
RELIGION AND CREATIVE IMAGINATION: RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATION IN I. B. SINGER'S *IN MY FATHER'S COURT* AND THE SHADOW-THEATER (*WAYANG*) IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Even within religion, the creativity of imagination offers an invaluable defense against the tendencies towards dogma and absolutism. It also provides spaces living and experiencing life in diverse ways. This paper discusses the different facets of creative imagination in religious art and literature forms by comparing Isaac Bashevis Singer's *In My Father's Court* with *Wayang* shadow theater in Indonesia. I will show that they possess similar features demonstrating a reflection on religious law, creativity and everyday life. In Singer's work, the synagogue is a theater, and Singer's father functions in the same way the puppet master, or *Dalang*, operates in *Wayang* theater. This allows for the negotiations between religious law and the living community.

Keywords: Isaac Bashevis Singer, Religious Creativity, *Wayang*, Religious Law

Scholars have often described religion as providing a rigorous set of beliefs, symbols and rituals which have been shaped by the historical dynamics of communities. Peter Beyer, for example, discusses religion both substantially and functionally. The substantive aspect relates to the supernatural, while the functional aspect of religion focuses on religion's social or psychological purposes and effects¹. He pointed out that to “observe religion as a social phenomenon is to observe it as a communication”² But this raises the question, if religion is a form of communication, might we ask if it is possible to see religion as a creative form of communication where its effective expression involves creative imagination.³

The distinctiveness of literature and drama stands out in contrast to the conceptual disciplines of theology and philosophy. The creative use of words, movement and sounds create a unique world of ideas, and enables us to express things that the theologian or philosopher might find difficult to express. Thus the expressive indeterminacy of the creative imagination can often offer an alternative and defense against the abstract rationalism often encountered in philosophy and theology, and against the tendencies towards dogma and absolutism. The creative imagination opens a space for feeling, emotion, and the mysteries of a particular experience of life. At the same time, literature, like philosophy, shares a determination to question received wisdom and to open up new modes of thought, perception and action.

The creative and imaginative qualities of human nature allow people to approach, shape and perceive religious teachings, sources and traditions in very different ways. In addition, creativity naturally spreads the message of religion beyond the limits of merely theological matters, instead touching on many more practical, equally universal aspects of life and experience, and more practical, such as art, literature, dialogue, ethics, etc.⁴ One form of religious expression that is particularly popular in today's world is fiction in its many forms, whether poem, novel, film or other kinds of performance.

This transcending of limits through creative expression allow us to see themes and patterns repeated in various religious expressions which relate to very separate and unique lived experiences. This interpretation of religion through the creative imagination, allows one not only to recognize one's own life within an exotic culture, but it also allows a creative bridging between cultures. By taking a closer look at the contemporary study on Religion, where the qualitative aspects of study of humanities, is able to see very complex situations in social phenomena, this paper discusses the creative imagination represented by religious actors, players, at the same adherents or followers. By taking examples from two different forms of creative art, stories are represented as religious representation in different context of life and people religious life, with different ways of negotiating life, through individual, rational interpretation to mystical interpretation. While both representing different religious tradition within different social-cultural context, they both are similar in a way to show us how to negotiate life within religious- dogmatic prescription that very often are not compatible with people's real life.

Isaac B. Singer's book, *In My Father's Court*, is a work of literature that explores a unique life while expressing universal religious ideas. It becomes a question of life and law. From the narrow religious perspective of law what Singer goes beyond scripture in order to accommodate the life of his people. The focus on lived experience is important because the narrow perspective of religious law is often removed from living society.

In this work, Singer powerfully represents and re-creates an Eastern European Jewish culture that is today unfamiliar to most people. In the book, his father's synagogue, rather than simply being a place where people sought law and justice, came to represent a space for religious life to break through into the everyday world, creating a unique space for his people to learn, to contemplate, to negotiate life, and to overcome dramatically challenging conditions. Singer vividly draws on that world of his childhood to share the deeply humanistic lessons that he himself had begun to learn already in his own childhood.

