

Kartini: The First Indonesian Feminist

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Like in some other places in the Western world, in the case of Indonesia, at the beginning of the 20th century Kartini (1879 – 1904) raised similar demands for educational reform in order to improve the moral life of family and the nation. She also demanded education so women could have careers and not be forced to marry for economic support.

It was Kartini who first started the discussion on the necessity of modern/western education for Indonesian women. Born in 1879, she was regarded as “a pioneer of women’s rights, education and personal freedom.”¹ Through her letters of correspondence with her Dutch friends, written in Dutch and published in 1911 with the title *Door Duisternis Tot Licht (Through Darkness Into Light)* by J.A. Abendanon, whose wife was one of Kartini’s mentors, Kartini’s ideas came into public discourse amongst the literate elite. The letters subsequently went through several editions and translations, including one into Indonesian by Armijn Pane. Kartini herself failed to enjoy the fame her letters brought her because of her early death in childbirth in 1904, seven years before the publication of her letters. Kartini, to a certain degree, inspired the succeeding Indonesian women’s movement. Her letters are evidence of her desire to question the condition of women “in the areas of medical and general welfare” and reveal her objection to polygamy.²

Many critical readings of Kartini’s letters place her ideas and worldview into much larger contexts of socio-political and cultural changes within society. Very few have included her into religious discussions, especially in the framework of Islam.³ Kartini like most members of her

1 Jean Taylor, ‘Once More Kartini’, *Autonomous Histories Particular Truths: Essays in Honor of John Smail*, Laurie Sears (ed), Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, 1993, p. 156.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

3 An article by Ahmad Zahro Al-Hasany, MA ‘Islam dan Perempuan (Diskursus Islam, RA Kartini dan Feminisme’. *Membincangkan Feminisme: Diskursus Gender Perspective Islam*, Tim Risalah Gusti (ed), Risalah Gusti, Jakarta, 2000, pp. 251 – 264 places Kartini in the Islamic discourse and feminism. However, I find his findings quite misleading. Zahro Al-Hasany believes that Kartini’s struggle is to find her way back to her religion, Islam, and that she is not a representation of liberal and secular feminism adopted from Western environment. Saying that Kartini is a Muslim feminist with not liberal Western influence is partially incorrect. Careful reading of Kartini’s letters undeniably shows that Kartini is very much influenced by Western feminism and secularism introduced to her by Stella Zeehandelaar and her other Dutch friends. In her letter to Zeehandelaar on November 6, 1899, Kartini illustrated her wish for the non-existence of religion since different religions contributed to conflicts. However, a letter to Abendanon on August 15, 1902 acknowledged her comprehension and acceptance of the notion of religion. All these letters are from *On Feminism and Nationalism: Kartini’s Letters to Stella Zeehandelaar 1899 – 1903*, translated and introduction by Joost Coté, revised edition, Monash Asia Institute, Clayton, Australia, 2005, and *Letters of A Javanese Princess*, translated from the Dutch by Agnes Louis Symmers, edited and with an introduction by Hildred Geertz, preface by Eleanor Roosevelt, The Norton Library, WW Norton & Company, New York, 1964. However, as is widely known the title *Letters of A Javanese Princess* is misleading and inappropriate. Kartini was not a princess in the sense of being a daughter of a king. She was the daughter of high-ranking official in colonial government. Her father was the regent of Jepara. Regent during the Dutch colonial reign was the highest official position given to the natives in order to help colonial administration of native affairs.

family was a Muslim.⁴ Not only does she write against polygamy in Javanese society, she also attacks this problem within Islamic discourse. Polygamy in Java, where Kartini resided all of her life, existed long before Islam was introduced to Java, yet it was clear to her that polygamy was sustained, became deeply rooted and institutionalised by Islam. Her struggle against polygamy and her demand for female education reflect many of the changes that Muslim women are still advocating for in contemporary Indonesia. For Kartini, polygamy was men's subjugation of women, "an enemy" to be opposed:

And can you imagine what hellish pain a woman must experience when her husband comes home with another whom she has to recognize as his lawful wife, her rival? He can torment her to death, mistreat her as much as he likes for as long as he chooses not to give her her freedom again; she can whistle to the wind for her rights! Everything for the man, and nothing for the woman is our law and general belief.⁵

However, one must realize that debate over marriage in colonial Indonesia entered into public discourse through the Indonesian elite, particularly through the *priyayi* class and scholars having access to Dutch education and close associations with the colonial authorities. At the grassroots level, that is the majority of Indonesians, such debate seemed to be non-existent.

