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Social Transformation through the Spirit of Literacy: Reflections on R. A. Kartini's Feminism in the Indonesian Context

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Abstract

R. A. Kartini is a central figure in the history of the women's movement in Indonesia. Her struggle against injustice demonstrated that resistance does not always require physical confrontation but can be achieved through the power of thought and writing. This research aims to explore how the spirit of literacy (reading and writing) became a fundamental instrument in the formation of Kartini's feminist consciousness amidst the constraints of feudal customs and colonial structures. During her period of pingitan (seclusion), which restricted her physical movement, reading served as an "intellectual window" that allowed Kartini to gain a broad horizon regarding world events and the international women's movement. This spirit of literacy was then manifested through intense correspondence, where Kartini used the "pen" as a primary weapon to criticize the practices of polygamy, feudalism, and the lack of access to education for women. The analysis shows that literacy is an effort to dismantle the patriarchal paradigm and voice the aspirations of those who are silenced (the voice of the voiceless). The study concludes that Kartini's spirit of literacy remains relevant as a model for women's empowerment in the pursuit of social justice and the common good (bonum commune). This research employs a qualitative method with a library research approach, involving a systematic series of activities including data collection, reading, note-taking, and the processing of research materials.

Keywords

R. A. Kartini, Feminism, Literacy, Struggle, Patriarchy

INTRODUCTION

Human existence is often entangled in the net of established power structures, where individuals are forced to confront systemic injustices that undermine human dignity. In Indonesian history, this complexity reached its peak at the intersection of Dutch colonialism and local feudalism, creating a reality in which the indigenous people were doubly oppressed: politically through exploitative policies such as forcedcultivation, and culturally through rigid customary systems. Amid the darkness

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of this structure, R.A. Kartini emerged as an individual who directly experienced the bitterness of discrimination within the deeply entrenched patriarchal Javanese culture of the 19th century. Her existential struggle began when she was forced to submit to the custom of pingitan, which physically isolated her from the outside world at a very young age, a condition she described as a tedious confinement that sought to extinguish the idealism of her youth.

For Kartini, the true enemy was not merely the walls of the regency but the institutions of polygamy and customary injustice that reduced women to objects or puppets with no authority over their own thoughts and feelings.[1] She vocally denounced the practice of polygamy as "the root of all oppression against women" and a form of "sin" because it causes profound emotional suffering to fellow human beings. This feudal-patriarchal structure perpetuates a mindset of acceptance or resignation that keeps women in a state of intellectual backwardness, making them easily controlled by men's interests. Facing this seemingly impenetrable wall of tradition, Kartini realized that physical resistance was not feasible, so she chose the path of intellectual resistance through the spirit of literacy. Reading and writing became the primary weapons she diligently honed to deconstruct the old paradigms that shackled her people. She firmly declared that external authorities might be able to strip her of all her possessions, but they would never be able to take away her "pen" as an instrument for voicing the truth. Through literacy, Kartini opened an "intellectual window" that connected the isolation of her seclusion with progressive ideas from the outside world, allowing her to contrast the dark reality around her with the vast, light-filled world of knowledge.

The hisstory of R. A. Kartini shows that she was a remarkable individual who was 'quite different' from her peers and contemporaries. This uniqueness is evident in her writings (in foreign languages), which reflect her thoughts and feelings about what she experienced and observed around her.[2] It was rare in those days—and even today—for someone to express their observations and thoughts in writing in a foreign language, especially someone with only an elementary school education. Kartini, who lived in the late 19th century, showed us that fighting against an enemy (for her, the main enemy was Javanese customs that shackled women) was not limited to taking

[1] Sitisoemandari Soeroto, *Kartini Sebuah Biografi* (Jakarta: PT Gunung Agung, 1977), 57.

[2] Haryati Soebadio dan Saparinah Sadli, *Kartini Pribadi Mandiri* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1990), 55.

up arms. However, Kartini once said that her weapon was the pen, her writing instrument: *"I will diligently train myself to use my weapon." She also said that "...they can take everything from me, but not my pen."*[3]

Kartini's strength was not only her ability to write accurately based on her various observations and experiences, but also her determination to change society's prevailing views on women at that time. As a woman, she realized that she was not permitted to have a will of her own, let alone hold onto ideals. This, however, became Kartini's motivation to find a way to make her aspirations a reality. Such a determination would have been acceptable in that era had she been a man, but such resolve was deemed "unbecoming" for a woman. Kartini did not easily lose hope in the face of the various responses and reactions from many people toward her aspirations. Her struggle to "fight" against inhumane traditional customs serves as an inspiration worth emulating. As a woman who had only received an elementary school education and whose freedom of movement was limited, she demonstrated that her reasoning regarding the situation and her ability to speak foreign languages helped her realize her dreams. She also proved that what she thought and fought for could be understood by many people (including Europeans), and her struggle became an inspiration for many to continue her fight.

This paper uses a qualitative method. Data will be collected through library research.[4] The library research method involves a series of activities related to the collection of literature, reading, note-taking, and the analysis of research materials. In this case, the author searched for, read, and studied writings relevant to the theme of this paper, specifically R.A. Kartini's writings on women. As the primary reference for this paper, the author uses R.A. Kartini's writings compiled by J.H. Abendanon, titled "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang." Additionally, other written works are utilized as secondary sources—including books, journal articles, and other materials—in both Indonesian and English to explore the theme addressed in this paper.

