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LAUGHING AT FEMININITY: Gender Regulation in *Arja Muani* Performance

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Abstract

Arja Muani is a Balinese performing art in which all characters, including female roles, are performed by men. Although accepted as entertainment on stage, male dancers who perform femininity often experience stigma and social labeling outside the performance space. This study aims to analyze power relations operate in *Arja Muani* performances through social discourse surrounding gender and masculinity. Using a qualitative approach within cultural studies, this research applies Mitchel Foucault's theory of power relations to examine community responses toward crossgender performance. The findings show that power relations are formed through collective social knowledge, traditional episteme, sexist jokes, public laughter, and institutional legitimization. Society simultaneously accepts and controls feminine expressions by limiting them within the realm of entertainment. Thus, *Arja Muani* becomes an ambivalent cultural space where gender, body, and social power are continuously negotiated within Balinese patriarchal culture.

Keywords: *Arja Muani*; gender; power relations; patriarchy.

Introduction

Within the richness of Balinese performing arts, *Arja Muani* represents a unique form of performance in which male performers portray all characters, including female roles. In the twentieth century, arja performances underwent a significant transformation in which all characters, including female roles, began to be performed by men. This development later became known as *Arja Muani* and emerged as one of the distinctive characteristics of the performance due to its strong entertaining appeal (Peradantha, 2011). As part of the *Arja Cenik* tradition, *Arja Muani* is widely recognized for its humorous and entertaining elements.

According to Dibia (2017), *Arja Muani* emerged from the spontaneity and creativity of *pangayah* artists who sought to present *arja* in a lighter, more humorous, and entertainment-oriented form. Although all characters were once again performed by men—similar to the early history of *arja*—*Arja Muani* did not emerge as a form of exclusion toward women, but rather as an artistic exploration and innovation within contemporary performing arts. In its later development, *Arja Muani* not only succeeded in reviving public interest in *arja*, but also continues to survive as one of the popular performance traditions in Bali today.

Patriarchal constructions of gender do not emerge naturally, but are continuously reproduced through cultural practices, social norms, and institutional structures. In Indonesia, gender norms were historically reinforced through political and stage mechanism during the New Order era. Suryakusuma (2021) describes this condition as "state *ibuism* [mother-ism]," a political construction that positioned women primarily within domestic roles as wives and mothers in support of national stability and development. Such constructions strengthened rigid distinctions between masculinity and femininity became closely linked to softness, passivity, and domesticity. These gender expectations continue to shape how bodies and identities are socially interpreted in contemporary Indonesian society.

A study published in *Jurnal Perempuan* (2016) further explains that gender construction is not something natural or biologically fixed, but rather the result of social and cultural norms reproduced through everyday practices (Jauhariyah, 2016). Gender is continuously formed through bodily expressions such as clothing, gestures, speech, and everyday behavior, which function as performativity acts shaping identity. In this sense, the body becomes a primary site where gender norms are repeated, negotiated, and potentially disrupted. Critiques of patriarchy, as articulated by Millett (as cited in Tong, 2010:73) and other feminist scholars, emphasize that gender power relations are socially constructed, maintained, and reproduced through various cultural practices, including the arts. Within this context, *Arja Muani* provides an important example for examining how gender constructions and hierarchical relations are intertwined within performing arts traditions.

Arja Muani becomes culturally significant because it presents male bodies performing femininity in public spaces. Male dancers not only imitate female costumes and gestures, but also embody feminine expressions through voice, movement, and bodily performance. On stage, these performances are socially accepted and appreciated as entertainment. However, outside the performance arena, male dancers who portray women often experience ridicule, stigma, and social labeling. Society may enjoy the performance as comedy while

simultaneously maintaining normative boundaries regarding how male bodies should behave in everyday life. This condition demonstrates the ambivalent social position of *Arja Muani* within Balinese society.

This ambivalence reveals that social acceptance toward gender performance remains conditional and spatially limited. Femininity embodied by male performers may be tolerated within the artistic boundaries of the stage, yet it often becomes problematic when perceived beyond the performance context. In this sense, *Arja Muani* does not merely function as a theatrical performance, but also as a social arena where cultural expectations regarding masculinity and femininity are continuously negotiated. The performance simultaneously creates space for gender expression while also exposing performers to various forms of social judgment and symbolic regulation.