On Female Education

As noted previously Kartini, through her letters, put the demand for female education into public discourse.⁶ Yet her ideals did not only circulate on the rhetorical level for she established informal school for the daughters of her father's staff—her father was the regent of Jepara, and continued to do so after her arranged marriage to the neighbouring regent.⁷ An advocate of personal liberty, female education, and the development of Javanese art and craftsmanship, Kartini's name has ever since been directly associated with the Indonesian women's movement. But her most notable demand was the urgency of female education. Only through education could women's position be raised, she wrote:

Raise the Javanese women, educate her heart and her understanding, and you will have splendid workers to cooperate with you in your noble work, your giant's work, the work of civilizing and enlightening a whole nation.

Teach her a trade, so that she will no longer powerless when her guardians command her to contract a marriage which will inevitably plunge her and whatever children she may have into misery.

The only escape from such conditions is for the girl herself to learn to be independent. . . . It is not the least our intention to try to make European-Javanese of the Javanese by giving them liberal education; our idea is to develop the fine qualities that are peculiar to

4 Her letters to Stella Zeehandelaar on November 6, 1899 took account of her confession being a Muslim, the faith she inherited from her ancestors without knowing what it actually was, but on her later letter to J. H. Abendanon on August 15, 1902 depicted her desire to learn the Qur'an and her comprehension of what religion meant for her.

5 Letter to Zeehandelaar on 6 November 1899, *On Feminism and Nationalism: Kartini's Letters to Stella Zeehandelaar 1899 – 1903*, p. 35.

6 Kartini's letters were considered "private." She never meant to publicize her letters but the publication of her letters by her Western friends made them "public".

7 Taylor, p. 160.

their race; to help them to gain by contract by contract with another civilization, not to the detraction of their own, but to its ennoblement.⁸

In her letters Kartini was addressing the Javanese but her message can certainly be extended to encompass all Indonesian women. Not only did Kartini aim to endow women with knowledge (Western education in particular), she also yearned for women's empowerment seeing it as the only way possible to react against the bonds of patriarchal tradition. On 3 August 1964, Kartini was declared a "Heroine of National Freedom" by Soekarno, Indonesia's first president, and her birthday on April 21st is celebrated as a national day. Kartini's ideals have largely been taken as the embodiment of the Indonesian women's movement:

She is remembered in Indonesia as one of the first champions of women's rights. In Indonesia the emancipation of women is closely allied to the emancipation of the entire population, and Ibu Kartini ('Mother Kartini') has been canonized not only as defender of 'her sisters' but also as a patron saint for all modern Indonesians.⁹

Kartini is called Ibu Kartini, instead of Raden Ajeng Kartini.¹⁰ The term *Ibu* reflects a notion of motherhood, the ideal role for Indonesian women. It is also a substitution for the Javanese titles in the New Order while at the same time implying domestication of female public roles. In Indonesian history her actions are seen as equivalent to patriotism, for Indonesians call their land *Ibu Pertiwi* (motherland). Raden Ajeng—a title inherited only by aristocratic family—on the other hand implies rank in social order and if used places her above the rest of her people. Kartini set up schools for indigenous Javanese to provide education for those who were denied their education due to their social status and sex. In her letters she often questions and attacks the complex Javanese order of social classes similar to a caste system. Her ideals went beyond the boundaries of sex to the larger scheme of individual self.

