

M/C Journal, Vol. 17, No. 5 (2014) - 'illegitimate'
Dancing with an Illegitimate Feminism: A Female Buginese Scholar's Voice in Australian Academia

<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/871>

Herawaty Abbas, Brooke Collins-Gearing

Sharing this article, the act of writing and then having it read, legitimises the point of it – that is, we (and we speak on behalf of each other here) managed to negotiate western academic expectations and norms from a just-as-legitimate-but-not-always-heard female Buginese perspective written in Standard Australian English (not my first choice-of-language and I speak on behalf of myself). At times we transgressed roles, guiding and following each other through different academic, cultural, social, and linguistic domains until we stumbled upon ways of legitimating our entanglement of experiences, when we heard the similar, faint, drum beat across boundaries and journeys.

This article is one storying of the results of this four year relationship between a Buginese PhD candidate and an Indigenous Australian supervisor – both in the writing of the article and the processes that we are writing about. This is our process of knowing and validating knowledge through sharing, collaboration and cultural exchange. Neither the successful PhD thesis nor this article draw from autoethnography but they are outcomes of a lived, research standpoint that fiercely fought to centre a Muslim-Buginese perspective as much as possible, due to the nature of a postgraduate program. In the effort to find a way to not privilege Western ways of knowing to the detriment of my standpoint and position, we had to find a way to at times privilege my way of knowing the world alongside a Western one. There had to be a beat that transgressed cultural and linguistic differences and that allowed for a legitimised dialogic, intersubjective dance.

The PhD research focused on potential dialogue between Australian culture and Buginese culture in terms of feminism and its resulting cultural hybridity where some Australian feminist thoughts are applicable to Buginese culture but some are not. Therefore, the PhD study centred a Buginese standpoint while moving back and forth amongst Australian feminist discourses and the dominant expectations of a western academic process. The PhD research was part of a greater Indonesian tertiary movement to include, study, challenge and extend feminist literary programs and how this could be respectfully and culturally appropriately achieved.

This article is written by both of us but the core knowledge comes from a Buginese standpoint, that is, the principal supervisor learned from the PhD candidate and then applied her understanding of Indigenous standpoint theory, Tuhiwahi Smith's decolonising methodologies and Spivakian self-reflexivity to aid the candidate's development of her dancing methodology. For this reason, the rest of this article is written from the first-person perspective of Dr Abbas.

The PhD study was a literary analysis on five stories from Helen Garner's *Postcards from Surfers* (1985). My work translated these five stories from English into Indonesian and discussed some challenges that occurred in the process of translation. By using Edward Said's work on contrapuntal reading and Robert Warrior's metaphor of the subaltern dancing, I, the embodied learner and the cultural translator, moved back and forth between Buginese culture and Australian culture to consider how Australian women and men are represented and how mainstream Australian society engages with, or challenges, discourses of patriarchy and power. This movement back and forth was theorised as 'dancing'. Ultimately, another dance was performed at the end of the thesis waltz between the work which centred my Buginese standpoint and academia as a

Western tertiary institution.

I have been dancing with Australian feminism for over four years. My use of the word 'dancing' signified my challenge to articulate and engage with Australian culture, literature, and feminism by viewing it from a Buginese perspective as opposed to a 'Non-Western' perspective. As a Buginese woman and scholar, I centred my specific cultural standpoints instead of accepting them generally and therefore dismissed the altering label of 'Non-Western'. Juxtaposing Australian feminism with Buginese culture was not easy. However, as my research progressed I saw interesting cultural differences between Australian and Buginese cultures that could result in a hybridized way of engaging feminist issues. At times, my cultural standpoint took the lead in directing the research or the point, at other times a Western beat was more prominent, for example, using the English language to voice my work.

The Buginese, also known as the Bugis, along with the Makassar, the Mandar, and the Toraja, are one of the four main ethnic groups of the province of South Sulawesi in Indonesia. The population of the Buginese in South Sulawesi spreads into major states (Bone, Wajo, Soppeng, and Sidenreng) and some minor states (Pare-Pare, Suppa, and Sinjai). Like other ethnic groups living in other islands of Indonesia such as the Javanese, the Sundanese, the Minang, the Batak, the Balinese, and the Ambonese, the Buginese have their own culture and traditions. The Buginese, especially those who live in the villages, are still bounded strictly by *ade'* (custom) or *pangadereng* (customary law). This concept of *ade'* provides living guidelines for Buginese and consists of five components including *ade'*, *bicara*, *rapang*, *wari'*, and *sara'*. Pelras clarifies that *pangadereng* is 'adat-hood', a corpus of interlinked ruling principles which, besides *ade'* (custom), includes also *bicara* (jurisprudence), *rapang* (models of good behaviour which ensure the proper functioning of society), *wari'* (rules of descent and hierarchy) and *sara'* (Islamic law and institution, derived from the Arabic *shari'a*) (190).