The phenomenon becomes increasingly relevant in contemporary society where discussions surrounding gender identity, body politics, and cultural representation continue to develop. Although traditional performances such as arja muani are often celebrated as evidence of cultural flexibility and artistic openness, such perspectives may overlook the subtle mechanisms through which society still regulates gender expression. Public acceptance toward cross gender performance does not necessarily eliminate dominant assumptions regarding how male bodies should appear and behave within everyday social life. As a result, the feminized male body in *Arja Muani* occupies a paradoxical position: culturally visible and artistically appreciated, yet simultaneously subjected to social scrutiny and normalization.

Several previous studies concerning *Arja Muani* have primarily focused on artistic transformation, gender performativity, or the experiences of performers themselves. Research has also explored how performers negotiate identity and social acceptance while portraying female characters on stage. However, discussions regarding how society and audiences actively construct perceptions toward feminized male bodies within *Arja Muani* remain relatively limited. In many cases, public responses such as humor, ridicule, labeling, and symbolic distancing are often considered ordinary social reactions without further examination of the cultural assumptions and power relations underlying them.

This study argues that social responses surrounding *Arja Muani* reflect broader mechanisms through which society constructs and regulates gender norms. The ways audiences observe, interpret, and respond toward male performers portraying femininity indicate that the body is not socially neutral, but continuously shaped by dominant cultural expectations. Through public commentary, informal jokes, symbolic labeling, and everyday interactions,

society participates in maintaining boundaries regarding acceptable masculinity and femininity within public spaces.

Therefore, this article seeks to examine how social perceptions toward *Arja Muani* are formed and reproduced within Balinese society, particularly concerning the relationship between masculinity, femininity, and public visibility. Rather than understanding *Arja Muani* solely as traditional entertainment or as a simple representation of gender fluidity, this study positions the performance as a cultural site norms, collective perceptions, and symbolic boundaries surrounding gender are continuously negotiated. By focusing on audience perspectives and social responses, this study aims to reveal the subtle forms of regulation operating behind the apparent acceptance of cross gender performance in Balinese cultural life.

Literature Review

Studies concerning *arja* performances in Bali have been conducted extensively with various analytical focuses and research problems. One of the studies was conducted by Ariani et al. (2021) in an article entitled "Eksistensi Seni Pertunjukan Dramatari Arja RRI Denpasar pada Masyarakat Bali di Era Revolusi Industri 4.0.," explains that *arja* performances need to undergo transformation in order to maintain their existence amid technological developments and changes in audience consumption patterns. According to Ariani et al. (2021), traditional stage-based performances must adapt to digital platforms, as demonstrated by Arja RRI Denpasar through the use of YouTube as a medium for performance distribution. The shift toward digital performance emerged partly because public interest in arja had declined, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, which limited conventional stage performances. Through digital dissemination, the study argues that the existence of arja experienced renewed public attention, reflected in the increasing number of viewers and likes on online platforms.

However, although Ariani et al. (2021) argue that digital technology contributes positively to the sustainability of *arja*, measuring cultural existence primarily through viewers and likes remains problematic. Quantitative indicators within digital platforms do not necessarily reflect meaningful audience appreciation or genuine aesthetic engagement with the performance itself. Furthermore, the absence of deeper analysis concerning the characteristics and social backgrounds of digital audience's leaves questions regarding whether the online popularity of *arja* truly represents cultural sustainability or merely temporary digital visibility. In this sense, the discourse of cultural existence in digital spaces still requires more critical examination beyond numerical indicators.

Discussions concerning gender fluidity within arja muani performances have also appeared in previous studies. Sari et al. (2022), in their article entitled "Analisis Seni Pertunjukan Arja Muani di Bali: Dari Dominasi Maskulinitas menuju Fluiditas Gender Tahun 1997-2022," explain that gender fluidity within *Arja Muani* may be understood through Butler's theory of performativity. Butler argues that gender is fundamentally something performed rather than something inherently possessed. Based on this perspective. *Arja Muani* performers are understood as freely performing through bodily expression and theatrical performance.

The study further highlights that contemporary *Arja Muani* performers increasingly engage in bodily transformations extending beyod traditional performance conventions, such as wearing high heels and undergoing hormone injections. According to Sari et al. (2022), these practices reflect a transformation within *Arja Muani* itself, where performers no longer merely imitate femininity symbolically, but begin to embody feminine identities more physically and socially. The article interprets these bodily practices as performativity acts through which gender identities are constructed and reproduced.