Although Kartini was an early promoter (in fact considered to be the first) of female education, within a more Islamic framework the efforts of Rangkyo Rahmah el-Yunusiah (1900 - 1969), the founder of *Diniyah School Putri* (*Madrasah Diniyah li al-Banat*, established on November 1, 1923), are equally important. The school was an Islamic school for girls meant to elevate women's self-worth in Rahmah's own homeland, Minangkabau, a region in North Sumatra. Throughout her life, Rahmah dedicated her life to manage and develop her educational institutions.¹¹ Quintessentially different from Kartini who came from a Javanese *priyayi* background, Rahmah grew up in a strongly Islamic educational environment in Sumatra. She was the daughter of a prominent *ulama*, and the younger sister of Zaenuddin Labay who had earlier introduced a modernized religious instruction in Islamic education at his own school. In 1912, Haji Rasul, the father of Hamka (Haji Abdul Malik Karim Amrullah) who had a leading role in the Islamic reform movement of *Kaum Muda* from 1920-1940, founded *Diniyah School* (Religious School), a modern Islamic school with the emphasis on self-activity and self-

8 Letter to Mevrouw Van Kol, August 1901, *Letters of a Javanese Princess*.

9 E.M. Beekman in the chapter Kartini (1879 – 1904): The Paradox of Colonialism' in *Troubled Pleasures: Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies 1600 – 1950*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 398.

10 There is a song, composed by W.R. Supratman, dedicated to Kartini's struggle entitled *Ibu Kita Kartini* (Our Mother Kartini).

11 'Pengantar Editor', *Ulama Perempuan Indonesia*, Jajat Burhanudin (ed), PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama in corporation with PPIM IAIN Jakarta, Jakarta, 2002, p. x.

knowledge.¹² Later, Rahmah followed his path by setting up her own *Diniyah School Putri* for girls. Accordingly, Rahmah's activities "fit perfectly into the Islamic reform movement of the *Kaum Muda*" that Taufik Abdullah defines as "a group of energetic and educated women who played an important role in the social and political movement of the Minangkabau."¹³

From her experiences in the co-educational Islamic school of *Diniyah School*, where all instructors were male, Rahmah believed that the school did not adequately address women's issues. She considered that woman's problems were as complex as men's. Yet, such women never received as much access or attention as men, resulting in intellectual inequality between men and women. She asserted that women in fact had a major importance in shaping and safeguarding the education of subsequent generations. Rahmah posited that women's role was central to their household, and household was the pole of society, as society itself was the pole of the nation. Only through creating good households could a good society and state be achieved. Improving women's quality and position could only be done by giving them special education taught by women; education for women by women and about women. She stated:

Diniyah School Putri always attempted to provide religious enlightenments and progress for women who had been in difficulty in gaining adequate Islamic education because they were reluctant to ask the woman questions to male instructors. This caused women to be parted from Islam [as a religion], making them ignorant. *Diniyah School Putri* would endeavour to create and produce educated mothers [*Ibu Pendidik*] for Muslim sons and daughters so that they know how to devote themselves to God, their nation and homeland through self worth. This was also intended to make the religion [Islam] become the flesh and blood for our fellow civilians.¹⁴

Rahmah did not only work within the field of education for women, she was also politically active in the nationalist movement for Indonesia's independence. She rebuffed the colonial offer to subsidize *Diniyah Putri* in order to maintain its independence.¹⁵ Her work was recognized internationally and in 1957 she was the first woman awarded the title *Syaikhah*, by Al Azhar University in Cairo. This highest title for Islamic scholars was originally given to men only, and Rahmah's award made her equal to *Syeikh*, male Islamic cleric and scholars. Her name is juxtaposed with Kartini's, and she is celebrated as the "Kartini of Islamic Institution" or "Kartini of Islamic Movement."¹⁶ It should be noted here that despite their similarity in terms of struggling for girls' education, Rahmah and Kartini presented themselves in different ways. If Kartini was tied in a polygamous marriage, Rahmah chose divorce from such a marriage. In terms of clothing, Kartini wore Javanese traditional dress called *kebaya* and *sanggul* for her hairdo as the ways Javanese aristocrat women normally dressed, whilst Rahmah as a Minangkabau woman was veiled. Rahmah was from urban middle class family and her ability to travel and work was related to her class background more than to her appearance as a veiled

12 Cora Vreede-de Stuers, 'The Life of Rankayo Rahmah El Yunusiyah', *Indonesian Women in Focus: Past and Present Notions*, Elsbeth Locher-Scholten and Anke Niehof (eds), second printing, KITLV Press, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1992, pp. 52 - 53.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

14 Rahmah's speech in 15 years anniversary of *Diniyah School Putri*. Translation mine. Quoted in Junaidatul Munawaroh, 'Rahmah el-Yunusiah: Pelopor Pendidikan Perempuan' in *Ulama Perempuan Indonesia*, p. 11.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 28 - 29.

woman. Differences in their self-presentation are not important, for what is important is their strong commitment to women's right for education and their struggles for better conditions for women. Rahmah's struggle for female education is now mirrored by Islamic women's movements all over the world.

