

MONIKA SWASTI WINARNITA, *Dancing the Feminine. Gender and Identity Performances by Indonesian Migrant Women*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2016. 208 pages, £29.95. ISBN 978-1-84519-818-3 (pb)

For Indonesian migrant women who are married to Australian men, “dance provides a sense of well-being through socialisation, community engagement, the ability to express who they are and the opportunities it gives to them” (p. 131). With *Dancing the Feminine*, Monika Swasti Winarnita provides compelling insight into the endeavour of Indonesian migrant women to find their place within a heterogeneous migrant community in Perth, Australia. The author’s analysis of dance performances as rituals of belonging shows “that in the diaspora, the meanings of the ritual are always open to contestation” (p. 31). Fissures between the performers and their audience reveal the political notions of cultural performances.

Throughout 2007, the author conducted fieldwork among Indonesian migrant women dancers in Perth, actively taking part in dance rehearsals and performances. Most of the research participants are married to Australian men who work in transnational companies in rural Indonesia, where they met their wives. The “amateur hobby housewife dancers” (p. 3) have to cope with stereotypical ascriptions as bar girls and lower class migrants, even though they are in fact relatively wealthy. Their counterparts in identity negotiations are other Indonesian migrants, in particular members of the Indonesian consulate and the consulate’s branch of Dharma Wanita, an Indonesian women’s organisation for state officials’ wives, who frequently denounce the performances as inauthentic and *haram*.

In their struggle to represent “authentic”, “traditional” Indonesian dances, the marriage migrants negotiate dominant discourses on authenticity and moral values and their own preferences for a *mélange* of different dance styles, including Arab belly dance and Western aerobics. Winarnita describes “how certain gendered and moral values are imposed on the performers by not only the audience, but also other parties with a vested interest [...], who become arbiters of legitimacy and aesthetics” (p. 130). For the dancers, this means that they have to newly create “authentic” folk dances in order to gain acknowledgement. Winarnita argues that authenticity becomes a “strategic form of self-essentialising”, which is “negotiated by subaltern groups” (p. 33). However, this strategic act is not detached from the joy of dancing, creativity and subversive acts. Recognition from officials, such as the Western Australian Premier, grants the dancers a higher status and scope of agency. Through humour and self-mockery, as well as controversial performances, the women embody resistance in a playful manner. They subvert certain “dominant sexual values” (p. 92), such as images of ideal Indonesian femininity (p. 24), by exploring

their sexual self-determination and enactment of different gender roles. The migrant women dancers negotiate “three interrelated gender discourses of *ibu* (housewife/mother), mail order bride and bar girl while strategizing with gendered performances of masculinity and femininity” (p. 77). In the “duel of recognition”, the dancers’ experiences vary from “embarrassing to empowering performance” (Chapter 2).

Winarnita includes analyses of age (Chapter 3), the experiences of Chinese Indonesians (Chapter 4) and representations of exotic Bali as a tourist destination (Chapter 5) in her ethnography. The varied cases shed light on the interrelation of gender, sexuality, class, age and ethnicity. Moreover, they indicate the significance of the historical circumstances of migration, such as the anti-Chinese riots of 1998.

The author follows an interpretative and phenomenological approach in studying the multi-layered meanings of migrants’ dance performances in Perth. The uniqueness of this ethnography is its balanced representation of different emic and etic perspectives, embodied knowledge and sensitive reflection. Winarnita demonstrates that the reflection of the researcher’s position is not only an ethical issue but also reveals insightful research data. Her role in the group provoked reactions and questions that she includes in her interpretation. As an example, her research participants’ attempts to label her an insider or outsider to her research topic mirrored many migrants’ difficulties of defining where they belong, dealing with demarcations by other migrants. Winarnita describes her own role as a “partial insider” (p. 8), hinting at the relativity of insider and outsider perspectives in anthropological research. The switching of perspectives enables her to provide a nuanced and close-grained ethnography.

Winarnita carefully distinguishes the role of Indonesian marriage migrants in Australia from Indonesian female labour migrants who work in other countries. However, she touches only marginally upon the relevance of the host country’s social system. Here, her theoretical analysis of migrants’ agency could have been expanded further. It would have been interesting to consider how the host country’s attitude towards multiculturalism and Western discourses on sexuality influence the migrants’ actions. All in all, *Dancing the Feminine* is a valuable empirical study on marriage migration from Indonesia to Australia. Its major strength is its ethnographic depth and methodological reflection. On the theoretical level, contributions to the understanding of migrants’ agency are thought-provoking and can be juxtaposed with migrants’ experiences in other countries, illuminating those conditions under which “their marginal status does not equate Indonesian women as fixed within subordination” (p. 139).

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