Another relevant study is "Ecofeminism Diplomacy in the Performing Arts Arja Siki Bali" written by Agustina et al. (2021). The article examines *Arja Siki* as an artistic medium for ecological diplomacy. Particularly concerning environmental crises and water issues in Bali. Initiated by Cok Sawitri, *Arja Siki* combines monologue performance with various theatrical elements in order to communicate ecological concerns to the public. Through an ecofeminism approach, the study argues that domination over nature and domination over women originate from the same patriarchal system.

Although the article contributes significantly to discussions linking Balinese performing arts with ecofeminism discourse, its analysis tends to position performance primarily as a direct ideological medium. As a result, less attention is given to the performativity, symbolic, and bodily dimensions of the performance itself. The body within performance appears mainly as a vehicle for ideological messages rather than as an active site of cultural negotiation and symbolic expression.

Research concerning sexuality and psychological experience within *Arja Muani* was also conducted by Wedastra & Lesmana (2015) in their journal article entitled "Gay dalam Dramatari Arja Muani" using a qualitative case-study approach, the study focuses on gay male performers participating in *Arja Muani* and examines how performance functions as a space for self-expression. The findings indicate that participation in *Arja Muani* enables gay performers to

express their feminine side more openly, increase self-confidence, and reduce feeling of anxiety and depression.

Based on previous studies, it can be seen that *Arja Muani* has been examined through various perspectives, ranging from cultural existence in the digital era, gender performativitiy, ecofeminism, to the psychological and sexual experiences of performers. However, most of these studies primarily focus on performers, artistic transformation, or the ideological dimensions of performance, while discussions concerning how society and audiences construct perceptions toward feminized male bodies within *Arja Muani* remain relatively limited. In fact, social responses such as humor, ridicule, stereotypes, and conditional acceptance indicate that society/s relationship toward *Arja Muani* is not merely aesthetic, but also closely related to broader social constructions concerning masculinity and the boundaries of acceptable gender expression. Therefore, this study seeks to examine how social perceptions toward *Arja Muani* are formed and reproduced within Balinese society through a qualitative approach that positions audiences and social responses as the central focus of analysis.

Research Methods

This study employs research approach with a critical interpretive paradigm to examine social perceptions toward *Arja Muani* within Balinese society. A qualitative approach was chosen because the phenomenon explored in this study relates closely to meanings, cultural interpretations, social experiences, and collective perceptions that cannot be adequately understood through quantitative measurement. The critical interpretive paradigm enables the study to examine not only visible social responses toward *Arja Muani*, but also the cultural assumptions and social structures underlying public perceptions regarding masculinity, femininity, and acceptable bodily behavior in Balinese society. Within qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument in the processes of data collection and interpretation (Sugiyono, 2014). Therefore, the researcher was directly involved in observing social interactions, interpreting audience responses, and conducting interviews with members of the community in order to understand how perceptions toward arja muani are formed and reproduced within everyday social life.

Unlike studies that primarily focus on the experiences of performers, this research positions society and audiences as the central focus of analysis. Therefore, the study emphasizes how audiences, community members, and surrounding social environments interpret male performers portraying femininity within *Arja Muani*. The research seeks to understand how social

responses such as appreciation, humor, ridicule, labeling, and symbolic distancing are constructed and reproduced through everyday cultural interaction.

The research was conducted in several areas in Bali where *Arja Muani* performances are still actively performed and recognized as part of local cultural practices. These locations were selected because they provide direct social interaction between performers and audiences within communal performance settings. The study involved audience members, cultural observers, community figures, and individuals who frequently attend or interact with *Arja Muani* performances. Informants were selected purposively based on their knowledge, social involvement, and familiarity with *Arja Muani* within the context of Balinese society.

Data Collection was carried out through in-depth interviews and participant observation. In-depth interviews were conducted semi-structurally in order to allow informants to freely express their perceptions, opinions, and experiences regarding *Arja Muani*. The interviews explored various issues, including audience interpretations toward male performers portraying female characters, public attitudes concerning masculinity and femininity, social reactions toward performers inside and outside the performance arena, and perceptions regarding the social acceptance of cross gender performance in Balinese culture.