Dewi Sartika (1884-1947) was another influential figure in the struggle for female education in colonial Indonesia. Dewi Sartika, like Kartini with her *priyayi* background, was from a *menak* family (West Javanese aristocratic family). Her father was a former *patih* (similar to vice-regent) of Bandung. In 1904, she led a school for women established by the Dutch in Bandung. Whilst Kartini's school was an informal one, Dewi Sartika's was under the colonial government's authorization. Accordingly, Dewi Sartika can be seen as the first female principal in Indonesia appointed officially by the colonial government,¹⁷ making her school the first formal school opened for women in colonial Indonesia. Dewi Sartika's school, first named *Sekolah Istri* (female school), then changed to *Sekolah Kautaman Istri* (school of decorous girls) in 1905, was open to the public but was not free from class distinctions as not all classes could attend. *Sekolah Kautaman Istri* was secular in its form, because religion (Islam) was not the framework for the curriculum: it was in contrast to the *Diniyah School Putri* established by Rahmah. Nonetheless, Dewi Sartika's school had a significant role in the discourses of the women's movement within an Islamic paradigm. Besides female skills such as sewing, cooking, embroidering and baby nursing Islam was taught as a separate course. *Sekolah Kautaman Istri* was the first government-funded school to include religious instruction in its curriculum. The course covered only the reading and reciting of the Qur'an and basic Islamic knowledge such as praying and fasting during Ramadhan.¹⁸ Whilst Dewi Sartika's school still emphasized domestic skills education, training girls to be decorous wives, her work for female education was progressive. In her struggle to improve women's position Dewi Sartika wrote about and discussed women's lives: she believed that "education for women was a *conditio sine qua non*, for the happiness and welfare of [Indies] society. . . . an [Indies] woman's education was necessary to ensure that her children were healthy both physically and mentally."¹⁹

Dewi Sartika was also concerned with other gender issues. From 1911-1914, under the auspices of *Sarekat Islam*, she delivered talks on female education and on prostitution, which she believed resulted from polygamy, for cultural practices of child marriage and polygamy would most likely end up in divorce, and divorce was an immediate path for women to join prostitution.²⁰ She also called attention to the lower pay for female labourers and their need for equal pay and social security such as health insurance and maternity leave, all of which would keep them from prostitution. For her, female education was central to improving women's status and security. Vreede-de Stuers comments: "Long before the feminist movement was organized, this young woman revolted against the injustice of less pay for women work equal to that done by men."²¹ Thus, more than one hundred years ago, Dewi Sartika envisioned contemporary female

17 Sukanti Suryochondro, *Potret Pergerakan Wanita di Indonesia*, CV. Rajawali in corporation with Yayasan Ilmu Ilmu Sosial, Jakarta, 1984, p. 81.

18 Rochiati Wiriaatmadja, *Dewi Sartika*, Departement Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Direktorat Sejarah dan Nilai Tradisional, Proyek Investarisasi dan Dokumentasi Sejarah Nasional, Jakarta, 1983/1984, p. 94.

19 Baroroh Baried, p. 144.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 111 – 112.

21 Quoted from *Dewi Sartika*, p. 110.

labourers' demands for social security, equal pay, and maternity leave. Indeed, Dewi Sartika continued what Kartini had started, but she moved beyond the boundaries of her own class by incorporating the needs of working class women in her struggles. Dewi Sartika's famous axiom *Nu bisa hirup* (Sundanese, meaning you can live) underlined her belief in the need for women's empowerment and independence.