In these exotic tales which recount his rabbi father's life in a Polish Ghetto, Singer is able to lead his readers on their own spiritual journey, to discover deeper human truths that can be valued across religious and cultural divides. His themes center on seeking truth in the face of lust, greed, pride, obsession, misfortune, unreason, communicating all the surprises and challenges of the human condition. Such a creative art is not just about a particular life, or a particular story, but also about communicating universal themes creatively through these particular forms.

The *wayang* shadow-puppet drama is a very old Javanese tradition going back to the ancient animist traditions and extending through the introduction of the Indian dramatic forms of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and finally extending to the arrival of Islam with the *Wali Songo* the "Nine Sufi Saints", who in the fifteenth century, were able to spread Islamic spiritual teachings in Indonesia⁵, in ways in harmony with the older dramatic forms. The imaginative effectiveness of this puppet-theater (and associated local musical forms, such as the *gamelan* orchestra) meant that the Javanese sensed no contradiction between this new vehicle for Islamic teachings and the fact that these puppet-theater stories were often Hindu in origin, while some of their characters may have stemmed from even earlier local roots. Nor do the writers and directors of *wayang performances*—both old and new—find it odd that the Javanese philosophy has deep connections to Sufism, the mystical dimension and expressions of Islam.

The creative characters of *wayang* are demonstrated, first, through its language. The *wayang* presents a very rich and creative use of language. Aside from the religious-ethical instructions and reflections on the roles of the leader and the people, the stories also communicate more complex themes through allusions, parables, jokes and social criticism⁶. Second, the plot in the shadow theater is not fixed, rather it fluctuates with the emergence of new problems and situations. The complex situations that people face in life – from searching for truth, to the challenges of faith, to the solving of ethical problems – involves doubt, conflict, paradox,

and unanswered questions. The purpose of the stories is not just to give solutions to the problems of life, but rather, to show new possibilities for contemplation and the negotiation of living situations. Human characters portrayed are always individuals and often are not even representations of Javanese identity, but are rather more universal. Third, *wayang* is a media of Islamic Education, and a creative attempt to communicate Islamic values.⁷

Some have argued that the highly stylized human forms in the Javanese *wayang* puppets were very effective in accommodating local culture and life with early Islamic teaching in Indonesia, especially throughout Java, Bali and Lombok. Yet this artistic also plays a role in communicating new, contemporary themes and issues arising in areas of religious ideology, religious law, social criticism, ethics and morality, politics. In this way *wayang* can be a diverse and highly creative contemporary religious representation mirroring the transformation of people's lives through stories and characters (*lakon*), like the strange and often exotic figures and stories represented in Singer's book. Although the two "religious arts" and representation may not have a close historical connection, I will show that they both involve similar creative features to bring out unsuspected dimensions of religious life, suggesting important insights for the study of religion.

So we can ask, what is the role of creative imagination in religious expressions and forms? Specifically, how does Singer's creativity represent a unique expression of life, but at the same time allow us to see universal themes that link us with the unique expression of life found in Javanese *wayang* theater?

First, it is important to explore the features of Singer's book to see what is shared with the shadow-puppet performance, by looking at the representation of religious life through stories which relate the everyday life in his childhood Polish Jewish community. Those common features in Singer's stories represent areas of life where life cannot be reduced to right or wrong, permitted or forbidden things, as was often understood in the learned religious texts. They do not involve preaching normative

beliefs and practices, instead those stories evoke the sort of places where individuals must by themselves somehow negotiate life's mysterious and tricky situations. The plot in his stories does not unfold in a familiar, constant pace, but rather fluctuate through difficult, often inconclusive and unexpected problems and situations. The complex ethical situations that people face in life, from searching for the truth to struggling with the validity of faith, are portrayed in these stories as a process of seeking the truth, since his characters live through dramas of doubt, conflict, paradoxes, and questioning. These often inconclusive stories, echo the famous "teaching stories" of the Hasidic mystics. The purpose of such stories, unlike the rabbinic religious authority of Singer's father and his fellows, is not merely about providing a legally or scripturally valid "solution" to the problems of life. Instead, they point to a very different form of religiosity requiring a long inner process of contemplation and negotiation.