Participant observation was conducted during *Arja Muani* performances as well in social interactions surrounding the performances. Observation focused not only on the stage performance itself, but also on audience reactions, informal conversations, public comments, jokes, laughter, gestures of approval, and forms of symbolic distancing emerging among spectators. Through observation, the study examined how public responses toward feminized male bodies are expressed within everyday social interaction. Attention was also directed toward how audiences collectively construct meanings regarding acceptable and unacceptable forms of gender expression.

The analysis focused on recurring discourses related to masculinity, femininity, public morality, cultural acceptance, humor, stigma, and social normalization. Data analysis was conducted through several stages. First, interview transcripts and observation notes were organized and categorized according to recurring thematic patterns. Second, the researcher identified dominant social narratives regarding gender and bodily behavior within audience responses. Third, the findings were interpreted critically to understand how public perceptions toward *Arja Muani* reflect broader cultural mechanisms regulating gender expression within Balinese society.

To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed source triangulation and method triangulation. Information obtained from interviews was compared with observation findings and documentation data in order to maintain consistency and strengthen interpretation. Through this process, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how *Arja Muani* is socially perceived and how collective audience responses contribute to the negotiation of gender norms within contemporary Balinese cultural life.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that public responses toward *Arja Muani* cannot be understood merely as reactions to theatrical entertainment. Audience perceptions toward male performers portraying femininity reveal broader social mechanisms related to masculinity, gender norms, bodily visibility, and cultural acceptance within Balinese society. Through interviews, observations, and documentation, this study found that social responses toward *Arja Muani* are often ambivalent. On one hand, audiences appreciate the performance as part of Balinese cultural tradition and artistic entertainment. On the other hand, audiences simultaneously reproduce symbolic boundaries regulating how femininity may be embodied through male bodies within public spaces.

The discussion in this section is divided into several interconnected themes. First, the study examines the episteme of masculinity operating within Balinese society as the underlying framework shaping public perceptions toward *Arja Muani.* Second, the study discusses jokes and humor as subtle disciplinary mechanisms through which gender norms are reproduced socially. Third, the analysis explores how social gaze operates through audience observation and public interpretation toward feminized male bodies. Finally, the discussion examines how society constructs symbolic boundaries regarding acceptable bodily expression and conditional social acceptance toward *Arja Muani* performers.

Episteme of Masculinity in Balinese Society

The findings reveal that public perceptions toward *Arja Muani* are strongly shaped by a traditional episteme operating within Balinese society, particularly concerning masculinity, femininity, and the symbolic order of the body. In Foucauldian terms, episteme refers to the historical conditions that determine what kinds of knowledge, meanings, and the social assumptions are considered reasonable, acceptable, and legitimate within a particular cultural context (Suyono, 2002). Within Balinese society, especially in Klungkung, this episteme

continues to be deeply influenced by traditional ways of thinking that clearly differentiate the social roles and functions of men and women, not only within everyday social life, but also within ritual structures, customary systems, and cosmological understandings.

This condition cannot be separated from the broader patriarchal structure still operating within Balinese society. Gender inequality is reflected not only through limited female participation within public spaces, but also through social, cultural, legal, and economic systems that continue to position women within subordinate roles. Within Balinese customary systems, gender distinctions are institutionalized through divisions of social responsibility, inheritance rights, ritual participation, and decision-making structures within both family and communal life (Dwipayana et al., 2024). Consequently, gender difference is not understood merely as social identity, but as part of a larger symbolic order regulating how male and female bodies should function within society.

Within this traditional episteme, the body is not perceived as a neutral entity, but as a symbolic carrier embedded with social, cultural, and religious consequences. Male and female bodies are positioned as having different obligations, functions, and limitations within public, domestic, and sacred spaces. As a result, gender reversal within *Arja Muani* is not automatically interpreted as an expression of identity or personal freedom, but rather as a symbolic deviation that must remain culturally managed in order not to destabilize dominant social structures.

The findings indicate that power relations within this context manifest through what way be described as aesthetic marginalization. Society does not entirely reject cross gender performance within *Arja Muani*, however, it confines such practices strictly within the realm of aesthetics, comedy, and entertainment. Gender reversal is tolerate only insofar as it functions as spectacle rather than as an everyday social identity. In this sense, the traditional episteme works by limiting the social validity of cross gender expression, preventing it from developing into a fully legitimized social practice beyond the theatrical stage.

