

Research Article

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R.A. Kartini's Letters: The Emergence of the Subaltern?

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Abstract

This study investigates R.A. Kartini's letters to find out how her published letters represent the emerging of the subaltern voice. Using postcolonial criticism, this study scrutinizes ways in which Kartini's letters show traces of the Dutch colonialism's ideology and interprets the letters as challenging the Dutch's purposes and hegemony. Focusing on Kartini's concerns regarding colonized women's position in society and their education, Kartini's letters show her mimicry and ambivalence of her identity as a colonized subject. The publication of her letters enable her subaltern voice to be heard.

Keywords: Kartini's letters; subaltern; mimicry; ambivalence

1. Introduction

R.A. Kartini (1879-1901), an Indonesian national heroine whose birthday is annually celebrated as Kartini Day, exemplifies a woman whose thoughts are ahead of her time. A nineteenth-century Javanese woman, Kartini's situation was unique. A Dutch colonized subject, her father shared his father's progressive vision in giving all of his children a European education. While all of her older brothers finished Hoogere Burger School, the highest institution in central Java, and one of them spent three years studying in the Netherlands, Kartini and her sisters, unfortunately, could only attend elementary school. Once they reached puberty, around the age of twelve, they were required to remain at home until they were married, a tradition for Javanese noble girls called *pingitan*. Their parents would arrange marriages to the men of their choice, and the marriage would come as a surprise to the bride who would meet the groom for the first time on their wedding day. Fortunately, while in seclusion, Kartini and her sisters could still continue their education. The wife of the Dutch Assistant Resident, who was impressed by their intelligence, offered to be their private tutor in feminine handicrafts. Mevrouw Ovink-Soer, a socialist and feminist, might also have shared her political opinions and attitudes during those five years of tutoring [1]. Their father was also generously providing them with books and contemporary journals. The exposure to European education, thought and attitudes may have changed Kartini.

Kartini attracted great interest in the Netherlands when a collection of her letters was published in the Hague in 1911 under the title *Door Duisternis tot Licht* ("From Darkness into Light"). The correspondence between a native Javanese woman to her European friends not only exemplifies a relationship between the East and the West but also sheds a light on the way the Dutch viewed Javanese women. A number of questions arise regarding Kartini's position and voice. What does it mean to be a colonized woman in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries colonized space? To what extent did Kartini show traces of Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry and ambivalence in her letters? How

did Kartini, doubly colonized, negotiate her aristocratic status while challenging colonialism and patriarchy? As part of the elite group, how did Kartini represent the subaltern voice? How do the letters still show the unruly traces of her authorial imprint in spite of the editorializing? In answering the questions, I argue that Kartini's letters to numerous European recipients represent her subaltern voices while also record her mimicry and ambivalence as she returns the gaze and speak back to the colonizer.

2. Method

The questions posed above show that this research on Kartini's letters employs postcolonial criticism. Kartini's letters are the right object for postcolonial studies because, as Bressler explains, postcolonial studies "concentrate on writings from colonized or formerly colonized culture in Australia, New Zealand, Africa, South America, and other places that were once dominated by, but remained outside, the white, male, European cultural, political, and philosophical tradition" [2, p. 200]. Less than fifty years after Kartini died, Indonesia whose territory includes the island where Kartini lived gained its independence, no longer being dominated by the Dutch. Postcolonial criticism, according to Bressler, "investigates ways in which texts bear the traces of colonialism's ideology and interpret such texts as challenging or promoting the colonizer's purposes and hegemony [2, p. 207]". In this study, the texts that are investigated and interpreted are Kartini's letters. Three postcolonial theories are used to apply postcolonial criticism to Kartini's letters: Edward Said's Orientalism, Homi Bhabha's mimicry and ambivalence, and Gayatri Spivak's subaltern.

3. R.A. Kartini's Letters: The Emergence of the Subaltern?

Although Edward Said is often accused of defining a homogenous subject of the so-called Orient, he provides a basis to understand the relations between the West and the East. Said's Orientalism is basically the body of fact, opinion and prejudice by western European scholars in their encounter with the Orient. He says, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experience" [3, p. 7]. The reception of Kartini's letters by European people may exemplify Said's notion of the Orient. In the English version published in the USA in 1922, a Dutch novelist and poet, Louis Coperus writes in the foreword, "It was gentle, like the melodious song of a little bird in a cage ... It was the voice of Raden Adjeng Kartini. ... like the cry of a little bird that wanted to spread its wings free in the air, and fly towards life. ... It penetrated to the distant Netherlands, and was heard there with wonder and with delight" [4, p. viii-ix]. On the one hand, Coperus exoticizes Kartini and the reception of her voice by the Dutch. The little bird suggests a cute object of endearment, especially with its gentle and melodious song. Such song is pleasant to the ears. On the other hand, he also points to up her oppression, imprisonment, and her struggles for freedom. The same little bird can also suggest vulnerability and inferiority, which would be the antithesis opposite of the stereotypes of the strong and superior West. Her cage may represent the oppression by native men upon their women. Her penetrating the Netherlands suggests the difficulties and efforts to be get heard, yet once it is heard, it may also serve as a plea for help from the West.