Based on this background, this study formulates several fundamental issues that serve as the focal points of analysis. First, this study examines how an analysis of the historical and cultural context shaped R.A. Kartini's critical consciousness and the scope of her thought. Second, how did R.A. Kartini's struggle manifest in her efforts to

[3] Soebadio dan Sadli, *Kartini Pribadi Mandiri*, 58.

[4] John W. Creswell dan J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5 ed. (London: Sage Publications, 2018), 254–58.

achieve women's emancipation, educational rights, and equality amidst the shackles of Javanese patriarchal tradition? Third, how did the spirit of literacy, demonstrated through reading and writing, function as a strategic tool for Kartini to challenge and critique social inequality and the oppression of her people?

The purpose of this paper is, first, to provide an in-depth explanation of the socio-historical and cultural context underlying the emergence of Kartini's ideas, in order to understand the roots of her critical stance toward colonialism and feudalism. The second objective is to systematically trace the essence of R.A. Kartini's struggle to elevate the dignity of women as equal and independent human beings, and to examine the impact of this struggle on the national emancipation movement. Finally, this study aims to analyze the spirit of literacy demonstrated by Kartini as a fundamental instrument that stirs the conscience to remain sensitive to the surrounding reality; a valuable lesson that social injustice demands every individual not merely to be a bystander, but to actively engage in advocating for truth and social justice.

The discourse on R.A. Kartini's spirit of literacy is an urgent need to reflect anew on the essence of humanity amidst the complexities of an era that often turns a blind eye to injustice. The significance of discussing this theme lies in the understanding that literacy, for Kartini, is not merely a technical skill, but an instrument that serves as a weapon to break through physical barriers and cultural hegemony. To be a reflective human being in this era means adopting Kartini's courage to not turn a blind eye to the various social inequalities occurring within society. Literacy functions as the driving force of consciousness that challenges individuals not to merely be spectators or stand idly by in the face of others' suffering. In Kartini's narrative, the critical thinking skills born from the process of literacy demand a moral responsibility to give voice to the aspirations of the silenced (the voice of the voiceless) for the sake of achieving the common good or bonum commune.

DISCUSSION

How far the Indonesian know the figure of Kartini? Every April 21, there are events that interpret Kartini based on her cultural identity.[5] However, people today only remember Kartini for her clothing. In fact, in her time, Kartini was an inspiring figure. Yet the reality today is that Kartini is merely seen as a relic brought to life once

[5] Pramoedya Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 4 ed. (Jakarta Timur: Lentera Dipantara, 2003), 299.

a year. In this age, Kartini is nothing more than a painting displayed in a museum. Therefore, this section will outline the socio-political and socio-cultural context of the society and era in which Kartini lived. An understanding of this background is necessary to comprehend the context of Kartini's ideas and the emancipation she fought for.

Background of R. A. Kartini

R. A. Kartini's life story was shaped by the context of Dutch colonial rule and the cultural context of Javanese society. During Kartini's time, Indonesia had been colonized for decades by the colonial government. The influence exerted by the colonial government had a profound impact on Indonesia's economy, culture, and bureaucracy. The colonial government quickly took control of the country's governance system. Kartini witnessed many events in her life that were disadvantageous to her simply because she was born a Javanese noblewoman. These political and cultural influences inspired Kartini to think critically about the fate of her people, particularly to challenge customs, traditions, and practices that discriminated against women in all their roles. Until her death, she continued to fight for her ideals regarding women's rights and freedom.

Sociopolitical

In the 17th century, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) established a foothold on the northwest coast of Java in an effort to control the spice trade. In 1602, the VOC destroyed the city of Jayakarta and built Batavia (now Jakarta) on its ruins, creating a hub for Asia's maritime trade.[6] Although the VOC had been operating trading posts in Java since 1607, the founding of Batavia marked the permanent Dutch presence in Java, necessitating the formulation of specific policies for occupying this new territory. As the first multinational corporation in world history, these policies were grounded in cost efficiency and profit maximization. The VOC's obsession with profit created the conditions that led to the emergence of colonial officials during Kartini's time.

In 1677 and 1678, the VOC expanded its power beyond Batavia by exploiting the rivalries and internal weaknesses of the indigenous kingdoms. This process reached

[6] Arnout van der Meer, "Setting the Stage: The Javanization of Colonial Authority in the Nineteenth Century," dalam *Performing Power Cultural Hegemony, Identity, and Resistance in Colonial Indonesia* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornel University Press, 2020), 21.

its peak in 1677 with the fragmentation of the once-powerful Mataram Sultanate into Surakarta and Yogyakarta.[7] Within a century, the VOC had come to control most of the island of Java. The VOC relied on cooperation with the Javanese aristocratic elite, the *priyayi*—a social group comprising nobles, officials, and administrators. Local governments gradually lost sovereignty over the territories they had long controlled. In practice, the highest-ranking members of the priyayi—*bupati* were granted broad autonomy as long as they remained loyal to the VOC, avoided ties with foreign powers, ensured peace in their regions, and promptly collected and remitted tribute.[8] As their power expanded across Java, the Dutch became familiar with the intricacies of the Javanese social and political system. By the time Kartini died in 1904, the entire territory of present-day Indonesia was under Dutch rule.[9]

Cultuurstelsel (Tanam Paksa)

