

Constructing Gender in the Performance of *"Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua"*

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Published online: 25 January 2019

To cite this article: Johan Awang bin Othman and Pravina Manoharan. 2019. Constructing gender in the performance of *"Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua"*. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse* 18(Supp. 1): 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2019.18.Supp.1.4>.

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2019.18.Supp.1.4>.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the theoretical basis for the music composition that accompanies the theatre play "Bermulanya di Sini...Kedah Tua". One of the main approaches of the music composition is the symbolic associations of gendering that can be derived from the narrative text of the play. Through referencing various arguments regarding the idea of gender, particularly the concept of gender as discursive and as the somatic, the music composition approach addresses the meaning of gendering and signification symbolically. In general, the formulation for the referencing of gender in the music does not privilege either one of the two categories of argument regarding gender as either textual or a corporeal factor. These structuring of the somatic are taken into consideration with the artistic license taken advantage in the composition process. Essentially, the music reflects the richness of gender associations that can be derived from the narrative text to illustrate that gendering is a malleable signifier.

Keywords: *gender, music theatre, music composition*

INTRODUCTION

The abstraction of the term and concept of gender have been an ongoing discursive negotiation, mainly addressing its ontological signification as either natural or merely a cultural construct. Ranging from Simone de Beauvoir's assertion of gender as a "becoming" to Judith Butler's argument of gender as performative, as well as the ancient Greek's vicissitudes and less structured gendering and sex dichotomy, the delimitation of the idea of gender is not fixed. Given this condition that influences the multiple perception of gendering, the composition of music for the theatre play *"Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua"* that references symbolic associations with gendering addresses one main concern that is to link two abstract factors; music and gender. This paper will focus on the exploration of the notion of gender as a construct, nature, and culture dichotomy within the context of constructing music for this play. This paper does not explicate on the composition of the music directly, but instead, discuss how the notion of gender is being conceptualised as an abstraction that subsequently informs the composition of the music for *"Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua"*. The composition process for the music of the theatre production is based on a pre-composition structuring, which also includes the conceptualisation of varying significations of the sound world. As such, the meaning of the sound of the music in relation to gendering of the subjects of the play, as one of the main kinds of significations of sound and music for the play, is one of the major pre-composition factors that informs the music composition process. Essentially, the music for this theatre project is an avenue that illustrates and explores the discourse of gendering in the following section. The following sections discuss various arguments pertaining to the abstraction of gender, its discursivity in relation to its corporeality, which in turn, contributes to the philosophical and semiotics premise for the music composition of the play.

CONSTRUCTING AND CONTEXTUALISING THE IDEA OF GENDER IN THE MUSIC THEATRE OF "*BERMULANYA DI SINI...KEDAH TUA*"

In general, studies that suggest an ontological distinction between the body and its gender articulate a critiquing of the poststructuralists' notion of the body as purely discursive that denaturalises the body. This disagreement regarding the existence of a purely discursive body endeavours to bring back the idea of the natural body as a distinctive somatic material that has an existence independent from culture. However, these arguments do not undermine the existence and importance of culture despite suggesting the autonomy of the natural body from its enculturation and, hence, gendering. The reclamation of the body as a natural body in contention to the poststructuralists' idea of the body as discursive aligns the relationship between the body and its gender to a relationship between nature and culture, respectively. The play itself portrays symbolically the cultivation of nature and its subsequent transformation into culture; the workings of metal into cultural objects in particular. This translation of nature into culture can be itself a symbolic expression of the binary dichotomy between nature and culture and, hence, body and its gender inscription.

Kelly Oliver's "The Flesh Become Word: The Body in Kristeva's Theory" (Oliver 2004) and Carol Bigwood's "Renaturalising the Body" (Bigwood 1998) present extensive discussion on the poststructuralists' formulation of the body as purely discursive. According to Oliver, Kristeva's formulation of the body undermines the sovereignty of language as the sole means for the body to exist. In addition, Kristeva also suggests that not only are the body and language distinct but also dependent on one another; implied in the context of the semiotic and the symbolic, respectively (Oliver 2004: 344). This context essentially aligns the idea of the semiotic and symbolic to the body and soul, respectively. Therefore, given that the soul can also mean the mind and, subsequently, culture (351, n6), Kristeva's formulation suggests the interdependence between the body and culture. Hence, the body can be considered as distinct from culture and not purely discursive. Oliver further establishes this distinction of the body as natural by stressing the tangible materiality of the body as an "organic tissue" (342) and "uninscribable" (346) by language. As such, the idea of gendering within the construction of music, should address the question of inscribing music "onto" the body of the performers of sounds that symbolises gendering.

