more thorough consideration. Do they not speak of repression that jeopardizes scientific work, institutions, and scholars precisely in the country which is, after all, the book's subject? Luckily enough it is the editor herself who gives such a thorough consideration in her introduction to the book.⁹

In Benedict Anderson's "'Bullshit!' S/He said,"¹⁰ published in the same volume, we find an example in which the old colonial power structures dividing East and West, men and women, are overcome in a most fascinating way. Thoughtfully and with sensitivity Anderson considers *Bidadari*, a novel by the female Indonesian author, Tatie Said. From a sociological point of view the novel, as Anderson points out, is far removed from reality. In telling the story of a transsexual's rise from humble social beginnings to a life in wealthy surroundings in a Jakarta where money is of no importance, Said does not bother much with the inconveniences and economic limitations of everyday life. While facing and acknowledging this kind of sociological inanity offered by the upper-middle-class writer, Anderson does not retreat from analysis, but instead follows the development of Said's fictional story step by step. In so doing he discovers a most fascinating reality: the ideal of a new androgynous consumer hero/ine emerging in an urban field where narcissism structures social relationships and sex is more important than reproduction or gender. The novel's protagonists exhibit neither social responsibility nor interest in politics, but subscribe instead to a star system within which one can make a lot of money. Reading, listening, and without denying Said's story, Anderson takes a "trivial" novel seriously and gains new insights into the hitherto hidden reality of a blurred gender-dichotomy in urban Jakarta.

In his contribution, Dédé Oetomo¹¹ also speaks of blurred gender-dichotomies when he tries to explain the Indonesian term *banci* by juxtaposing it with the notion of gay men. While *banci* are considered "sexually passive, impotent, and genitally defective," Oetomo is nonetheless persuaded that, from a feminist point of view, "*banci*-hood with its androgynous, assertive gender characteristics . . . has something to offer to women."¹² I think liminal categories like *banci*, transsexual, or gay are extraordinarily sensitive and revealing when we try to follow the often unexpected course of social change. In his article, Oetomo gives the reader an example of how rich comparative analysis can be in cases in which the right juxtapositions are chosen.

⁸ D. S. Lev, "On the Other Hand?," p. 198.

⁹ Laurie J. Sears, "Fragile Identities: Deconstructing Women and Indonesia," *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 1-44.

¹⁰ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, "Bullshit!" S/He Said. The Happy, Modern. Sexy, Indonesian Married Woman as Transsexual," *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 270-294.

¹¹ Dédé Oetomo, "Gender and Sexual Orientation in Indonesia," *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 259-269.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 269.

In order to know more about the shifting gender-categories in Southeast Asia, and inspired by Anderson's and Oetomo's essays, it would make sense to me to go further and juxtapose Said's postmodern transsexual hero/ine to *banci*-men, a phenomenon deeply rooted in the archipelago's traditions.

With the same sensitivity Anderson shows for Tati Said's novel, Jacqueline Siapno¹³ reads the novel of a Philippine author about a middle-class mother of five sons who starts to doubt her apolitical role in life as her sons turn into NPA revolutionaries. In Siapno's, as in Anderson's essays, the "search for the Other" does not fulfill itself prematurely by projection, thus creating an exotic or despised Other. Instead, both scholars enter into a deep relationship with the text of an other, discovering step by step—and sometimes perhaps against their own will—an unexpected reality. In the process, they win new insights into a foreign world.

With the same inner concentration and an open mind, Aihwa Ong¹⁴ ". . . describes the origins and implications of the different models of Malay womanhood, family, and kinship that both undergird and infuse Malay(sian) nationalist discourses."¹⁵ Thereby she discovers unknown and sometimes surprising aspects of women's self-expression in the religious context of Islam. I think such insights would not have been possible without the author's deep involvement with those expressing themselves and their sense of freedom in ways other than a (Western) feminist would expect—by wearing the veil!

