

**‘RORO MENDUT’ BY WINDARTI:
CHOREOGRAPHING THE SEXUALITIES OF JAVANESE WOMAN**

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Windarti choreographed Roro Mendut, which has been performed for several times with various compositions of dancers and durations. The full version of Roro Mendut dance piece is performed in a 45-minute time involving five dancers. There are also duet and solo versions performed in several places in Java revealing the public acceptance for this dance. This paper aims to discuss the full version dance piece designed in a deductive explanation about the dance in Java, Indonesia and one of the results of its evolution today. Roro Mendut dance piece is an attempt of a woman named Windarti born in 1982 to portray woman's character in the current Javanese society. She is not from a noble or dancer family where dances are usually produced in the Javanese history. She graduates theatre and dance and has already made several dance pieces mainly discussing about woman.

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Windarti's dance piece has a similarity with the spirit of French feminism theory in the 1970s approaching the feminism with the concept of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing.

'Women must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.' (Helene Cixous)

This dance piece is an attempt of a woman to determine about herself by deconstructing her story through many aspects such as the story line of the main character Roro Mendut, body as a signifier to express the woman character, and the concept of spectacle including the costume and props used in this performance.

DANCE, AUTHOR, AUTHORITY

In the history of Javanese performing art, women characters typically are portrayed as the loveable and graceful figures with less capability to determine themselves. Various characters are performed in a dance drama as an adaptation from the puppet show inspired from some epics such as Ramayana, Mahabarata, and Panji. The character of Shinta in Ramayana story, for instance, is presented as a prize of the competition in Mantili Kingdom. In Mahabarata story most of the knight male characters are presented with having more than one wife. It occurs in the real life when Java consisted of several kingdoms in which women were symbolized as subjugation. If a kingdom won a battle against another kingdom, the heirlooms and the women were brought to the winner. Another case was by using a marriage to conquer the opponent and to expand the kingdom's area. Moreover, women's dance in the Javanese courts are presented to illustrate the ideal figure of a woman to be elegant, calm, and charming through the slow, refined, and graceful movements. One of the main features of the dance costume is Jarik, a long cloth to cover the bottom part of the body by wrapping the hip to leg tidily. The costume in a dance determines the range of leg movement; enabling the dancer to only produce the graceful movement and unable to run, jump, or spread the legs. Court dance has been legitimized by the palace the heirlooms. (Brakel, 1995) Most of the dances were choreographed by men dance masters including to create the story line and the movement arrangements cultivated only from court dance movement vocabularies.

The dance in Java has been developing through the emergence of some figures who has been out of the formal concept of the court dance. Indonesian performing art scholar RM.

Soedarsono has classified the emergence of Modern Dance Indonesia into two generations. The names mentioned below focus on those who have developed Javanese dance. Bagong Kussudiarjo and Wisnu Wardhana, both gentlemen are considered in the first generation of Indonesian modern dance that have developed the dance by making variation on duration, simplified costume, combined movement vocabularies from other dance traditions or picked up inspiration from the daily activity. Sardono W. Kusumo and Miroto -both gentlemen are also the prominent figures on the later generation. Sal Moergiyanto - Indonesian dance critic- argued that Sardono is considered as the stake of the emergence contemporary dance in Indonesia who has made an exploration on the individual creativity to respond the current situation and to seek the essence of the tradition rather than the decorative element. (Moergiyanto, 1976).

This evolution process implies that a distribution of the authority of the dance in Java from the court to the people and an individual have the right to construct their own identity in responding the current situation. Afterwards, how is this authority explored particularly by the woman whom the characters have been diminished in the previous era? Therefore, Windarti's dance piece 'Roro Mendut' is crucial to be discussed as a reflection of the woman character portrayed in this current moment. Windarti signifies that she as an individual and as a woman has the right to question the role of woman through her dance work.

RORO MENDUT KEEPS ALIVE

Windarti's decision to perform the story of Roro Mendut is powerful to voice out her critic about woman idea in the current situation - particularly in Javanese society. The popularity of the story itself has made people easily to associate the existed woman character in the Indonesian tales. Therefore, it is well received by the society and the feminist idea has more chances to be understood by Indonesian audiences. Windarti highlighted that a particular character of 'Roro Mendut' among other women characters in the tales seems more subordinate. Moreover, she has made an adjustment of the story line breaking out the stereotyped story and it just makes a strong statement.