This mechanism can be understood through the concept of heterotopia. According to Dehaene & de Cauter (2008;5), heterotopia may be understood as an attempt to restore meaningful "place" within increasingly fragmented modern social spaces shaped by information flows, mobility, and global networks. Within such conditions, heterotopia becomes a site where symbolic meaning can temporarily re-emerge amidst impersonal and functional social spaces. In this sense, heterotopia reflects tensions between meaningful "place"

and detached "non-place," tensions that continue to shape contemporary public life.

Within the context of *Arja Muani*, the performance stage functions as a heterotopic space where different rules temporarily operate. On stage, male performers are permitted to embody exaggerated femininity through gestures, vocal expressions, humor, and bodility performance without fundamentally threatening dominant social order. However, this permission remains temporary, contextual, and spatially limited. The performers' femininity is acceptable only within the controlled boundaries of theatrical performance and cannot be freely transferred into everyday social life. Consequently, heterotopia within *Arja Muani* does not function as a space of total liberation, but rather as a controlled space for managing symbolic deviation.

By positioning *Arja Muani* as heterotopia, society effectively creates a mechanism of social catharsis. Cross gender practices are not eliminated entirely, but instead domesticated through comedy and artistic performance. Social deviation is not confronted directly, but rather transformed into a safe and controlled form of entertainment. This process allows society to preserve dominant gender norms while simultaneously enjoying the temporary sensation of symbolic transgression contained within the performance itself. Foucault's analysis does not stop at mapping structures of knowledge alone. Through a genealogical approach, he further examines how such knowledge operates within concrete social practices, particularly through bodies, norms, institutions, and the formation of subjectivity. Rather than searching for a pure origin, genealogy traces the historical processes through which particular practices become normalized and maintained within society. In this sense, the analysis of knowledge simultaneously becomes an analysis of power relations (Ritzer, 2018). One of the most subtle mechanisms of power operating within this context is collective laughter from audiences.

The findings reveal that laughter functions not merely as an emotional response toward humor, but also as a social technology marking symbolic boundaries. Through collective laughter, audiences continuously reaffirm that what occurs on stage belongs to the realm of play, performance, and fiction rather than everyday social reality. Laughter becomes a mechanism through which audiences maintain symbolic distance from performers and prevent deeper identification with cross-gender practices. In this sense, audience reactions are shaped by broader cultural assumptions determining what kinds of gender expression can still be considered acceptable within performance spaces. As Bertens (2013) explains, episteme is not merely a collection of ideas, but the underlying condition that determines what can be perceived as rational,

acceptable, and true within a particular historical period. Collective laughter therefore reflects not only amusement, but also a shared social framework through which audiences interpret and regulate gender performance.

In this perspective, humor and laughter function as instruments for domesticating symbolic deviation. As long as performers remain within the role of entertainers and do not demand broader social recognition outside the stage, they continue to receive cultural legitimacy. However, when cross gender behavior is perceived as entering serious or sacred social spaces, such as everyday communal life, dominant power relations begin to shift. What was previously tolerated as entertainment may quickly be reconstructed as moral deviation requiring social sanction.

Consequently, *Arja Muani* occupies a liminal position between acceptance and prohibition, between artistic performance and symbolic deviance, between entertainment and morality. This ambiguity should not be understood as weakness within the social system, but rather as part of how the system itself operates. By allowing *Arja Muani* to remain within a controlled ambiguous space, society is able to continuously reproduce dominant gender norms without completely erasing practices that potentially challenge them.

Within this framework, *Arja Muani* does not necessarily function to dismantle existing gender structures, but instead reinforces their boundaries symbolically. Gender reversal on stage ultimately reaffirms that outside the stage, male and female identities are expected to return to their socially "proper" roles. The traditional episteme therefore ensures that symbolic transgression may occur only within regulated spaces, while broader social and ritual life remains protected within relatively stable normative structures. At this point, it becomes clear that power relations within *Arja Muani* operate not only through formal institutions or direct social actors, but also through deeper structures of knowledge that often remain socially unquestioned. The traditional episteme within Balinese society provides the cognitive and symbolic foundation allowing cross-gender performance to exist as entertainment while simultaneously limiting its potential to become fully recognized within everyday social life.