Sylvia Tiwon¹⁶ analyzes the state-induced "ibuism" in Indonesia as an oppressive ideology that deprives women from "being-as-self" and forces them into a "being-for-others" as mothers and wives. Nevertheless, Tiwon does not just construct Indonesian women as victims: she also emphasizes their agency. While speaking of a young working-class woman author expressing herself against the grain of her time and political circumstances, Tiwon refuses to see women as weak and victims only. The same is true for Anna Tsing¹⁷ as she tells the stories of several Dayak women in Kalimantan who became powerful men's lovers in a situation of oppression but maintained their self-esteem by claiming to be truly loved by their masters. And Nancy Florida¹⁸ too emphasizes female agency when she writes about women of noble origin fleeing into sufi mysticism in order to avoid marriage in nineteenth century Java.

While reading essay after essay, a troubling question comes to mind: weren't the phenomena that are now identified as provoking "women's agency" called "humiliating" and these humiliating situations called "exploitative" in the sixties and seventies? In her article Jane Monning Atkinson indirectly reflects on the issue by discussing a researcher's responsibility in a situation of misery and oppression. In a

¹³ Jacqueline Siapno, "Alternative Filipina Heroines," *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 216-243.

¹⁴ Aihwa Ong, "State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men. Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, pp. 159-194.

¹⁵ Introduction to Aihwa Ong's article "State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia," p. 159.

¹⁶ Sylvia Tiwon, "Models and Maniacs," *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 47-70.

¹⁷ Anna Tsing Lowenhaupt, "Alien Romance," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 295-317.

¹⁸ Nancy K. Florida, "Sex Wars. Writing Gender Relations in Nineteenth-Century Java," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 207-224.

programmatic statement, she proclaims that her own “liberal impulses” and her need for action outdistance her “postmodernist cynism”—as she calls a critical text that limits itself to “hermeneutics.”¹⁹ As Atkinson leads the reader into a field of difficult ethical questions, she finds remedy, maybe too easily, in statistics. In order to diminish the high death rate of small children in the village where she carried out her research, she has decided to conform her “disciplinary discourse to the interests of policy-makers” so as to provoke governmental action.²⁰

It is indeed hard to avoid speaking of either women’s or men’s agency when it comes to discussing exploitation of the Southeast Asian labor force. Diane L. Wolfe²¹ describes the situation in a rural area in Indonesia, Mary Beth Mills²² examines the situation of Thai workers, and Jane A. Margold²³ studies Philippine workers in Saudi Arabia. What becomes evident throughout these texts is that relatively uneducated, often rural people, are hit by a forced and rapid integration into capitalism more directly than any other segment of society. Very often their own cultural resources are in no way compatible with the discipline of factory work, and the rapidity of social change can be devastating. As Margold points out for Philippine migrants in Saudi Arabia, the latter are reduced to muscles and body parts, and it is most difficult for them to reintegrate into their former social environment when they finally come home after months or years of alienating experiences abroad.²⁴

When discussing gender in Southeast Asia, scholars have been known to employ the matrilineal Minangkabau of West Sumatra and Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia as stepping stones for two opposite arguments. The Minangkabau are characterized as representing either the persistence of women’s agency in a rapidly changing world or, on the contrary, expressing the dissolution of women’s self-esteem and agency under the influence of Islam, or state- and market-integration. Three articles in these books discuss this topic: Jennifer Krier²⁵ and Evelyn Blackwood²⁶ write about the Minangkabau in West Sumatra, and Michael Peletz²⁷ writes about Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia. Scratching on the smooth surface of the official patriarchal discourse, the “official representations,” Peletz and Blackwood show oppositional “practical

¹⁹ Jane Monnig Atkinson, “Quizzing the Shinx. Reflections on Mortality in Central Sulawesi,” in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, p. 190.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Diane L. Wolfe, “Javanese Factory Daughters. Gender, the State, and Industrial Capitalism,” in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 140-162.