Bigwood's arguments not only assert the distinction between the body and gender but also suggest their interdependence, particularly through her criticism of Judith Butler's notion of the body as "thoroughly culturally produced" (1998: 102). Bigwood also criticises Butler and the poststructuralists not only for defining the body as a purely cultural construct but also asserting "natural", pre-gendered or pre-cultured bodies to be a product of culture that is "disemboweled of their full existential content" (103). As such, Bigwood accuses Butler of going "too far in her denaturalisation of the body" (102), which reduces the body to a construct that reflects a "complete abandonment of nature and support of purely cultural determinants" (102). In this regard, the sound and music that supplements the body movement of the performers marks the body as a site of inscription. The body is regarded as a surface that can be enculturated. For instance, the body that touches the water, can be inscribed as a body associated with a feminine gendering, once the music composition establishes that water as a metaphor for the feminine. This subjectivation of water as feminine is arbitrary, and hence, alluding to the general post-structuralist idea of signs and its meanings as an unstable.

Within her conception of the "natural" body as a "perceptual body", Bigwood not only defines the natural body as distinct from culture but also demarcates the relationship between the body and culture as "inextricably tangled" (109). Bigwood asserts this entanglement as a continuous relation between the body and culture or body and gender and remarks that "we must affirm a certain continuity in the connection of gender to the body" (109). The association of water with the body in one of the scenes when the princess touches the water illustrates the association of water as feminine with the female sex who touches the water before her dance with a lover.

Apart from positing the distinction between the body and its gender in terms of the interdependence between the body and culture, Rom Harré (1998) and Iris Young (1998) also present other ways of formulating the relationship between the body and its gender. Harré's article "Man and Woman" suggests that the body, as a physical material, is itself responsible for the projection of its gendering. This implies that gender as a culture is not imposed onto the body but instead originates from the body. This argument opposes the conception of the body in the play as a gendered surface. Harré defines those aspects of the body that project its significations of gender as the "tertiary sexual markers" (12). Examples of "tertiary sexual markers" are hairstyles or even dress codes which serve as an "illusion of sexual category" that is "manufactured" by the body to signify the differences between the men and women (Harré 1998: 12–13).

The body can also become marked as a gendered body through its exposure to socio-historical events; an idea that Young articulates in her article "Throwing like a Girl". For these reason, Young cautions against perceiving the body outside of a socio-historical context. It can be seen that to isolate the body as an ahistorical body would "reduce women's condition simply to unintelligibility if we 'explain' it by appeal to some natural and ahistorical feminine essence" (260). Essentially, Young's assertion of a body that is prone to the effects of external forces such as socio-historical factors through time implies that the body and culture as distinct. At this point, it is not known about the socio-historical development of the perception of gender within the culture of the Kedah Tua. This gap in the research will need to be worked on in future studies.

In the context of sound re-presentations of the gendered body of the performers in the play, the notion of a natural and non-discursive body most likely cannot apply because the characters are based entirely on a fictional reconstruction of an oral and written history and myth; it is not based on any existing human figures. Thus, this paper argues that since the characters are based entirely on an oral and written source, their gendered body can only be considered as purely a textual or discursive construct. As a result, it would be more viable to contextualise the re-presentations and gender inscription of the body of the performers as a body that is already a discursive formation and always gendered.

The argument that opposes the idea of the body as having a distinct materiality from its culture or gender claims that the body is always already a cultural construct and exists purely as an abstraction. The body as a cultural construct implies a body that is formed within the context of social and historical constraints. The following studies discuss the varying ways in which the body is perceived as a construct and the contestation of the reality of the body as flesh. These many approaches of conceptualising the body as purely discursive that are presented below also show that there are ample arguments to further support and inform the treatment of the gendered body as text that the music supplements.

In the article "Corporeal Archetypes and Power: Preliminary Clarifications and Considerations of Sex", Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1998) disagrees with the idea of the materiality of the body as purely natural. Sheets-Johnstone criticises the idea of "corporeal archetypes", which assert that the materiality of the body is not only natural but also has its own natural way of behaving according to its natural male or female sex. Each is seen to have its natural habits of gesturing or acting within "gender-specific ways" that imply gendering as already inherent in the natural body (Sheets-Johnstone 1998: 157). Sheets-Johnstone illustrates an example of the "corporeal archetypes" derived from the study of "archetypal primate behaviour" that explores "sex specific archetypes" (160). This archetype states that "females are submissive, males are dominant" (160); the kind of bias that Sheets-Johnstone alludes to is the bias perception of the "corporeal archetypes" that privileges the masculine. This biasness can be seen in the portrayal of female and male gestures in the love dance. The soft and sensual gestures of the female dancer that is constantly supported by the hands and body of the male dancer implies the privileging of the masculine as the stronger of the two sexes. Essentially, Sheets-Johnstone criticises the archetype for tenuously asserting the existence of a natural body and that gender is already naturally constituted; which can be asserted that masculine and feminine relationship as strength and gentle, respectively. Two key points support her criticism. First, past studies that delineate the "natural" body through establishing "corporeal archetypes" are inferred from the study of nonhuman primate's body behaviours. This inference is in turn questionable because it assumes that the bodies of non-human primates correspond closely to the human body (173). Second, these studies place too much emphasis on the definition and constitution of the female corporeal archetypes instead of the male, implying that the "natural" body is defined only within the context of the "shallow" masculine perspective (173). Sheets-Johnstone makes reference to Ladelle McWhorter's (1989) article "Culture or Nature? The Function of the Term 'Body' in the Work of Michel Foucault" to conclude that even the scientists' definition of the "natural" materiality of the body is itself laden with cultural meanings and is not a "'clean' body which underlies all the inscriptions that subdue it" (150). In this regard, Sheets-Johnstone questions the objectivity of these scientists and suggests that even the pre-discursive body is itself already discursively constituted, implying that the body archetype is also already a cultured body (176, n23).