In 1830, a retired General Commissioner of the West Indies appeared before the Queen of the Netherlands to propose plans to restore the financial health of the Dutch East Indies colonial government, specifically by implementing the cultuurstelsel. He argued that this system would not burden the indigenous population, would not impose onerous labor, and would require negotiation with the local inhabitants. The plan was subsequently accepted by the queen, who herself belonged to the capitalist class. Van den Bosch then arrived in Java and assumed the position of Governor-General. Van den Bosch did not squander the queen's trust and, with an iron fist, began implementing his plans: exploiting the natural resources and labor of the indigenous population even more ruthlessly, and dehumanizing the indigenous people with even greater cruelty.[10]

According to the plan, if the people wished, they could cultivate one-fifth of their land with crops desired by the Governor, such as indigo, sugar, coffee, and tobacco. Then, the harvest could be handed over to the government at market prices. At first, the farmers were still hesitant about whether they should comply with the government's will. At first glance, this forced cultivation regulation sounded

[7] van der Meer, "Setting the Stage: The Javanization of Colonial Authority in the Nineteenth Century," 22.

[8] van der Meer, "Setting the Stage: The Javanization of Colonial Authority in the Nineteenth Century," 22.

[9] Jean Stewart Taylor, "Raden Ajeng Kartini," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Chicago) 1, no. 3 (1976): 643, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/493247.

[10] Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 22.

appealing, especially since the official announcement stated, "It is better not to receive the produce of the land than to obtain it through the torments of obligations imposed on the people, to whom we are indebted." However, the regulation suddenly changed: anyone without land was required to work on government plantations for 66 days a year.

The Cultuurstelsel system, which initially appeared beneficial without forcing cultivation, eventually transformed into the Cultivation System. Just five years after the end of Diponegoro's resistance, the Forced Cultivation System caused the indigenous people to suffer even more, and the produce of forced cultivation became Dutch wealth without providing fair wages to the indigenous people.[11] A Dutch author stated that Indonesia's economy at that time, which depended on large plantations, was in fact nothing more than a result of the Forced Cultivation System. Yet, the fate of the indigenous people grew increasingly destitute. The indigenous people reaped only a small benefit from the fruits of their hard labor. Kartini began to understand the plight of the indigenous people through a book titled "Max Havelaar" by Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker).

The Rise of the Liberals

The ongoing Dutch colonial rule gave rise to several figures who sought to defend the indigenous people, who had suffered for so long. The indigenous population, whose suffering was growing, was powerless to act because the government system was entirely controlled by the Dutch. This situation gave rise to the liberals—people who sought a better life for the indigenous population. The liberal faction sought relief from the grip of feudalism, bureaucracy, and the dictatorial hierarchy of the civil service. They criticized the rigid and harsh regulations governing daily life and the government. The rise of this liberal faction was marked by events in 1848, specifically the onset of the famine in Grobokan and Demak. At that time, educational levels were very low, both among Europeans and, even more so, among the indigenous people. The arrival of the Dutch in Indonesia was solely to exploit the land and the indigenous people for profit. The rise of this liberal group began with the establishment of schools in various locations, such as in Pasuruhan and Padang (1849), Makassar and Maros (1853), Banjarmasin (1863), and Ambon (1607).

[11] Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 24.

Many changes occurred as a result of pressure from the liberal group. The Cultuurstelsel was gradually phased out for the indigenous population. The Dutch government began abolishing several mandatory crops (which were unprofitable). Pepper was abolished in 1862, cloves and nutmeg in 1864, indigo, tea, and cinnamon in 1865, and tobacco in 1866.[12] Many plantations reverted to private ownership, laying the groundwork for capitalism, and a proletarian class began to emerge in Indonesia. During this period, trade intensified, and several railway lines were constructed to connect various regions (Yogyakarta-Semarang, Jakarta-Bogor) to facilitate the transport of goods. Liberalism emerged alongside the rise of the bourgeoisie, who used liberal slogans to justify their demands for political power.[13] The fever for modern capitalism during the colonial era left the indigenous population increasingly impoverished. The Dutch East Indies was nothing more than a colony contributing to the global economy through its natural resources. Ironically, the people remained poor and became strangers in their own land.

Ethical Policy

The liberal political practices implemented in the colonies drew significant criticism and debate from various groups. In principle, they agreed that the colony (the Dutch East Indies) should benefit the Netherlands. However, by the late 19th century, a new voice began to emerge, showing great concern for the indigenous people.[14] The fundamental idea behind this colonial policy was to move away from a system of exploitation and focus on efforts to improve the welfare of the colonial subjects. By the late 19th century, politics in the Netherlands underwent changes that influenced their policies in the colony, the Dutch East Indies. The "Liberal Colonial Policy" implemented and regulated by the Netherlands since 1870 emphasized the welfare of the indigenous people as a moral responsibility of the government toward the Indonesian people, and later shifted toward the "Ethical Policy," which stated that the government held a moral responsibility for the welfare of the indigenous people.[15]

[12] M. C. Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1200*, 3. ed (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 161.
[13] Sartono Kartodirdjo, *Pengantar Sejarah Indonesia Baru: SEJARAH PERGERAKAN NASIONAL Dari Kolonialisme Sampai Nasionalisme*, 3 ed. (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1993), 21.
[14] Kartodirdjo, *Pengantar Sejarah Indonesia Baru: SEJARAH PERGERAKAN NASIONAL Dari Kolonialisme Sampai Nasionalisme*, 30.
[15] Imron Rosyadi, *R. A. Kartini: Biografi Singkat 1879-1904* (Yogyakarta: Garasi, 2020), 19.