Sexist Jokes as Symbolic Power Mechanisms in Arja Muani

One of the most significant findings in this study concerns the role of jokes and humor within *Arja Muani* performances, particularly sexist humor directed toward femininity and women's social roles. Within the performance, jokes do not merely function as entertainment or comic relief, but also operate as discursive practices reproducing broader social meanings concerning gender relations, masculinity, and femininity. Sexist jokes that stereotype, objectify, or

symbolically degrade women frequently appear through dialogue, exaggerated gestures, bodily expressions, and comedic interaction between performers. In this sense, humor within *Arja Muani* cannot be understood as culturally neutral, but rather as part of a larger discourse through which dominant social norms are continuously reinforced.

The findings reveal that sexist humor within *Arja Muani* often emerges through exaggerated feminine performances, comments regarding women's bodies, jokes concerning domestic roles, and symbolic representations of femininity embodied by male performers. These performances are usually framed as comedy and are collectively enjoyed by audiences. However, beneath the laughter lies a deeper symbolic process through which femininity becomes socially reduced into an object of humor. The audience's laughter therefore functions not only as emotional reaction toward comic performance, but also as cognitive affirmation of pre-existing gender norms operating within society.

This condition corresponds with broader studies regarding sexist humor within everyday social interaction. Research conducted by Yasmine & Gustina (2024) demonstrates that sexist jokes among university students are frequently used to degrade women while simultaneously being normalized as harmless entertainment or ordinary humor. At a more critical level, however, such jokes represent the normalization of gender-based verbal harassment. Furthermore, the study found that individuals who deliver sexist jokes often perceive such humor as a sign of intimacy and social closeness within friendship circles. This finding indicates that humor can function as a mechanism normalizing gender inequality by transforming stereotypes and symbolic degradation into socially acceptable interaction.

Within *Arja Muani*, similar mechanisms become visible through theatrical performance. Feminine gestures performed by male bodies are exaggerated to provoke laughter, while stereotypical assumptions regarding women's emotionality, bodily behavior, or domestic roles are repeatedly reproduced through comic dialogue and stage interaction. Every moment of collective laughter reinforces symbolic assumptions concerning how femininity is socially perceived. In this context, the audience's laughter implicitly legitimizes sexist discourse by positioning femininity as something amusing, excessive, or culturally reducible into comic spectacle.

This mechanism aligns closely with Michel Foucault's understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge (power/knowledge). Humor does not merely reflect existing social reality; it actively functions as a mechanism of power regulating which forms of discourse are socially acceptable. Public laughter toward sexist or sexual jokes within *Arja Muani* demonstrates that

dominant gender norms have become embedded within the savoir of society, shaping how audiences interpret and evaluate representations of femininity within entertainment spaces. Consequently, sexist humor within arja muani should not be viewed as accidental or marginal, but rather as an integral part of a discursive system sustaining dominant gender structures through subtle yet effective symbolic practices.

The findings further indicate that sexist humor operates ambivalently within *Arja Muani*. On one hand, audiences perceive the jokes as harmless entertainment and part of Balinese theatrical tradition. On the other hand, such humor simultaneously reproduces symbolic boundaries positioning women and femininity as socially subordinate objects of ridicule. Through repeated exposure within popular performance, sexist assumptions become normalized and culturally familiar, allowing gender inequality to persist through seemingly light and playful interaction.

In this sense, sexist humor within *Arja Muani* cannot be separated from the broader patriarchal structure underlying social life in Bali. Humor becomes a mechanism of symbolic power preserving dominant gender stereotypes while simultaneously allowing society to tolerate temporary cross-gender expression on stage. Rather than destabilizing patriarchal structures, sexist humor often functions to domesticate symbolic transgression by transforming it into controlled entertainment.

The analysis also reveals that these discursive mechanisms do not operate independently from institutional power. Social perceptions toward humor and gender expression are influenced not only by audience reactions, but also by formal cultural regulation determining what kinds of performances are publicly acceptable. Institutions such as the Department of Culture (Dinas Kebudayaan) therefore become important actors in shaping the boundaries of cultural expression, including humor involving gender representation within *Arja Muani*. Through formal regulation, cultural policy, and public representation, institutional structures contribute to the production and reproduction of formal savoir concerning art, morality, and gender within contemporary Balinese society. Thus, sexist humor within *Arja Muani* reveals that power relations surrounding gender do not operate solely through explicit prohibition or formal social control, but also through everyday laughter, entertainment, and popular cultural practices that appear ordinary yet continuously reinforce dominant symbolic structures.