Singer suggests, through these stories, that it is the individual's inner qualities (at once spiritual and ethical) which alone can confront evil in the world; that the human character is drawn to the purity of heart, clarity and courage. It is important to note that these rare, but essential inner qualities arise in characters who are always distinctly individual and not based upon any religious or ethnic identity. Moreover, the lessons conveyed by these stories are not just abstract ethical principles, but lively representations of the lives of people.

Take for example, the story about a man asking whether it is proper to sleep with his dead wife. The reason is his modest crowded home where there is no place to sleep except with his dead wife's body. Instead of providing a religious-law solution, Singer's father helps him with money and neighbors help him with cleaning his house. In this case, he reconstitutes this person's situation by transforming the "strictly-legal solution" into a more personal-negotiated solution. Yet for his Rabbi father, it brings up doubts concerning his own beliefs. He felt it odd for a Jew to have only one bed in his house. Whether someone is a pious Jew is not necessarily determined by how many beds he or she might have.

On another day, an old woman comes to the Rabbi to get a divorce from her husband, not because she no longer wants to live with him, but because she loves him so much, she feels he is entitled to a new, younger wife who might bear him a child. She has already chosen her successor for him. The Rabbi facilitated their divorce and the man re-married this new wife. Not long after the wedding, the new wife did not give birth, the old man fell ill and passed away and the old wife passed away. The Rabbi questions himself, why did he facilitate their divorce? The best a man can do is to negotiate and respond creatively to life, even though the outcome is far from what we expect. Once again, he recognizes painfully that this is life. This story shows that the uncertainties of life are a lesson for everyone involved, for the old man and women, and for the rabbi himself.

Another woman comes to him asking why two slaughtered geese “shriek” when they are being carried in her shopping-basket, and whether such possessed geese could possibly be kosher. While Singer’s mother hints at the need for logic in encountering this seemingly mysterious and wondrous event. Her approach to religious faith requires explanation. That blind faith can be dangerous and needs to be deepened by doubt. Singer’s father comments on his mother’s way of “logic tearing down faith, mocking it, holding it up to ridicule and scorn.” This suggests the unavoidable paradoxes in life and the importance of conflict in the development of faith and human decision making.

In all those stories Singer provides an insight into life far beyond legalistic positions, determined solutions, and flat situations. They are always dynamic, unpredictable, while at the same astonishingly unavoidable.

There is something about such literature that gives us space for an imaginative understanding of life in that way, and it seems that the *wayang* puppet theater does something similar: i.e., creating the inner space for transforming the ways that people encounter religion—not as something outwardly official or authoritative, but as something playful. By “playful” here I mean entering into a different realm of possibility, of different

interpretations and representations. It allows us to play out situations across the usual limitations of dogma and social determination. It is a way for individuals and communities to express and engage themselves more freely and creatively.

The use of language is particularly important in the shadow *wayang* theater, as it is supposed to be effectively understood by the audience, who are usually mostly Javanese. So the language used in the shadow *wayang* in the past was usually the ancient local *kawi* language. But even today, contemporary *wayang* puppeteers still use Javanese slang, characterized by a direct, critical and symbolic language that readily lends itself to the elaboration of myth, ritual, social interaction, and other aspects of daily life. While *wayang* theater represents the beliefs and the philosophy of the Javanese which fulfill the need for spiritual inquiry and meaning, it is also like Singer's book in that the characters and the plot are always in a dynamic situation.

The richness of the characters in both Singer's book and the shadow *wayang* genres and plays allows the creative *dalang* (puppeteer) of the latter to re-create a world that simultaneously questions and brings to deeper life religion's meaning and teachings that people otherwise very often just take for granted, as something simply "given" in their society. In his role as artist and priest (like that of Singer's father role), a *dalang* is expected to introduce and reinforce the traditionally accepted social and philosophical concepts. Yet the creativity of the *dalang* allows those who are illiterate to become acquainted with these ideas. That is why no matter how critical the *dalang* and his performance is, ordinary people may get the lesson immediately.