In the article "Material Bodies", Susan Hekman (1998) also posits that there is no such thing as a pre-discursive body. She makes reference to Butler's conception of the body as always already a discursive body and an effect of "a specific formation of power/discourse" in order to contest Bordo's argument that asserts the body as having agency to resist discursivity or enculturation (66). As such, this paper argues that the text of the play itself constitutes an enforcement of the masculine and feminine normative, which the music does not judge but supplements, and hence, being in complicit with a power relation that regulates the privileging of the masculine. Despite the opposing views of Bordo and Butler, Hekman makes the point that both Bordo and Butler concur that the body is culturally constituted. The difference between the arguments is that Bordo separates and makes distinction between the body and culture, whereas Butler conflates culture together with the body as a singular materiality. Essentially, Butler's notion of the body is a discursive body without a prior "real" body.

Dennis D. Waskul's article "The Naked Self: Being a Body in Televideo Cybersex" (Waskul 2010) and Steve Kroll-Smith's article "Chemically Reactive Bodies, Knowledge, and Society" (Kroll-Smith 2010) discuss how the discursive body is also a socially constituted body. In Waskul's discussion of the body's virtual signification in the context of televideo cybersex, he demarcates the social constitution of the body as "innately predetermined" that consequently exists as "something that people read, interpret, present, conceal, and make meaningful in an ongoing negotiated process of situated social interaction" (276).

Kroll-Smith gives a similar view regarding the social construction of the body as a body that society gives meaning through being "fabricated in talk; [...] literally, figures of speech, tropes [and] embodied conversations, [...]" (127). Kroll-Smith illustrates this social construction and social contextualisation of the body in his discussion regarding the body of the new born infant that is accorded social recognition by state certification. On this point, Kroll-Smith explains that "A state's bureau of vital statistics [...] locates the body in demographic and numerical coordinates. [...] Its goal is the [...] objective location of the body in society" (128). This remark suggests that only a socially marked body is a recognised body, implying that there is no body that exists outside of its social fabrication. The text of the play has clearly demarcated the social infrastructure of the subjects and consequently delimited the women to being entertainers and a lover of an illicit affair, who have no voice except through the masculine. An intelligibility which is only accorded by the masculine. In this regard, the musical soundscape on the whole, affirms the binary privileging of the masculine, in order to sabotage this normative conditioning by way of a hyperbolic illustration of the women as soft and men as strong; bringing to attention the imposition of hierarchy in the gender binary structuring of the play's text. This hierarchy mainly occurs in the public space. In relation to this, Karen Dias (2010) interprets the social constitution of the body in the context of its relation to power and regulation. In her article "The Ana Sanctuary: Women's Pro-Anorexic Narratives in Cyberspace", Dias states that the socially constituted body is a body that is constantly being regulated by social or cultural norms. This form of constraint occurs especially in the public space and particularly on the woman's body (399).

The notion of the gendered body as signifying an ideal gendering permeates throughout the narrative of the play. The normative ideal of the feminine as submissive is one amongst many illustrations of the performative signification of the gendered body constrained within the normative. Within the context of the cultured body as a constrained body mentioned above, there are many studies that exemplify how the body is regulated and cultured. In the article "The Body's Problems with Illness", Arthur Frank (2010) reflects on the question "Do I have a body, or am I a body?" to argue that the subject of the self is dependent on the body to exist, which in turn is dependent on a "set of ideal images" derived from the popular culture (41). Extending the above argument, Eric Plemons' article "Envisioning the Body in Relation: Finding Sex, Changing Sex", argues that the notion of the ideal image is related to the mind and, hence, a perception of the mind (Plemons, 2010: 320). At this point, the definition of the body as culture undermines the materiality of the body as natural or biological. Kathryn Pauly Morgan (1998) pursues this issue within the context of cosmetic surgery in her article "Women and the Knife: Cosmetic Surgery and the Colonization of Women's Bodies", and argues that the "given" biological body is already a cultured body and, therefore, makes a point that there is no natural body outside that "precedes" its enculturation (344, n10). Essentially, Morgan's argument relates to the idea of the desire for the body to be marked by cosmetic surgical intervention as reflecting the body as "intimately and inextricably" linked to culture (344, n10).