So, *pangadereng* is an overall norm which includes advice on how Buginese should behave towards fellow human beings and social institutions on a reciprocal basis. In addition, the Buginese together with Makassarese, mind what is called *siri'* (honour and shame), that is the sense of honour and shame.

In the life of the Buginese-Makassar people, the most basic element is *siri'*. For them, no other value merits to be more detected and preserved. *Siri'* is their life, their self-respect and their dignity. This is why, in order to uphold and to defend it when it has been stained or they consider it has been stained by somebody, the Bugis-Makassar people are ready to sacrifice everything, including their most precious life, for the sake of its restoration. So goes the saying.... 'When one's honour is at stake, without any afterthought one fights' (Pelras 206).

Buginese is one of Indonesia's ethnic groups where men and women are intended to perform equal roles in society, especially those who live in the Buginese states of South Sulawesi where they are still bound strictly by *ade'* (custom) or *pangadereng* (customary law). These two basic concepts are guidelines for daily life, both in the family and the work place. Buginese also praise what is called *siri'*, a sense of honour and shame. It is because of this sense of honour and shame that we have a saying, *siri' emmi ri onroang ri lino* (people live only for siri') which means one lives only for honour and prestige.

Siri' had to remain a guiding principle in my theoretical and methodological approach to my PhD research. It is also a guiding principle in the resulting pedagogical praxis that this work has established for my course in Australian culture and literature at Hasanuddin University. I was not prepared to compromise my own ethical and cultural identity and position yet will admit, at times, I felt pressured to do so if I was going to be seen to be performing legitimate scholarly work. Novera argues that:

Little research has focused specifically on the adjustment of Indonesian students in Australia. Hasanah (1997) and Philips (1994) note that Indonesian students encounter difficulties in fulfilling certain Western academic requirements, particularly in relation to critical thinking. These studies do not explore the broad range of academic and social problems. Yet this is a fruitful area for research, not just because of the importance of Indonesian students to Australia, and the importance of the Australia-Indonesia relationship to both neighbouring nations, but also because adjustment problems are magnified by cultural differences. There are clear differences between Indonesian and Australian cultures, so that a study of Indonesian students in Australia might also be of broader academic interest [...] Studies of international student adjustment discuss a range of problems, including the pressures created by new role and behavioural expectations, language difficulties, financial problems, social difficulties, homesickness, difficulties in dealing with university and other authorities, academic difficulties, and lack of assertiveness inside and outside the classroom. (467)

While both my supervisor and I would agree that I faced all of these obstacles during my PhD candidature, this article is focusing solely on the battle to present my methodology, a dialogic encounter between Buginese feminism and mainstream Australian culture using Helen Garner's short stories, to a Western process and have it be "legitimised".

Endang writes that short stories are becoming more popular in the industrial era in Indonesia and they have become vehicles for writers to articulate the realities of social life such as poverty, marginalization, and unfairness (141-144). In addition, Noor states that the short story has become a new literary form particularly effective for assisting writers in their goal to help the marginalized because its shortness can function as a weapon to directly "scoop up" the targeted issues and "knock them out at a blow" (Endang 144-145). Indeed, Helen Garner uses short stories in a way similar to that described by Endang: as a defiant act towards the government and current circumstances (145).

My study of Helen Garner's short stories explored the way her stories engage with and resist gender relations and inequality between men and women in Australian society through four themes prevalent in the narratives: the kitchen, landscape, language, and sexuality. I wrote my thesis in standard Australian English and I complied with expected forms, formatting, referencing, structuring etc. My thesis also included the Buginese translations of some of Garner's work. However, the theoretical approaches that informed my analysis cannot be separated from the personal. In the title, I use the term 'dancing' to indicate a dialogue with white Australian women by moving back and forth between Australian culture and Buginese culture. I use the term 'dancing' as an extension of Edward Said's work on contrapuntal reading but employ it as a signifier of my movement between insider and outsider (of Australian feminism), that is, I extend it from just a literary reading to a whole body experience. According to Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, the "essence of Said's argument is to know something is to have power over it, and conversely, to have power is to know the world in your own terms" (83).