And that lesson itself goes far beyond social and current events, as the shared philosophical foundation of *wayang* is one of purification and edification. For the representation of the popular shadow-puppet Ramayana and Mahabharata-inspired figures—like Yushistira, Durna, Sengkuni, and local Javanese figures like *Semar*, *Nala Gareng*, *Petruk*, and *Bagong*—as a unit actually represent the distinctive characteristics of an ideal Muslim personality. The stories they represent, drawn from

Islamic spirituality and Javanese philosophical teachings, make these plays vehicles of social criticism, including highlighting the limitations of formal or “official” religion. The humorous or ironic dialogue between these striking characters is necessarily what we can find in the stories in Singer’s book which have a similar critical stance in regard to his own father’s relative “orthodoxy”.

Like the comic characters who live patiently in *wayang* and Javanese legend, the legends and myths that live in society are often latent (not fully conscious or codified) regulatory systems that continue to control the empirical behavior of the members of the community concerned. In the *wayang* tradition, the clowns’ servants⁸ often appear as moralistic agents who offer useful suggestions to their kings in times of misery or pressure. For example, *Semar* is not merely a clown-servant (*abdi*) puppet, but he is also a legendary, semi-divine figure in the world of puppets, as well as a legend and political myth. *Semar* is known as a character who saves the source of leadership, who is charismatic and rational—yet in his physical appearance he looks humble, and outwardly he does not reflect power.

Semar once advises Pandawa that men should not just think about what they will eat every day in seven days, and that as the leader, Pandawa should show humility which is represented by “luwe” (hunger) and “a simple life” to his people. Thus, in order to protect the kingdom and to have the power to resist, the leader should appoint a good advisor, deputy and or officer (*patih*), since there is no power of the leader (*Ratu*) without people, and the responsibility of the *Ratu* is to serve the will of people.

The Javanese mystical-philosophical text, “*Suluk Wujil*”, is an old Javanese text written by one of Javanese saints, Sunan Bonang. It tells of the spiritual journey of a clown-servant called Wujil, the disciple of Wahdat, to find his master. After several years performing ritual, Wujil complains to his master that he has not yet gained any mystical experiences. One of the main subjects of the dialogue in the play revolves around the importance of “*intention*” or “*purified will*”, of true prayer and the importance of self-knowledge. There is always an explanation

for something (like Singer's mother's response to the shrieking dead geese). Praying by itself will not give anything unless Wujil realizes it with self-knowledge and good intentions. Wahdat's long responses to Wujil's inquiry, covers his life story in a very philosophical and symbolic way. For instance, he says:

*“The turban was used to hit and beat inside the mosque after they were angry with each other, and prayed individually. That is the result of shirk (error), because they assume that each person's intelligence is the most important. As a result, the person does not understand pure will or sincere intentions”.*⁹

He continues:

*“This problem is very difficult. People may not hold fast to the letters (written text), for the existence of text is contingent upon the existence of understanding (ideas, guesses). And there is no single understanding, but they are many, which leads to error, since there are many people who deify their understanding. People already feel happy merely by reciting the Qur'an, (and other religious text), yet that is only a whisper of understanding”.*¹⁰

Here, Wahdat presents anti-scripturalism or anti-literalism. Blind adherence to the mere letters of scripture is a form of idolatry. Now the symbols of *wayang* become meaningful in terms of the complex hermeneutics of mystical Islam. And of course, this ideal can be discovered, and has been communicated, through the encounter of religious texts with the deeper philosophy of life of Javanese society.