Roro Mendut is one of folktales from Java that has been spread over Indonesia through a spoken and written tradition in a novel by YB. Mangunwijaya. The story has become inspiration for traditional theatre performance such as Ketoprak either on stage or on radio. A movie was also produced in 1982. The story portrays the life of a woman in Java during Mataram Kingdom era circa 17th century at which Mataram sent the troops under the command of Wiroguno to defeat a region named Pati where Roro Mendut lives. Therefore, as Mataram

won the battle, the beautiful lady Roro Mendut was considered as a treasure in Pati and should be brought to Mataram and proposed to be the younger wife of Wiroguno. However, Roro Mendut who lived under the reign of Mataram refused the proposal and it was irritating Wiroguno's prestige. To uphold his dignity, Wiroguno asked Roro Mendut as a common citizen to pay amount of tax for refusing the offer of Wiroguno. Roro Mendut accepted that challenge. She better paid the tax rather than to be Wiroguno's wife. Selling cigarette in the market was her way collecting the money. She offered the cigarette from one man to another but she smoked the cigarette firstly to attract the men to taste the cigarette just sampled Mendut's lips. One day she met Pronocitro and they were in love. Wiroguno noticed about that relationship then he killed Pronocitro and in the end both Pronocitro and Roro Mendut died. In Mangunwijaya's novel, Roro Mendut died because she tried to protect Pronocitro when Wiroguno and Pronocitro were in the battle. In the oral tradition, Mendut died because of suicide after Pronocitro was defeated by Wiroguno.

Windarti made an adjustment of the story where in the end of the story by keeping Mendut still alive. In the last scene Mendut even has a battle against Pranacitra after she reveals that Pronocitro has been using her as the spy in Mataram Kingdom. Although in the beginning Windarti portrays so many leaning positions towards Pronocitro showing how she is so powerless in front of her lover, in the end she demonstrates her ability to free herself from any attachment.

LEGS SPREADING, HIPS SWINGING

Through Roro Mendut choreography Windarti attempts to question the patriarchy system and explore the woman privilege. She puts several men's movement vocabularies from traditional Javanese dance such as Kambeng - stretching both arms to the the sides in the shoulder height- (appendix picture 1) and Mbegagah – spreading both legs to the sides and lowering down the position of the body until the knees are bent making 90 degrees angle- (appendix picture 2). This movement is contrast compared to the previous sequence which are more exploring the woman body movement by swinging the hips to the sides. This part symbolizes a statement breaking the idealized body movement in classical Javanese dance suggesting woman to lock the hip in their position. Therefore, swinging the hips has demonstrated the exploration of woman exoticism.

It is noticeable that Windarti has made an exploration on body movements by negotiating the range of classical dance vocabularies and using it as a medium to express woman's identity in the context of modern dance. Affection and emotion have marked the idea

of expressivity on the modern or contemporary dance. Martha Graham and Pina Bausch artworks would be appropriate to discuss about the idea of expressivity. Both choreographers brought the concept of emotion as the evidence of modern dance to express any feeling, rather than showing only body movement. On reading Graham's dance piece, a dance critic John Martin, identified that Graham has made a successful case of 'metakinesis' as the pre-eminence of body and emotion incorporating the physical transfer of feelings from a dancing body to a spectating body as the proof of Graham's 'emotional blossoming'. (Franko, 2006: 3-4) On the other hand, Pina Bausch is renowned with the idea of 'theatre of experience' which aims for an emotional involvement in the formation of problems - not in the characters. This concept underlines the experienced necessity rather than the intellectual insight. She explored the dancer's own experiences on her creative process making the dance piece to achieve the quality of the depth structure. The term 'inner-nature' and 'internalization' professed as the formulation of emotive communication on the dance theatre performance by Pina Bausch. (Ricchio, 2010)

Windarti creative process has a similarity with the way of Martha Graham to create her dance pieces as Bannerman explained that Martha Graham not only broke the rules in the way how the dancing body should move in time and space but she challenged accepted traditions relating to the female body and its presentation as an expressive medium. She produced a dance vocabulary and contract release technique. (Bannerman, 1999) As noted by Austin on reviewing Graham's piece 'Frontier' manipulating the idea of land by the interaction of a woman, the fence, and hanging rope. Austin notified that Graham performs a white, Anglo-Saxon primitive and a woman doing "a man's work". She added that Graham's works has avoided a number of literal references but are still legible as those of work, play, and reproduction. Repetitive patterns and direction of the body always facing front are also the main feature of this dance piece. Moreover, she put a folk element in her choreography. (Franko, 2006: 7-10) The props such as fence is put as a symbol to indicate the concept of boundaries and the land. Furthermore, by inserting the folk element, she pointed out the identity as the narration of the performance.

Both Pina and Graham delivered the idea of expressivity and dance theatre in the concept of modern dance. Dance has an ability to express affection, emotion, or any feeling inside of the corporeal body. Both choreographers also use the narration; therefore, it is called dance-theatre. However, the way of arranging these narrations is different. Martha Graham used several symbols to deliver the story line and indicate the identity. The form or the shape is important on Graham's work encompassing the form of the body and the other elements such as costume and props to communicate with the audience. While the narration of Pina's work is

arranged by the exploration of feeling. Most of her dance pieces wear the daily clothes as the dance costume. The emotive communication invites the audience to join the feeling experience. Therefore, it is said that Pina's work is meant to be felt, not to be seen. In her dance piece, Windarti combines the movements inspired by the Javanese classical dance and daily life such as in the minute 9 the dancers perform a slow-motion running movement. There are a number of repetitive monotonous movements for instance in minute 8 footwork shifted sideways manner for 4 minutes as applied for the swinging hips and slow-motion running movements. It demonstrates that those movements are meant to be felt rather than to be seen. However, in the other sequences particularly in last one, there are many poses paused for a couple of seconds exposing body configurations, which are worth to be seen. Analysing the element of movements such as the classical dance vocabularies manipulated to discuss the range of woman and man implies that Windarti's idea of woman expressivity has more resemblance with Graham's work rather than Pina's. Moreover, costume being worn in this dance piece gives more impressions of theatre narration in Graham's style. The concept of the costume, which takes an important cognition on the idea of expressivity will be discussed below.