Ashcroft and Ahluwalia add how through music, particularly the work of pianist Glenn Gould, Said formulated a way of reading imperial and postcolonial texts contrapuntally. Such a reading acknowledges the hybridity of cultures, histories and literatures, allowing the reader to move back and forth between an internal and an external standpoint of cultural references and attitudes in "an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" (Said 66). While theorising about the potential dance between Australian and Buginese feminisms in my work, I was living the dance in my day-to-day Australian university experience.

Trying to accommodate the expected requirements of a PhD thesis, while at the same time ensuring that I maintained my own personal, cultural and professional dignity, that is *ade'*, and *siri'*, required some fancy footwork.

Siri' is central to my Buginese worldview and had to be positioned as such in my PhD thesis. Also, the realities that women are still marginalized and that gender inequality and disparities persist in Indonesian society become a motivation to carry out my PhD study. The opportunity to study Australian culture and literature in that country, allowed me to increase my global and local complexity as an individual, what Pieterse refers to as " a process of hybridization" and to become as Beck terms an "actor" and "manager" of my life (as cited in Edmunds 1). Gaining greater autonomy and reconceptualising both masculinity and femininity, while dominant themes in Garner's work, are also issues I address in my personal and professional goals. In other words, this study resulted in hybridized knowledge of Australian concepts of feminism and Buginese societies that offers a reference for students to understand and engage with different feminist thought. By learning how feminism is understood differently by Australians and Buginese, my Indonesian students can decide what aspects of feminist ideas from a Western perspective can be applied to Buginese culture without transgressing Buginese customs and habits.

There are few Australian literary works that have been translated into Indonesian. Those that have include Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2007) and *My Life is a Fake* (2009), James Vance Marshall's *Walkabout* (1957), Emma Darcy's *The Billionaire Bridegroom* (2010) , Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), and Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* (1978). My translation of five short stories from *Postcards from Surfers* complemented these works and enriched the diversity of Indonesian translations of world literary works, the bulk of which tends to come from the United Kingdom, America, the Middle East, and Japan. However, actually getting through the process of PhD research followed by examination required my supervisor and I to negotiate cross-cultural terrain, academic agendas and Western expectations of what legitimate thesis writing should look like. Employing Said's contrapuntal pedagogy and Warrior's notion of subaltern dancing became my illegitimate methodological frame.

Said points out that contrapuntal analysis means that students and teachers can cross-culturally "elucidate a complex and uneven topography" (318). He adds that "we must be able to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others" (32). Contrapuntal is a metaphor Said derived from musical theory, meaning to counterpoint or add a rhythm or melody, in this case, Buginese and Anglo-Australian feminisms.

Warrior argues for an indigenous critique of how power and knowledge is read and in doing so he writes that "the subaltern can dance, and so sometimes can the intellectual" (85). In his rereading of Spivak, he argues that subaltern and intellectual positions can meet "and in meeting, create the possibility of communication" (86). He refers to this as dancing partly because it implicitly acknowledges without silencing the voices of the subaltern (once the subaltern speaks it is no longer the subaltern, so the notion of dancing allows for communication, "a movement from subalternity to something else" (90) which can mark "a new sort of non-complicitous relationship to a family, community or class of origin" (91). By "non-complicit" Warrior means that when a member of the subaltern becomes a scholar and therefore a member of those who historically silence the subaltern, there are other methods for communicating, of moving, between political and cultural spaces that allow for a multiplicity of voices and responses. Warrior uses a traditional Osage in-losh-ka dance as an example of how he physically and intellectually interacts with multiple voices and positions:

While the music plays, our usual differences, including subalternity and intellectuality, and even gender in its own way, are levelled. For those of us moving to the music, the rules change, and those who know the steps and the songs and those who can keep up with the whirl of bodies, music and colours hold nearly every advantage over station or money. The music ends, of course, but I know I take my knowledge of the dance away and into my life as a critic, and I would argue that those levelled moments remain with us after we leave the drum, change our clothes, and go back to the rest of our lives. (93)

For Warrior, the dance becomes theory into practice. For me, it became not only a way to soundly and “appropriately” present my methodology and purpose, but it also became my day to day interactions, as a female Buginese scholar, with western, Australian academic and cultural worldviews and expectations.