Long before the Ethical Policy was introduced (1899), Kartini had already been thinking about and taking steps to improve the standard of living of her people within her own community.[16] The Ethical Policy and Kartini's efforts had different starting points. Both sought to improve the fate of the indigenous people, but their motivations differed. Essentially, the background of the "Ethical" movement was driven by economic motivations and Dutch political interests, which ultimately constituted a form of colonialism; whereas R. A. Kartini, with her nationalist spirit, dedicated her entire life to the emancipation of her people.[17]

Cultural Background

Biography

Kartini was born on April 21, 1879, in Mayong, a sub-district town in northern Central Java, where her father served as the district head. Little is recorded in history about Kartini's childhood; as a child, she was often nicknamed *"Si Jaran Ke"* (the wild horse) because of her love for jumping around. Kartini personally described her childhood as one filled with sorrow. Her letter to Mrs. HG de Booij-Boissevain reveals the discriminatory treatment she endured from childhood.[18] Her mother was forced to compete with her father's primary wife, and from a young age, Kartini felt the stark contrast between life at the palace and her own modest home. She lived within the customs of the Javanese nobility, and her life was entirely governed by the restrictive traditional systems and customs of Javanese society.

From a young age, she had to live under and be constrained by customary rules that she considered highly discriminatory, from her life within the royal court until her death. She deeply aspired to freedom for women and sought to change human perceptions and customs regarding women, asserting that women also possess the right to make decisions about their own lives. Kartini maintained a close relationship with her father and siblings, particularly her two younger sisters, Rukmini and Kardinah. The term *"Tiga Serangkai"*: Kartini – Rukmini – Kardinah, illustrates the closeness of these three sisters. They were practically inseparable and worked together until Kardinah had to marry and part ways with her two sisters. The three of them were committed and worked hard to improve the status of Javanese women and

[16] Soeroto, *Kartini Sebuah Biografi*, 199.
[17] Rosyadi, *R. A. Kartini: Biografi Singkat 1879-1904*, 200.
[18] Rosyadi, *R. A. Kartini: Biografi Singkat 1879-1904*, 13.

secure a place for them in society. However, their hopes and aspirations hit a dead end. The letters of Rukmini, Kardinah, and Kartini reveal the profound suffering they endured while fighting for women's rights, particularly against "forced marriage."[19]

During Kartini's time, a very strong feudal system was prevalent in Javanese society. Men were given every priority, while women held a very low status, particularly regarding marital status. The presence of multiple wives (polygamy) among the upper class was considered normal, as it had been part of custom since ancient times (before Islam), which was later recognized and reinforced by the Islamic faith.[20] Therefore, by the late 19th century, during the formative years of Kartini's life, no one questioned whether a regent had more than one wife. Kartini's father was the regent of Jepara around the 1900s. Jepara was part of the Semarang Residency, roughly the size of Aceh Province, with a population of 200,000.[21] Sosroningrat was an educated man; he was skilled in writing and spoke Dutch. Sosroningrat's father, Prince Ario Tjondronegoro, served as the Regent of Demak. He was a strong advocate for progress and was the first regent to educate his children—both sons and daughters—using the Western educational system.[22] In Kartini's time, Javanese nobility was crucial to the colonial rulers because they possessed the authority and influence necessary to carry out their duties. The Dutch subsequently leveraged this authority to secure a role of power within the royal administrative system.

Education

Kartini's father had great ambitions regarding education. For that reason, he sent all of his children to school, both boys and girls. At the time, aristocratic customs strictly forbade daughters from leaving the house, especially to attend school every day and socialize with boys. However, her father paid no heed to these customs and made every effort to send his daughter to school once she was old enough. A few years after her birth, R. A. Kartini began her Dutch education. Kartini was permitted to attend the Europeesche Lagere School (ELS)—a European elementary school. This school was exclusively for European children and those from the priyayi class.

[19] Joost Coté, *Realizing the Dream of R.A. Kartini: Her Sisters' Letters from Colonial Java* (USA: Ohio University Press, 2008), 12.
[20] Soeroto, *Kartini Sebuah Biografi*, 23.
[21] Leontien van Pelt-Otten, *R. A. Kartini Dengan Latar Belakang Zamannya*, trans. oleh John Tondowidjojo (Surabaya: Yayasan Sanggar Bina Tama, 2004), 41.
[22] Armijn Pane, *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang* (Balai Pustaka (Persero), PT, 1938), 2.

Although she was granted the privilege of attending school, Kartini realized from the start that Javanese customs forbade girls from attending school. Kartini's enrollment in school was highly unusual. Kartini expressed her concerns to Estella Zeehandelaar in a letter dated May 25, 1899, regarding educational opportunities for women:

> "...pengkhianatan besar terhadap adat kebiasaan negeriku, kami bocah-bocah perempuan keluar rumah untuk belajar dan karenanya harus meninggalkan rumah setiap hari untuk mengunjungi sekolah, lihatlah adat negeri kami melarang keras gadis-gadis keluar rumah, pergi ke tempat lain kami pun tidak boleh."[23]

The prohibition against girls leaving the house applied only to those from the priyayi and middle classes. Meanwhile, girls from the lower classes had to leave home to help with work in the rice fields, on the farm, or at the market. Even while attending school, Kartini still faced discrimination. Students were lined up in front of the classroom and called up one by one based on skin color (white, mixed-race, brown), as well as their parents' status within the civil service hierarchy and social structure.[24] Even upon entering the classroom, students had to line up according to their parents' roles in the government. Kartini also experienced this discrimination through her teachers, though not all teachers acted this way. Some teachers mocked the students' lack of knowledge and seemed to reject the very presence of indigenous children. However, there were also teachers who deeply valued indigenous children and strove to grade them objectively.