²² Mary Beth Mills, “Attack of the Widow Ghosts: Gender, Death, and Modernity in Northeast Thailand,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 244-273.

²³ Jane A. Margold, “Narratives of Masculinity and Transnational Migration: Filipino Workers in the Middle East,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 274-298.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

²⁵ Jennifer Krier, “Narrating Herself: Power and Gender in a Minangkabau Woman’s Tale of Conflict,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 51-75.

²⁶ Evelyn Blackwood, “Senior Women, Model Mothers, and Dutiful Wives. Managing Gender Contradictions in a Minangkabau Village,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 124-158.

²⁷ Michael G. Peletz, “Neither Reasonable nor Responsible: Contrasting Representations of Masculinity in a Malay Society,” in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 76-123.

representations" in which women's strong position is still vividly present.²⁸ Krier, however, emphasizes women's loss of control over landed property and their cultural heritage, a loss which leaves them deprived of their former strong position.

Suzanne Brenner²⁹ seems to go in the same direction as Peletz when she reconsiders Javanese women's presence in the marketplace. Although, as the Islamic discourse puts it, women are supposedly marked by passion (*nafsu*) and men by reason and rationality (*akal*), women's everyday life tells a different story: it is the woman's task to go to the marketplace and to manage the household money!

It is Brenner's merit to show the ideological gap between women's everyday life and the Islamic discourse. As a female researcher, Brenner had access to women's discourse about men and is therefore able to perceive male and female discourses in reaction and in opposition to each other. Had she called what women told her "practical representations," as opposed to "official representations," she would have obstructed women's way of representing things, which is, among women, no less "official" than the way men represent them. But she does not fall into this error.

Both volumes are at their best when the "postcolonial open-mindedness" claimed by their editors leads into unknown fields of knowledge, to the discovery precisely of what the reader did not expect. Very often such knowledge cannot be attained without a radical questioning of long-standing certainties. In this sense women and femininity in Southeast Asia are never what we expected, and many articles show that state policies, acting on women's minds and bodies, do not reach their goal. Well-educated women in Singapore—to the government's irritation—do not have, as Heng and Devan³⁰ show, as many babies as the government needs in order to reproduce the state's intelligentsia. And also Malay women in Malaysia, as Ong³¹ describes, are not as fertile as the government's population policy prescribes in its efforts to see that the Malay outnumber other ethnic groups. Instead, after a period of black veiling reflecting the deep anomie of Malaysia's middle-class women in a period of rapid social change, educated Malaysian women adapt themselves—but not by having more babies. They start to wear colorful veils after the newest fashion, while the government starts cautiously to give a "multicultural society" more room in its media.

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned how Western anthropology and the humanities had tended to create an Other shaped in accordance with their own Western nostalgia. In these collections the editors strive to go beyond such ethnocentric fixations, demanding instead an openness to other realities—realities that do not necessarily fit a Western (nostalgic) mindset. This is, I think, a most challenging and adventurous task. And like Laura Stoler describes it for the former European colonialists who got "contaminated" by their Javanese lovers, and the colonialists'

²⁸ Ibid., p. 82. Peletz quotes Pierre Bourdieu, "Outline of a Theory of Practice" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 33-38.

²⁹ Suzanne A. Brenner, "Why Women Rule the Roost: Rethinking Javanese Ideologies of Gender and Self-Control," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 19-50.

³⁰ Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan, "State Fatherhood: The Politics of Nationalism, Sexuality, and Race in Singapore," in *Bewitching Women, Pious Men*, pp. 195-215.

³¹ Aihwa Ong, "State versus Islam," p. 170.

children by their Javanese nannies,³² Sears's and Ong/Peletz's collections provide their readers with many new opportunities for contamination by the Other.

³² Ann Laura Stoler, "A Sentimental Education. Native Servants and the Cultivation of European Children in the Netherlands Indies," in *Fantasizing the Feminine*, pp. 71-91.