One of the biggest movements I had to justify was my use of the first person “I”, in my thesis, to signify my identity as a Buginese woman and position myself as an insider of my community with a hybrid western feminism with Australia in mind. Perrault argues that “Writing ‘I’ has been an emancipatory project for women” (2). In the context of my PhD thesis, uttering ‘I’ confirmed my position and aims. However, this act of explicitly situating my own identity and cultural position in my research and thesis was considered one of the more illegitimate acts. In one of the examiner reports, it was stated that situating myself centrally was fraught but that I managed to avoid the pitfalls. Judy Long argues that writing in the female first person challenges patriarchal control and order (127). For me, writing in the first person was essential if I had any chance of maintaining my Buginese identity and voice, in both my thesis and in my Australian tertiary experience. As Trinh-Minh writes, “S/he who writes, writes. In uncertainty, in necessity. And does not ask whether s/he is given permission to do so or not” (8).

Van Dijk, cited in Hamilton, notes that the west and north are bound by an academic ethnocentrism and this is a particular area my own research had to negotiate. Methodologically I provided a comparative rather than a universalising perspective, engaging with middle-class, heterosexual, western, white women feminism but not privileging them. It is important for Buginese to use language discourses as a weapon to gain power, particularly because as McGlynn claims, “generally Indonesians are not particularly outspoken” (38). My research was shaped by a combination of ongoing dedication to promote women’s empowerment in the Buginese context and my role as an academic teaching English literature at the university level. I applied interpretive principles that will enable my students to see how the ideas of feminism conveyed through western literature can positively improve the quality of women’s lives and be implemented in Buginese culture without compromising our identity as Indonesians and Buginese people. At the same time, my literary translation provides a cultural comparison with Australia that allows a space for further conversations to occur. However, while attempting to negotiate western and Indonesian discourses in my thesis, I was also physically and emotionally trying to negotiate how to do this as a Muslim Buginese female PhD candidate in an Anglo-Australian academic institution.

The notion of ‘dancing’ was employed as a signifier of movement between insider and outsider knowledge. Throughout the research process and my thesis I ‘danced’ with Australian feminism, traditional patriarchal Buginese society, Western academic expectations and my own emerging Indonesian feminist perspective. To ensure *siri*’ remained the pedagogical and ethical basis of my approach I applied Edward Said’s work on contrapuntal reading and Robert Warrior’s employment of a traditional Osage dance as a self-reflexive, embodied praxis, that is, I extended it from just a literary reading to a whole body experience. The notion of ‘dance’ allows for movement, change, contact,

tension, touch and distance: it means that for those who have historically been marginalised or confined, they are no longer silenced. The metaphoric act of dancing allowed me to legitimise my PhD work – it was successfully awarded – and to negotiate a western tertiary institute in Australia with my own Buginese knowledge, culture and purpose.

References

- Ashcroft., B., and P. Ahluwalia. *Edward Said*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Carey, Peter. *True History of the Kelly Gang: A Novel*. Random House LLC, 2007.
- Carey, Peter. *My Life as a Fake: A NNovel*. Random House LLC, 2009.
- Darcy, Emma. *Billionaire Bridegroom* 2319. Harlequin, 2010.
- Endang, Fransisca. "Disseminating Indonesian Postcoloniality into English Literature (a Case Study of 'Clara')." *Jurnal Sastra Inggris* 8.2: 2008.
- Edmunds, Kim. "The Impact of an Australian Higher Education on Gender Relations in Indonesia." *ISANA International Conference "Student Success in International Education"*, 2007
- Garner, Helen. *Postcards from Surfers*. Melbourne: McPhee/Gribble, 1985.
- Hamilton, Deborah, Deborah Schriffrin, and Heidi E. Tannen, ed. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. Victoria: Balckwll, 2001.
- Long, Judy. 1999. *Telling Women's Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text*. New York: New York UP, 1999.
- McGlynn, John H. "Silent Voices, Muted Expressions: Indonesian Literature Today." *Manoa* 12.1 (2000): 38-44.
- Morgan, Sally. *My Place*. Fremantle Press, 1987.
- Pelras, Christian. *The Bugis*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Perreault, Jeanne. *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autography*. London & Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995.
- Pieterse, J.N. Globalisation as Hybridisation. In M. Featherstone, S. Lash, and R. Robertson, eds., *Global Modernities*. London: Sage Publications, 1995.
- Marshall, James V. *Walkabout*. London: Puffin, 1957.
- McCullough, C. *The Thorn Birds* Sydney: Harper Collins, 1978.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1989.
- Novera, Isvet Amri. "Indonesian Postgraduate Students Studying in Australia: An Examination of Their Academic, Social and Cultural Experiences." *International Education Journal* 5.4 (2004): 475-487.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Book, 1993.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 1999.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois, 1988. 271-313.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Warrior, Robert. "'The Subaltern Can Dance, and So Sometimes Can the Intellectual.'" *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 13.1 (2011): 85-94.