The reflection of a message of religious/Islamic education appears in the narrative of *Sengkuni* and *Durna*:¹¹ *Sengkuni* who is a royal officer of Kurawa, once worried about Kurawa's future, and he is advised by *Durna* that a man should not be discouraged. Instead she/he should be resigned and submissive to God, needing His encouragement and relief. Although the public knows that *Durna* and *Sengkuni* are antagonistic figures, in puppetry they basically never justify that a person is simply good or bad, but invite the puppet lovers to see a situation from another perspective. The message (either to Muslim or non-Muslim) is that as a creature, human beings have to continue to fight and not despair, because God always gives a beauty and responds according to the condition of his servant.

In addition to the conversation between *Durna* and *Sengkuni*¹², another example that describes *wayang* language as a medium of Islamic education is *Wibisana*'s speech to the Pandavas. Here is a fragment of a *Wibisana* conversation. In this example, *Wibisana* is giving advice to the Pandavas to live a good life. "*There are seven ways to live a good life: beciking kelakuan, akehinng kepinteran, pakolehing kagunan, sugih, ngudi singgih, buntasing sesurupan, and landheping panggahita*", which means being good, intelligent, useful, rich, respectable, polite, and insightful—all of which are the forms of positive action taught in Islam.

The language in *wayang* is very rich with comic expressions of facts and allusion or satire and jokes and humor. Along with religious, ethical and political content, there are also stories of love scandals, jokes and social criticism in *wayang* theatre. It, for example, appears in the dialogue between comic/clown puppets, *Kenyot* and *Tonglang* about their marriage.¹³ *Tonglang* told *Kenyot* that he has problem with his wife. He says, "*When I give her more money, she serves me only rice. Less money no food at all, while she selfishly eats out alone. Had I known this hardship I would never have sought a wife. She just gives me a blink-of-the-eye orgasm at the expense of yearlong stressfulness.*" *Kentot* advises him that if he is no longer pleased with her, he could divorce her. *Tongleng* replies that he is afraid of her mother who may bewitch him, and that he might

fear that bad things would happen to her after he divorced her. Kentot then simply responds, “*well, divorce her and I will take her widower?.*” What role can strict legal rules play in a story such as this?

Singer’s awareness of how many-sided people are, and how complex the human condition is, does not undermine an understanding of what it means to be Jewish. Rather, through his stories, his readers can learn the many sides of religion and what it can mean to be Jewish. Likewise, with the shadow-puppets, the figures of the *dalang* (author/performer) and the *lakon* (the characters played) are always dynamic, keeping with the changing times and issues in the midst of society, while also encouraging their audience to discover how truly complex life is, beyond just simply being a Muslim, and to recognize that we cannot avoid those conflicts that make up the very journey of life itself. Thus *wayang* is not just a form of expressive creativity, it is also a collection of life stories.

Here I can quote the *dalang* Ki Prabowo who says that the *dalang* should have immense experience in his life in order to be creative and in order to project the stories to the audiences. Because *wayang* stories are basically a portrait of ourselves as human beings. Thus the message of *wayang* is not just for Javanese. or what it means to be a Javanese or a Muslim, but it has relevance to people all over the world. The messages that the *dalang* through the *wayang* wants to share is that the basic values of truth and right living are really the same everywhere. Evil in all the world is manifested in the greedy and power-hungry, and that the evil will always be defeated by high ideals and virtue.

In its development, *wayang* has been transformed into a strategic way to negotiate religion and social life and very often serves today as a public medium in addressing social and political issues, moral issues and likely critics of the country, society, government. It is even used to comment on and discuss such governmental programs as natural disaster mitigation. It cannot be denied that *wayang* shows have an identity or character in their own forms, and that they continue to be transformed as they are used to challenge new dilemmas. In response to the quest for the

present and in response to each person's own life situation, that is aspect of its active and highly effective creativity.