THE CLOTH WRAPPING THE BODY

One of the main features on classical Javanese dance is Jarik- a traditional long cloth as the costume. Woman wears *jarik* to wrap the bottom part of the body tidily like a long tight skirt. Therefore, the range of possible movements is customized by Jarik. In contrast, man is possible to do more exaggerating movements since the Jarik worn more loose or just covering the tight, not the whole legs. Performing Roro Mendut as Javanese woman, Windarti still uses the Jarik as the main costume. However, she has made an innovation on the way she put it on the woman body which is still exposing the ideal woman body but it is still possible to make a number of exaggerating movements as the range of man's movement. Through this dance piece, Windarti highlights the woman character, not only shown in her choice to pick Roro Mendut story but also the costume concept exposing the woman's body. The body, according to Butler in 'Bodies that Matter' 2011, is the most material dimension of sex or sexuality. The cloth is wrapped the body from the breast to the whole legs tidily. She also put the corset to hold the torso, so the curves of the body including the breast and the hip are exposed. However, there are two hollows on the right and left sides of the legs enlarging her movement's range. Windarti plays the fluidity of gender as explained in her previous book 'Gender Trouble' mentioning 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performativity constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results' (Butler, 1990: 25). Roro

Mendut performance attempts to negotiate the range of man but still emphasizes on the performance of woman identity through the body fit costume shaping the body curves and the hair bun following Javanese woman aesthetic as it was taught in classical dance context.

In her solo version, Windarti even has attempted to manipulate the hair bun in the end of the performance; she releases the hair bun to express a resistance action. Hair bun itself is a signifier of woman identity. In his study about dress and identity in Indonesia, Jean Taylor argues that Indonesian woman who represents the nation wears her hair in an elaborate bun. It is also shown in many paintings portraying the ideal Indonesian woman such as painting of M. Tamdjidin entitled 'Wanita Berkebaya Hijau'-Woman on Green Kebaya (appendix picture 3). The painting shows a woman with body fit Kebaya or traditional blouse, wrapped up very tight and tidy the bottom part of their body from hip to leg with Jarik, and neatly coiled the hair. In Roro Mendut performance, Windarti performs a woman with hair bun implying that this main character still sticks to her identity as Javanese woman but there is a possibility that Roro Mendut is free from her coiled bun and exploring the movement of her hair down. Windarti used the body and several symbols to communicate and negotiate the expression of woman. What she has done is in line with Judith Lynn Hanna in her study about Dance, Sex, and Gender delivering an argument that dance has an ability to communicate aesthetic and gendered meaning. She emphasized that body is an instrument of social expression and dance represents some signs and meanings. (Hanna, 1988)

Roro Mendut by Windarti is also an affirmation that modern or contemporary dance in Indonesia exists as a 'hybrid bodies', as Helly Minarti (2013) -Indonesian dance scholar-mentioned that the diversity of the ethnicity and culture in Indonesia influenced by the post-colonial and multiculturalism process. It is shown by the element of ethnicity picked and manipulated to develop the idea of expressivity. She did not create 'alien bodies' as Ramsay Burt (1998) explained that body becomes the brand new space of the modernity process.

In the context of gender expression, Roro Mendut dance piece is Windarti's action to write about woman out of the world men constructed for women. She negotiated the range of man authority to portray the ideal image of woman where was previously dominated by men. Windarti is conscious about the importance of woman to put woman into text as suggested by Helene Cixous. In this context, dance piece is the text.

Furthermore, the expressivity on Windarti dance piece also confirms the spirit of third wave feminism elaborating the perception that women are of many colours, nationalities, religion,

and cultural background. She shows that the image of beauty is by wearing the Jarik to emphasize the identity of woman. She is proud of the long cloth to wrap her body. She demonstrates that by wearing the Jarik, she is beautiful and still has an authority to reach the range of man's movement.

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VIDEO

-Roro Mendut Performance by Windarti

Teaser: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Na0X8NLwhwc>

Video 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUwNsszaqbw>

Video 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaI0xs2Xrxk>

Video 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAT8unHdXMI>

Video 4: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6QLqx4SL-w>

Solo version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tJUfu9kKYZg>

APPENDIX

Picture 1: Arm movement vocabulary 'Kambeng'



Picture 2 : Leg movement vocabulary 'Mbegagah'



Picture 3: Painting 'Wanita Berkebaya Hijau'-Woman on Green Kebaya by M. Tamdjidin