The difficulty Kartini faced at the start of her education was her knowledge of the Dutch language. Kartini's family mostly spoke Javanese at home. They used Dutch or Malay only on specific occasions, namely when speaking with non-indigenous people. In her letter to Estella Z. (January 12, 1900), Kartini wrote that when she first started school, she would just sit idly at her desk, even though, many of the European children who had just entered the school had the same limited knowledge of Dutch as she did. Kartini was happy to be able to attend school, meet many people, and laugh freely. One of Kartini's experiences that became a key to her unyielding struggle was when she was asked a question by a European child, Lesty Detmar. At that time, Kartini asked Lesty to tell her about the book she was reading while leaning against

[23] Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 60.
[24] Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 61.

that shady tree. She was focused on memorizing French. Lesty then asked Kartini, "You've never told me—what do you want to be when you grow up?" She had never thought about it, and she blurted out, "I don't know!" That question continued to echo in her mind and became the motivation to fight for her dream: to free her people from educational backwardness.

Pingitan and Marriage

In 1892, Kartini was 12 years old and had entered her teenage years. Although her father had great ambitions to educate his children, he was still unable to fully break away from the ancient customs of the nobility.[25] Kartini, who was talented in many ways, lively, and cheerful, was forced to discontinue her education. She was forced to leave behind the joys of education and was deemed old enough to submit to the old custom that compelled her to undergo seclusion: confined within the house without contact with the outside world, until the time came for her to be married to a man. From a life of a free and independent child, she became bound by unforgiving rules, a transformation that simultaneously turned the young girl into a mature woman.

A gloomy and monotonous life lay before her. Every day brought the same routine, the same surroundings, and the same people around her. She remarked: "No matter how beautiful, splendid, and luxurious that cage may be, for the bird trapped inside, it remains a cage!"[26] During her seclusion, Kartini often shared her ideas with her older sister, but every time Kartini spoke, her sister's response was always the same: "Who cares? I'm just a Javanese woman!" During those four years, Kartini did not view her life solely through the lens of regret over the traditional customs she endured. She spent her time reading many books that helped her forget the life that tormented her so deeply. Through the books she read, she came to know great figures, noble philosophies, and brilliant ideas that filled her with awe. During this period, she reflected on the meaning of being a mother, learned self-control, to yield, and to be patient. For Kartini, being born a woman into a noble lineage in the 19th century

[25] Soeroto, *Kartini Sebuah Biografi*, 48.
[26] Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 69.

meant a life of semi-exile, restrictions on certain matters, feminine propriety, and submission to her husband.[27]

By the age of 24, Kartini realized that her efforts to continue her education—whether in Semarang, Batavia, or the Netherlands—would not come to fruition. Kartini had actually been awarded a scholarship to study in the Netherlands, but due to various reasons and persuasion, she declined the scholarship. While awaiting the scholarship decision, Regent Sosroningrat suddenly received a messenger from Regent Djojo Adiningrat (Rembang) bearing a marriage proposal for Kartini. Kartini had no choice but to accept the offer to marry the Regent of Rembang. Ironically, Kartini's future husband, the regent, already had seven children and two wives.[28] His first wife, named Sukarmilah—a Raden Ayu—had passed away. Meanwhile, his two subsequent wives were not of noble lineage. For this reason, the Regent of Rembang married Kartini as his fourth wife to replace his first wife's position as a descendant of nobility. The wedding between Kartini and the Regent of Rembang took place on November 8, 1903. Kartini requested that the wedding ceremony be held simply; she wore only a garland of jasmine flowers without a wedding gown, and she refused to kneel and kiss her husband's feet—these were the conditions she set as a symbol of her struggle for women's emancipation. For Javanese society, these two requirements were mandatory for women in marriage. However, Kartini's refusal was meant to demonstrate that a wife is an equal partner to her husband.

The Thoughts of R. A. Kartini

This section will discuss Kartini's ideas as presented in *"Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang"* (After Darkness Comes Light) book, which explores themes related to women, education, and feudal customs. The letters Kartini sent to her friends in Europe provide a clear picture of the ideals she envisioned for indigenous society. R. A. Kartini's letters depict a new stage of development within her, in line with her efforts to communicate and compare her ideas with others. Most importantly, Kartini began to connect what she had read with the realities unfolding in Java and subsequently sought to develop her perspectives on women within the Javanese

[27] Jean Gelman Taylor, "Kartini in Her Historical Context," *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 145, no. 2 (1989): 297, https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003256.
[28] Rosyadi, *R. A. Kartini: Biografi Singkat 1879-1904*, 40.

context.[29] Undoubtedly, the core of Kartini's views on Java's future, on colonialism, and on the fate of women stemmed from the realities of her own life.