Social Perception and the Regulation of Visibility in Arja Muani

The findings reveal that public responses toward *Arja Muani* are largely shaped by dominant social perceptions positioning the performance primarily as entertainment. However, the perception of *Arja Muan*i as entertainment does not operate neutrally. Rather, it functions as a cultural framework determining how cross-gender performance may be viewed, enjoyed, tolerated, and symbolically limited within Balinese society. In this context, audience perception becomes more than personal opinion; it becomes part of a broader social mechanism regulating the visibility of feminized male bodies within public space.

This condition may be understood through Foucault's discussion in The Archaeology of Knowledge, particularly as interpreted by Ennis (2008), who explains that systems of knowledge operate as frameworks shaping which discourses become recognizable, reasonable, and socially acceptable within particular historical contexts. Within *Arja Muani*, the dominant public understanding of the performance as comedy and entertainment establishes the conditions through which cross-gender performance can appear safely within society. Gender reversal is tolerated not because it is fully accepted as legitimate social identity, but because it remains contained within theatrical humor and performativity spectacle.

This mechanism becomes visible in audience responses. Agung Suastika, one of the audience members interviewed in this study, explained:

> "*Arja Muani* is entertaining. It should continue to be developed because it provides broader and less monotonous entertainment. Arja muani performers can also deliver jokes more freely than women," (Interview, April 26, 2026)

This statement demonstrates that social acceptance toward *Arja Muani* is granted primarily through its entertaining function. Beneath such acceptance lies a subtle relation of power that allows men to perform femininity only within carefully regulated boundaries. Cross-gender performance is accepted not because gender reversal itself is socially legitimized, but because it is framed as humorous and enjoyable for audiences.

At the same time, this perception reinforces masculine power structures within performance culture. Male performers are perceived as "freer" and more capable of controlling humor and stage performance, even when embodying feminine characteristics. Consequently, audiences do not necessarily perceive male performers portraying women as subjects challenging dominant gender norms, but rather as entertainers who indirectly reaffirm those norms through comedy.

A similar perspective was expressed by Kadek Agus, another audience member, who stated:

> "I'm interested in watching arja muani because it's funny, especially the exaggerated expressions and gestures. The costumes also make it funnier. When real women play women, it no longer feels funny. Men playing women become funnier because of the contrast," (Interview, April 20, 2026).

This statement reveals a unique mechanism of social observation operating within *Arja Muani*. Audiences enjoy the visible dissonance between masculine identity and feminine appearance. The comedic value of the performance emerges precisely because audiences remain aware that the feminine performance is embodied by male bodies. If female roles were performed by actual women, the humor would disappear because no symbolic norm would appear disrupted.

In this sense, audience laughter functions not merely as emotional response toward humor, but also as symbolic regulation. Collective laughter continuously marks the boundary between acceptable theatrical femininity and unacceptable everyday gender deviation. The audience's reaction indicates that cross-gender embodiment may only remain acceptable so long as it appears temporary, performativity, and visibly artificial within the theatrical setting.

This finding aligns with broader Foucauldian understandings of modern power, where regulation frequently operates through ordinary social interaction rather than explicit prohibition. Public observation, social judgment, and everyday reactions become highly effective mechanisms in shaping acceptable bodily behavior. Within arja muani, laughter operates as a subtle disciplinary mechanism encouraging performers to remain within socially acceptable limits of theatrical femininity.

At the same time, audience laughter also contributes to sustaining the cultural popularity of arja muani. The more successful performers are in generating laughter, the more socially legitimate the performance becomes. Ayu Sasih, another informant, emphasized this point:

> "*Arja Muani* needs to be preserved because it offers different entertainment. If a man is truly capable of performing it well, it becomes very entertaining," (Intervew, April 19, 2026).

The phrase "if a man is truly capable" demonstrates that audiences position themselves as evaluative observers determining which forms of cross-gender performance deserve cultural legitimacy. Public acceptance is granted selectively to performers considered capable of negotiating femininity successfully within artistic boundaries. However, the findings also reveal important ambivalence within institutional responses toward arja muani. Budiyasa, a staff member from the Department of Culture (Dinas Kebudayaan), explained a contradictory situation concerning an official letter restricting male performers from

performing certain feminine dance roles during the Bali Arts Festival (Pesta Kesenian Bali/PKB):

> "The letter that was initially said to be fake was actually real and had been published, but only specifically for PKB events. The restriction on men performing the Liku role was intended to create a positive image of arja muani on a national scale," (Interview, May 2, 2026).