The success of Dewi Sartika's school's role in improving women's position was noted by colonial authorities. Subsequently, similar schools were set up in several places in West Java: in Tasikmalaya (1913), Sumedang (1916), Cianjur (1916), Ciamis (1917), Cicurug (1918), Kuningan (1922) and Sukabumi (1926).²² In the broader scope of the women's movement in Indonesia, these schools helped to generate the appearance of indigenous women in the public sphere. Although such schools by and large emphasized women's skills in domestic affairs, the efforts to make women literate helped raise women's status. In contrast to Qasim Amin's ideal of Muslim female education in 1899 (see above), the new push for female education moved beyond the domestic sphere. The founding of the *mesjid perempuan* (women's mosque)—later called Mushola Aisyiah—in Jogjakarta in 1920, and supported by Haji Ahmad Dahlan and his organization *Muhammadiyah*, could stand as an example of women's efforts to create a greater awareness of women in Islam, and of women's own awareness of their religiosity.²³ After the founding of Mushola *Aisyiah* other women's mosques were built throughout Java. Situating Kartini and Dewi Sartika in the discourses on women, gender and Indonesian Islam opens up the possibility of making space for women who are undeniably Muslim, but considered outside the domain of Islam because they are not "Islamic" enough.

Indonesian historiography on women in Islamic discourses does not stop at Kartini, Dewi Sartika and Rahmah el-Yunusiah. There is the presence of other women such as Rangkayo Rasuna Said (1910-1965) and Nyai Ahmad Dahlan (1872-1946). *Ulama Perempuan Indonesia*, edited by Jajat Burhanuddin, is one of the few books in Indonesian recording the names of these earlier Muslim women activists. What is important about this publication is that it situates their work in Indonesian historiography.²⁴ Moreover, not only is the publication itself a rarity, the contents shed new light on women in Islam. The role of *ulama perempuan* (female clerics) is little known although *ulama perempuan* were long present in the Indonesian Muslim world. The word *ulama* is usually thought to mean male, never female, despite the fact that the word *ulama* is gender neutral.²⁵ Documenting their work extends the world of *ulama* beyond merely clerical considerations. This attempt to locate and document *ulama perempuan* in Indonesia is vital to the historiography of women and gender in Indonesian Islam, and hopefully it is the beginning of a genre. Besides the names of women who are prominent figures in religious affairs, the book includes biographies of those active in social, cultural and political circumstances as well. The biographies call attention to their contribution in creating and shaping discourses on gender equality in terms of providing women with similar access as men in many domains of Indonesian life. These women 'translated' Islam into Indonesian settings. *Ulama Perempuan* records the

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²³ Quoted in Vreede-de Stuers, *The Indonesian Woman*, p. 66.

²⁴ Azzumardi Azra, 'Biography Sosial Intelektual Ulama Perempuan Indonesia' in *Ulama Perempuan Indonesia*. This collection of biographies of female *ulama* in Indonesia is amongst the few documentations of women and their public roles.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

stories of women from the colonial period to present day Indonesia. Juxtaposing women from different times signals the dynamic in which the women were and are located, and puts them at the heart of discourses on religious and social change in Indonesia. Other than *Ulama Perempuan* the lack of documentation on the work of women is disappointing. Researches to trace other women who struggled for women's rights and to place them in Indonesian historiography still need to be undertaken. Looking at regional biographies or personal diaries might be one of many ways to accomplish the task.

Kartini is well placed within the corpus of *kesusatraan lama*. Although she is generally placed in the corpus of Dutch colonial literature,²⁶ her writings move beyond the language in which they are written. Kartini's letters ceaselessly question the burden that *adat* laws place on one's cultural and social setting, in particular one's social class. Her style is melodramatic, but her letters express her rebellion against the socio-cultural conditions of Javanese women, and take the form of resistance to women's positioning in society. As far as thematic content is concerned Kartini's letters are her individual testimony, but they make a circular link between self and nation and for this reason she can be celebrated as a forerunner of modern Indonesian literature. A subsequent generation of writers—*Pujangga Baru* (New Writer)—were recognized for this seminal theme. Kartini is perhaps one of the most thought provoking writers dealing with gender issues in this early period of Indonesian literature. New research and investigation of historical archives is necessary to locate the names of other women writers to go alongside Kartini and Siti Saleha, so they too can have their place in the record.

26 E.M. Beekman, *Troubled Pleasures Dutch Colonial Literature from the East Indies 1600 – 1950*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, pp. 392 – 412. The chapter 'Kartini (1879 – 1904): The Paradox of Colonialism' discusses Kartini's letters and marks them as Javanese ideals, symbols of modern Indonesia.