Thoughts on Woman

The significance of Kartini's letters, particularly those to Stella Zeehandelaar, lies in her aspirations for women. Kartini's struggle centered on two main issues. First, her emotional and intellectual opposition to polygamy (which she believed was the root of all oppression against women). Second, the lack of access to (Western) education for women. Emancipation is a way of life for women that involves the demand for equal rights between men and women. Kartini became familiar with the term "emancipation" through the books she read while confined by the tradition of seclusion. The injustice Kartini experienced—being treated differently from her brothers—and the societal conditions she faced drove her to demand these equal rights. In a letter to Stella Zeehandelaar, Kartini wrote:

> "...Jalan hidup anak perempuan Jawa telah dibatasi dan dibentuk menurut satu pola yang sama. Kami tidak boleh bercita-cita. Satu-satunya yang boleh kami mimpikan ialah: hari ini atau besok menjadi istri yang kesekian bagi salah seorang laki-laki. Saya menantang mereka, dan menunjukkan ketidakbenaran hal ini."

Kartini also criticized the practice of polygamy, which is also supported by Islamic teachings. In her letter to Stella Zeehandelaar, she wrote:

> "...Karena tindakan tersebut tidak tergolong dosa: paham Islam mengizinkan seorang laki-laki menikahi empat perempuan sekaligus. Ajaran seperti itulah yang menimbulkan praktik poligami dan menurut hukum dan ajaran Islam, itu bukanlah dosa. Tapi, saya selama-lamanya akan tetap melihatnya sebagai dosa."[30] (letter, November 6, 1899).

Kartini viewed polygamy as a form of injustice against women. She saw the practice of polygamy as benefiting only men and harming women. Polygamy becomes a source of suffering for women because a man's attention and love are divided.

[29] Vissia Ita Yulianto, penerj., *Aku Mau: Feminisme dan Nasionalisme (Surat-surat Kartini kepada Stella Zeehandelaar)* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2004).
[30] R. A. Kartini, *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang - Door Duisternis Tot Licht* (Yogyakarta: Narasi, 2018), 17–18.

Polygamy also becomes an emotional burden for women who experience feelings of neglect, jealousy, and heartbreak. This practice traps women in domestic roles predetermined by men within traditional customs, and women remain marginalized because of it. For societies adhering to a strong patriarchal system, polygamy is considered normal and supported by certain religious teachings, so it does not become a significant social issue in communal life.

Thoughts on Education

Kartini was the first Javanese woman to have a vision for the education of Javanese teenage girls and to express her conviction that education was of the utmost urgency.[31] Kartini had a grand vision of establishing a secondary school for aristocratic girls like herself who had completed their primary education and wished to continue to the next level. She subsequently founded a district school together with her sister, Rukmini. Kartini personally designed the curriculum and the values she wished to instill in her students. She believed that school was not merely for intellectual development; rather, the cultivation of moral character and values was the primary focus of the educational process.

> ".....Memang benar "Sekolah Kami" berfokus pada pembentukan nilai-nilai moral lebih dari sekadar ilmu pengetahuan. Oleh karena itu, kami menghendaki sekolah ini didirikan oleh pihak swasta, bukan pemerintah. Sebab jika sekolah diatur oleh pemerintah, kami akan terikat dengan peraturan-peraturan tertentu. Sementara kami ingin menjalankan sekolah ini sesuai dengan cita-cita kami yaitu mendidik anak-anak berdasarkan pendekatan seorang ibu, bukan mengikuti pola-pola tradisional sekolah.
>
> Sekolah tersebut sama sekali berbeda dari sekolah biasa, tetapi lebih menyerupai sebuah keluarga besar, yang anggotanya saling mencintai dan saling mengajari satu sama lain. Pemahaman mengenai "ibu guru" bukan hanya sekadar gelar, tetapi ibu sejati, pendidik anak dalam hal rohani dan jasmani....."[32]

R. A. Kartini emphasized the importance of a mother's psychological influence on the development of a child's personality and character, as the child is born and raised in a mother's care. Kartini asserted that character education must

[31] Soeroto, *Kartini Sebuah Biografi*, 324.
[32] Kartini, *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang - Door Duisternis Tot Licht*, 438.

take precedence in shaping the noble mindset of the Javanese people. At this stage, the role of a woman (mother) is indispensable. As a child's primary educator, a woman guides them in learning to feel, think, and speak. However, how can a woman educate effectively if she herself is uneducated? Our nation will not progress if women are not empowered and given a role in the effort to advance the nation.[33] Kartini always advocated for education, first and foremost for the nobility—not because of their social status, but precisely because they must serve as role models in upholding new moral principles and practices of living that will bring progress to the lower strata of society. However, the feudal class was reluctant to relinquish the comforts they had long enjoyed; in other words, they opposed any form of progress.

Breaking Ancient Customs

Kartini lived in an era described by Multatuli as a time when "feudal colonizers cared not a whit about how rice was processed, how the land was plowed, or how people and animals were forced to labor for the colonizers' benefit."[34] Eduard Douwes Dekker used the pen name Multatuli, which means "I suffer." His work, Max Havelaar, recounts the cruelty of the forced cultivation system, which left many indigenous people starving, impoverished, and suffering. Kartini's life was shaped by the dominant feudal and colonial structures of that era. Although the words "feudal" or "feudalism" do not appear in Kartini's letters to her friends in the Netherlands, the concept is implicitly felt in her daily experiences within her environment:

> Terhadap kakak saya, laki-laki dan perempuan, saya taati semua peraturan sopan santun. Saya tidak mau mengurangi hak seseorang sedikit pun; jujur mulai dari saya ke bawah semua adat kami langgar. Kebebasan, persamaan dan persaudaraan! Adik-adik bergaul bebas dengan saya dan di antara mereka sendiri merupakan kawan-kawan setara. Di antara kami tidak ada kekakuan yang terlihat dalam perhubungan sesama kami hanyalah persahabatan dan ketulusan hati. adik-adik ber"aku"-"engkau" kepada saya dan berbahasa seperti saya. Mula-mula orang mencela sekali pergaulan bebas di antara kami kakak-beradik. Kami disebut sebagai "anak-anak tanpa pendidikan" dan saya disebut sebagai "kuda kore", kuda liar karena cara saya berjalan melompat-lompat atau melonjak-lonjak.[35] (Letter, August 18, 1899, to Estelle Zeehandelaar).