This statement reveals how institutional power regulates bodies selectively according to representational context. PKB functions not merely as a local performance space, but as a national cultural showcase representing Balinese identity before wider audiences. Within such contexts, cultural institutions become increasingly concerned with managing public visibility and symbolic image. Regulation toward performers' bodies therefore emerges not solely from aesthetic considerations, but from broader political concerns regarding cultural representation and public morality.

Foucault's discussion of discourse and institutional regulation helps illuminate this process. As explained by Ennis (2008), systems of formalized knowledge do not merely reflect social reality, but actively formulate and legitimize specific standards of truth through institutional statements and regulation. Within the context of *Arja Muani*, the official letter issued for PKB demonstrates that cultural institutions actively participate in defining which representations of gender are considered appropriate for national cultural visibility.

This situation reveals the existence of multiple layers of social perception operating simultaneously. At the local level, audiences may accept cross-gender performance as an ordinary and humorous aspect of theatrical entertainment. However, at the institutional and national level, the same performance may become subject to stricter symbolic regulation because it is perceived as potentially affecting the cultural image presented to broader audiences.

Gung Arjun, another cultural office staff member, also explained that the Department of Culture does not provide direct coaching or intervention toward arja muani performers in everyday contexts. However, this absence of direct intervention does not indicate the absence of power. Instead, it demonstrates a selective strategy of regulation in which authorities allow *Arja Muani* to exist relatively freely within local social spaces while intervening selectively when performances enter spaces of broader public visibility and symbolic representation.

Therefore, the findings demonstrate that social responses toward *Arja Muani* operate through layered mechanisms of observation, evaluation, and symbolic regulation. Public perception, audience laughter, institutional policy,

and cultural representation collectively shape how cross-gender performance becomes visible, tolerated, and limited within Balinese society. Power relations surrounding *Arja Muani* do not function through singular or direct prohibition, but through interconnected networks of social observation and institutional regulation continuously negotiating the boundaries of acceptable gender expression.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Arja Muani* is not merely a traditional Balinese performance functioning as entertainment, but also a cultural arena where gender norms, bodily visibility, and power relations are continuously negotiated. The acceptance of male performers portraying femininity within *Arja Muani* reveals an ambivalent social condition in which society simultaneously tolerates and regulates cross-gender expression through symbolic and institutional mechanisms. The findings show that public perceptions toward *Arja Muani* are strongly influenced by traditional gender assumptions embedded within Balinese patriarchal culture. Within this social framework, femininity embodied by male performers is accepted only within specific spatial and cultural boundaries, particularly when framed as comedy, theatrical spectacle, and temporary performance. The stage therefore functions as a controlled cultural space where symbolic transgression may occur without fundamentally destabilizing dominant gender structures.

Furthermore, this study reveals that power relations within *Arja Muani* operate through subtle mechanisms of social observation and symbolic regulation. Audience laughter, sexist jokes, public commentary, and everyday reactions function not merely as forms of entertainment, but also as disciplinary practices regulating how feminized male bodies become visible within public space. Through these mechanisms, society continuously reproduces normative boundaries concerning acceptable masculinity and femininity. The study also demonstrates that institutional power contributes to the regulation of gender representation within *Arja Muani*. Cultural institutions selectively intervene when performances enter spaces of broader symbolic visibility, particularly within national cultural representation. As a result, the regulation of cross-gender performance does not operate solely through explicit prohibition, but through interconnected processes of public perception, symbolic observation, cultural legitimacy, and institutional control.

Ultimately, *Arja Muani* occupies a paradoxical position within Balinese society. It is culturally celebrated as part of traditional artistic heritage while simultaneously subjected to social scrutiny and symbolic limitation. This

condition indicates that social tolerance toward gender flexibility does not necessarily dismantle dominant patriarchal structures, but often works to domesticate symbolic deviation within controlled cultural boundaries. Therefore, *Arja Muani* reflects how power relations surrounding gender continue to operate through everyday social practices, public visibility, and cultural discourse within contemporary Balinese society.

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