Although the idea of the body of the masculine and feminine in the play demonstrates a normative operating by way of dissimulation instead of an overt surface inscription, the gendering signification can be derived and identified through the varying dance gestures that complements the music. In this regard, the music can be situated and tracked as the origin of the gender normative signification. Morgan's idea of the body marked by surgical intervention as exposing the body as a cultural embodiment is very similar to Mary Kosut's assertion regarding the body as culture in the context of body modifications practiced by the modern primitive movement (Kosut 2010). In the article "Extreme Bodies/Extreme Culture", Kosut studies body modifications in the modern primitivism movement and defines these modified bodies as "extreme bodies" (168). In fact, Kosut posits that these "extreme bodies" also expose the delimitations of the body's definition (198). In relation to this point, Kosut explains that it is culture that is responsible for what constitutes the delimitations and definition of body, suggesting that the body itself is extremely entangled with, and subsequently "liberated" by culture (198).

Apart from the notion of culture embodied as a marked body through surgical modification or grooming, culture can also take form through the actions of the body. In the article "Assume the Position: The Changing Contours of Sexual Violence", Patricia Hill Collins (2010) argues that the gendered body can be defined through the act of rape. Collins explains that the body that does the raping defines itself as a masculine body, whereas the body that is being raped is a body that gestures a body being dominated and, hence, feminine

(87). This argument stresses that the body is a construct that is analogous to its actions, in this instance, the act of rape. As such, the composer defines the natural elements and factor within his own terms of gendering; based on an artistic license to name the earth as masculine, water as feminine and storm as masculine amongst others. The violence of the storm alludes to a "rape" of the people victimised by it. Hence, the storm as masculinised and the people feminised. This abstraction informs the soundscape of bass sounds that is normally associated with the male voice.

Another example of the body as an embodiment of culture is the formulation of the body as a linguistic and historical construction. In the article "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", Foucault defines the body as a construct of language and history through asserting the body as "the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas) [...] a body totally imprinted by history [...]" (Foucault 2010a: 83). Furthermore, Foucault defines this linguistic and historically determined body as a "docile" body that signifies a body that is "in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions, or obligations" (2010b: 180). Butler on the other hand, in her article "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions", observes Foucault's definition of the body as "inscribed surface" and "docile" to imply that there is a non-culturally constructed body prior to its inscription that is also prone to being shaped by external forces or power (Butler 1989: 5). Although Butler recognises the paradox in Foucault's definition of the body, she still maintains the perception of the "inscribed" body as always a cultural or discursive body without a pre-discursive existence and, hence, as always a cultured construct because "it [the body] bears on language all the time" (2011: 37). Moreover, Butler also questions the irreducibility of the body's sex as the natural basis that pre-exists its enculturation and fixity to a gendered existence and, therefore, suggests that sex is itself already a cultural construct. As such, Butler is suspicious of the fixity of the material sex to its gendering and, hence, raises issues pertaining to the "natural facts of sex [as] discursively produced" (1990: 9) and that gender is a term that "absorbs and displaces 'sex'" (2011: xv).

How can gender be associated with sound? How can sound signify gender? What is the significance of associating sound to gendering? These questions address one of the factors that involves the construction of the body and identity of the subjects being portrayed in this theatre work. Given that gender has been normalised as merely a surface signification – the mere bifurcation of the body into male and female, hence, masculine and feminine, respectively – the sounds selected for the performance enculturate the gendering of the subjects beyond the body, in terms of transgressing the normalised associative significations of the body, its sex and gendering. As such, the sounds of water dripping supplementing the dance of the lovers, not only portrays the space as literally within the area of a river, but also to extend the water normative signification to femininity to the male dancer as well. This undermining of the masculine and feminine distinction in the context of sound and gender association questions the possible interpretation of how gender is being constituted by the ancients.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, subject gendering has been the site of enforcement of the norms as well as contestation in theatre, both the ancient, traditional and modern, the global North and South. Arguments and questions pertaining to the portrayal of gender norms, gendering enforced and contested, in theatre should be sustained to illustrate that the mark of a gendered subject is never stable. Despite the challenges of having the music to portray, to a certain extent, the abstract idea of gendering, the composition of the music for "*Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua*" premises its construction closely on the various factors relating to the discursive notion of gendering as a culture that is discussed above. Although, sounding gender in the context of music can be considered as subjective, however, the signification of music and the meanings it can constitute has always been in subjective, and the exploration of extending the possibility of music to signify gendering should be allowed as a possibility of illustrating the universality of music to transcend any form of particularity.

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