[33] Soeroto, *Kartini Sebuah Biografi*, 302.
[34] Rosyadi, *R. A. Kartini: Biografi Singkat 1879-1904*, 104.
[35] Kartini, *Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang - Door Duisternis Tot Licht*, 10.

The dominant feudal customs in daily life were a concern for Kartini in her letters. For example, women were not allowed to open their mouths when laughing, and they had to speak in a soft tone. Furthermore, strict feudal customs required a younger sibling, whether male or female, to bow or crawl when passing an older sibling. If a younger sibling was sitting on a chair and an older sibling walked past, the younger sibling had to immediately get down on the floor and sit with their head bowed until the older sibling left the room. Kartini observed that such practices persisted in other places as well. Siblings interacted only because they were children of the same parents. They lived side by side like strangers to one another due to these highly restrictive rules. Kartini desired more flexible relationships, both among siblings and in daily interactions with others.

The multi-layered feudal social order experienced by Kartini was not limited to the Jepara regency but was nearly universal across the entire island of Java. Across these various layers—from the highest to the lowest social classes, from the elderly to the young, from the nobility to the common people, and even from men to women—the language of "command and obedience" became the dominant mode of communication.[36] Such practices have diminished the sense of humanity among the indigenous population. A person's human worth is no longer determined by their abilities, skills, and contributions to society, but is instead emphasized by their social status. The higher one's position in the feudal social hierarchy, the more valued their existence within that social structure. Faced with this feudalistic way of life—which, in Sukarno's words, was "sick"—Kartini sought a way out by learning from the way of life she considered more civilized, democratic, and egalitarian in the Western world. Kartini was a diligent reader and writer. She was the embodiment of a young person yearning for social interaction, yet due to customary restrictions, she was isolated from everything she needed to develop her personality.

For this reason, Kartini deeply longed for "someone to talk to" and was eager to communicate with some of her friends from Europe. Through her passion for reading and writing, she learned much about the Western world. Kartini described the Western world as the "land across the sea"—that is, the Netherlands itself—and not the false "colonial" government in the Dutch East Indies that oppressed and exploited the indigenous people through its forced cultivation system.[37] Kartini believed that

[36] Rosyadi, *R. A. Kartini: Biografi Singkat 1879-1904*, 105.
[37] Rosyadi, *R. A. Kartini: Biografi Singkat 1879-1904*, 106.

by turning to the West, all humanitarian problems could be resolved. Kartini yearned for the freedom adopted from Western civilization, which she also believed would help liberate society from the shackles of the indigenous feudal system.[38] Although Kartini had a strong desire to turn to the West, she also had very sharp criticisms of the colonial cultural practices around her. Kartini's view of Europeans actually differed from the reality she read about and also idealized. She witnessed the moral decay of Europeans, which stood in stark contrast to the narrative she had gleaned from her so-called "civilized" readings. On the night of Wilhelmina's coronation as Queen of the Netherlands, Kartini witnessed the deeply disappointing behavior of European men and women. They praised one another when face-to-face, but hurled insults at each other once the conversation ended. Men, too, behaved recklessly toward women once alcohol had clouded their judgment. Kartini remarked that the charade played out by Europeans was truly extraordinary. On paper, they were civilized people, but in reality, they were not. The phenomena she had seen and heard had shown her that deceit and hypocrisy were not limited to Europeans alone. This was a perspective shared by the indigenous people of the Netherlands at that time. From that moment on, Kartini became convinced that character education must be provided alongside intellectual development in any educational system.[39]

Literacy as an Instrument of Resistance

Reading Kartini's letters today means immersing oneself in the atmosphere and events of the past. The state of Indonesian society and its cultural development (both local and global) have gradually changed. However, Kartini instilled a consciousness that inspired the indigenous people's struggle to "move" toward positive change in social, cultural, and educational spheres—and, of course, toward a full respect for humanity (particularly women). Kartini's struggle serves as a strong foundation and leaves a invaluable legacy for the Indonesian nation, particularly for women to be able to "move freely" like men in all fields, especially in pursuing education and knowledge. Kartini felt inner turmoil because she felt shackled by the constraints of customs and culture that limited a woman's role, leaving her in a marginalized position. A woman's life was viewed solely through a naturalistic lens, without being given the opportunity to develop her full potential. Kartini's struggle had a significant impact on women in

[38] Ita Yulianto, *Aku Mau: Feminisme dan Nasionalisme (Surat-surat Kartini kepada Stella Zeehandelaar)*, 14–22.
[39] Taylor, "Raden Ajeng Kartini," 653.

Indonesia. During her lifetime, she provided strong meaning and motivation for women's struggles to achieve equality. Through her hobbies of writing, reading, and exchanging ideas with her peers in Europe, Kartini inspired the women's movement in Indonesia.