Religion is often considered as a form of law based upon scripture and the enforcement of its rules. But both Singer's book and *wayang* show religious life is communal, and that it therefore requires voluntary communal consent and conscience. Thus it always involves negotiation, and since it is a living reality, it vibrates with life and it has both life's inconstancy and its persistence, like in the *beth-din* stories, farther than what just strict, formal rules can offer. It is in light of this realization that Singer wishes in his introduction to "*In My Father's Court*" that the "Beth-Din" can be a universal institution. Beyond being a place for small community of Jewish faithful, Singer intimates, it could become a place all humans can learn from: i.e., learning how God's Mercy and Judgment can be manifested in every situation, so that the Beth-din might become the place to learn about God's justice and Mercy. What *wayang* performance can offer back to Singer's stories is that in projecting this complex life situation, beyond being a Jew or Muslim, and beyond what the religious text says, life always requires a full, deepened understanding of God's Mercy (Loving kindness, *hesed* and *rahmat*) that most of the time precedes the law and the rule, and judgment. While both Judaism and Islam very often are seen as religions which emphasize religious law, then through these two forms of religious representation, the "law" might be understood more richly as how human beings come understand God's Mercy. Or as the Qur'an says: "God's Mercy has precedence over His wrath." This is the famous understanding of God's Mercy and law that has been long discussed, especially in Sufism.

Finally, what I find most similar between these two creative approaches is that the synagogue can be like the *wayang* theater or stage, the shadows are like Singer's father (since it is through him that the stories happen), and the director is Singer as the (Polish Jewish) *dalang*. This theater is the "imagination" of the world, its past, present and future. And beyond this range of times, all the figures are like puppets before the Director, just as Islamic spirituality through the *hadith* tells us that

the hearts of human beings are shifting between two God's fingers. The human individual, the human heart here is God's puppet, while the world is the play of God's imagination.

ENDNOTES

¹. Peter Beyer, *Religions in global society* (New York: Routledge, 2006)

² Ibid, p.4.

³. For preliminary study on Religion and Creativity, see Kim-lien Thi Nguyen, "an Exploratory Study on the Relationship between Creativity, Religion, and Religiosity" (2012). *Master's Theses* published by *San Jose State University*. Online source: http://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/etd_theses/4204.

⁴. Petra Kuppinger, (2017), "Religion, art and creativity in the global city", in *Culture and Religion*, published by Routledge, Vol. 18, No. 4, 343–352, p 433.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2017.1402419>

⁵. Nicholas Tarling, "Religion and Popular Beliefs". in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Jerome Ch'en and Nicholas Tarling, Vol. I. 1970. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 331; R.M. Ismunandar, *Wayang: Asal Usul dan Jenisnya*. 1994. Semarang: Dahara, p. 96.

⁶. Jan Mrázek (1999), "Javanese *Wayang Kulit* in the Times of Comedy: Clown Scenes, Innovation, and the Performance's Being in the Present World". Part One: *Indonesia*, No. 68, pp. 38-128.

⁷. Cf Ferdi Efendi, "Learning Islam from the Performance of *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppets)", published by Hunafa: *Jurnal Studia Islamika*, Vol. 14, No.1 Juni 2017: 99-115.

⁸. In *wayang* mythology, the characters of comic clowns are not merely clowns; instead, in the macrocosmos, they are often identified with aspects of the Highest Being or Divine.

⁹. *Suluk Wujil* (101) *Kepet kinepetaken ing masjis// awekasan padha pepurikan// asembahhyang dhewek-dhewek// puniku palanipun//sirik gugon uajring tulis//tan wruhjatining niyat//palaning wong bingung//lanang wadon padha ngrarh//angulati niyat kang sejati-sejati//tan wruh ing dedalannya.*

¹⁰. *Suluk Wujil* (102) *Mapan angeling ujar puniku//nora kena ngukuhi aksara// kang aksara kadadine//dadining nyana iku//nyana nora among sawiji// nyana awarna-warna// dadine kapahung// akeh anyembah ing nyana//paksa hresthi sarira bisa angaji// ujure nyananira.*

¹¹. Arifin, "Learning Islam", p.104.

¹². Ibid, p.106

13. I Nyoman Sedara, *Kawi Dalang : Creativity in Dalang Theater* (2002), a Thesis published by University of Georgia, p. 105. Online sources : <https://athenaeum.libs.uga.edu/handle/10724/29419>; p. 105.

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