Kartini certainly did not easily lose hope in the face of various responses and reactions from many people regarding her aspirations. Her struggle to "challenge" customary practices that were "less" than humane serves as a spirit worth emulating. As a woman who had only received elementary education and faced limited freedom of movement, she demonstrated that her analytical understanding of the situation and her proficiency in foreign languages helped her realize her dreams. She also proved that her thoughts and struggles could be understood by many people (including Europeans), and her struggle became an inspiration for many to continue her cause. After turning 12, he had to undergo a period of seclusion (isolated from the hustle and bustle of the world). It was during this time that he began corresponding with several of his friends in Europe. In addition, she also avidly read the newspapers her father gave her. She made writing and reading her hobbies, gaining a wealth of knowledge and information from them. Through reading and reflecting during her seclusion, she gained a broad perspective on current events.

Initially, the name R. A. Kartini was not very well-known; she was merely the daughter of the Regent of Jepara, still bound by Javanese customs. However, the publication of the book "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang" opened the eyes of everyone—both in Indonesia and Europe—to the struggle of a Javanese woman against the feudal and colonial injustices taking place. Unfortunately, Kartini passed away at a very young age without seeing or enjoying the results of the cause she fought for through her letters. Kartini's concern for the fate of indigenous women was immense. She advocated for education to be accessible to everyone—both men and women—regardless of their social status. Kartini's collection of letters turned out to capture the attention of Europeans at the time. The Atlantic Monthly (New York) once published them in English translation, and they were later released as a standalone book titled "Letters of a Javanese Princess". The book "Door Duisternis Tot Licht" (DDTL) also contributed to the rise of women's emancipation in Syria. A Syrian girl, Aleyech Thouk, translated DDTL from English into Arabic, sparking great enthusiasm among her readers. Additionally, DDTL has been translated into French, Russian,

Chinese, and Spanish.[40] Without her collection of letters, Kartini would likely remain unknown to Europeans and even to her own people. The DDTL book offers a glimpse into Kartini's aspirations and struggles, which remain relevant to this day. It is no exaggeration to say that many women today hold significant roles in society thanks to Kartini's struggles during that era.

Kartini believed that education would transform the fate of the indigenous people, freeing them from oppression and backwardness. She said, "With education and equitable progress, the conditions of colonial rule will certainly disappear, so that the indigenous people and the Dutch no longer live in a world of master and servant, but as equals."[41] Knowledge broadens horizons and shifts perspectives, enabling people to critically assess the situations they face—and that is precisely what Kartini did. She read while observing every event that occurred and then poured her thoughts into writings she sent to her friends in Europe.

"Sometimes, you must first experience hardship before perfect happiness comes to you."[42] These words of Kartini aim to show that the process of fighting for something is not an easy one. In her time, despite all the restrictions imposed, she remained steadfast in her efforts to improve the future of women. Society's view of women at that time was extremely narrow, so much so that they were not even allowed to attend school. When Kartini enrolled in school, the public reaction was highly negative, as people viewed it as a violation of their cultural norms. However, Kartini continued her education thanks to the support of her father and grandfather (Tjondronegoro), who were open-minded regarding Western (modern) education.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer, an Indonesian writer, once said, "One may be as wise as the heavens, but as long as they do not write, they will vanish from society and from history. Writing is working for eternity." This quote is often used by many as motivation to start writing about what they think and feel. The activities of reading and writing (literacy) are invaluable assets in the journey of an era. Through her collection of writings, Kartini was able to touch the hearts of many, inspiring them to take action. The emergence of women's organizations is one manifestation of Kartini's vision to elevate the status of women in communal life. This spirit of literacy must be

[40] Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 239–40.
[41] Ananta Toer, *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja*, 141.
[42] Kevin Alfarizky, "21 Quotes tentang Hari Kartini yang Menginspirasi," Detikjabar, diakses 14 April 2024, https://www.detik.com/jabar/berita/d-6684140/21-quotes-tentang-hari-kartini-yang-menginspirasi.

upheld so that we, too, can speak out against situations that may be disadvantageous to many people.

CONCLUSION

The life of R.A. Kartini serves as a profound testament to the truth that human dignity cannot be suppressed by physical walls or oppressive cultural restrictions. Caught in the complex intersection of Dutch colonialism and Javanese feudalism—a reality that marginalized women into the status of mere objects or "dolls"- Kartini successfully deconstructed these patriarchal structures through a spirit of literacy. Her period of seclusion (*pingitan*), which was intended to isolate her, was instead transformed into an "intellectual window" through which she absorbed global progressive thoughts and challenged the injustices of polygamy and educational marginalization. By utilizing the "weapon of the pen," Kartini provided an identity and a voice for the voiceless, proving that critical ideas committed to writing possess a power that transcends both time and space.

The modern significance of Kartini's struggle lies in its moral call for individuals to move beyond being mere bystanders in the face of systemic social injustice. Literacy, as demonstrated by Kartini, must be understood as more than a technical skill; it is a machine of reflective consciousness that compels us not to close our eyes to the suffering of others for the sake of the common good (*bonum commune*). Her vision for education, which prioritized character building and moral development over mere intellectual exercise, remains a fundamental reference for building a civilized and equitable society. Ultimately, Kartini's greatest legacy is the realization that "to write is to work for eternity." Although she passed away at a young age, her thoughts remain vibrant and continue to inspire authentic social transformation and emancipation. Kartini's spirit challenges every individual today to sharpen their critical reasoning and compassionate conscience, ensuring that our actions are consistently oriented toward upholding the full and equal dignity of every human being

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