The Dutch represented Kartini in Orientalist terms but she resisted that typecasting. In a letter dated January 9, 1901, Kartini writes about a professor from Jena who came to his father's house to conduct some research. She points out the flaw of the European's perception of the Javanese: "The professor expected us to be half savage, and found us quite like ordinary people. Is it not pleasant to find one's own thoughts reflected in another?" [5, p. 97]. In writing about the incident, Kartini shows that she understands European stereotypes and prejudices against the Javanese, that the Javanese are seen as either savage or exotic. She argues that if the Javanese people wore the same types of clothes as the Dutch, had the same mannerisms and had Dutch blood flowing in their veins, the Javanese would not be treated differently.

As a colonizing other, Kartini's perception of her identity can be said as a hybrid of her Javanese cultural identity and the Dutch's cultural identity. Homi Bhaba describes the relations between the colonizer and colonized in terms of mimicry and ambivalence. He says, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence: in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" [6, p. 266]. In her early correspondence, Kartini associates herself with European women, "I glow with enthusiasm toward the new time which has come, and can truly say that in my thoughts and sympathies I do not belong to the Indian world, but to that of my pale sisters who are struggling forward in the distant West" [5, p. 31]. Kartini emphasizes temporal perception and historical habitation: she may not be geographically present in the West to experience new women movement, yet she shares the moment and align herself with the cause. Her assertion may also be read as a desire to be recognized as the reformed other. She is not white, yet she shares the same aspirations with her white sisters.

While sharing her aspirations with the European new women who struggled for equal treatment with men, she realizes her vulnerability as a Javanese woman bound by ancient traditions oppressing women. In her very first letter to her pen-friend Stella Zeehandelaar dated May 25, 1899, Kartini immediately associates herself with women's movement in the West. She writes, "If the laws of my land permitted it, there is nothing that I had rather do than give myself wholly to the working and striving of the new woman in Europe; but age-long traditions that cannot be broken hold us fast cloistered in their unyielding arms" [5, p. 31]. Kartini speaks from her experience as a noble woman. Her father, Raden Mas Adipati Sosroningrat was a Javanese nobleman part of the indigenous colonial bureaucratic elite. The elite shared power with the colonial Dutch, but the power was largely in the hands of men. The only career for a noble woman was to become a wife to a noble man. As a girl, Kartini asked her father what she was going to be when she grew up. Her father did not answer, but her older brother who overheard the question immediately answered, "What should a girl become? Why a Raden-Ajoe, [a Javanese married woman of high rank], naturally" [5, p. 71]. Kartini was not interested in being just the property of men, especially because there was a custom for a nobleman to have more than one wife. She poses a rhetorical question, "And can you imagine what hell-pain a woman must suffer when her husband comes home with another—a rival—whom she must recognize as his legal wife?" [5, p. 42]. Her aversion towards marriage, particularly polygamous marriage, compels her to be an independent woman. Kartini sees the European new women, a feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century, as the answer for the unequal treatment of Javanese women.

While criticizing her Javanese culture of polygamy, she does not forget to mention, in a letter dated September 30, 1901, that the Dutch government is partly responsible for the polygamy among noblemen. For example, the colonial government stipulates that a Regent must have an aristocrat woman as his principal wife. Kartini hears a story from a Dutch Comptroller about a Regent whose legal status is unmarried because his wife is not of aristocratic origin. This Regent does not intend to marry a Raden Ajoe because it would make his wife miserable either by sending her away or relegating her to second place. Upon listening to the story, Kartini remarks to herself, "My heart leapt when I heard that. Then there is indeed such an one! Splendid!" [5, p. 119]. While she may not have the power to break traditions, especially those supported by the colonial government, there is indeed a chance to subvert the tradition. Kartini ends this letter with a call for men and women to work hand in hand, "The young guard, regardless of sex, should band themselves together" [5, p. 119]. Kartini is clever in using the story of the "unmarried" Regent to showcase her rejection of polygamy while at the same time promoting cooperation across gender.

Kartini reveals her ambivalence towards her colonizer in her opinion on Javanese people receiving European education. She is aware that her European education has turned her to be the so-called "unruly daughter." However, she rejects the opinions of those who blame her father for giving his daughters

such an education and make them unruly girls. In her letter dated November 6, 1899, she says “Many other regents had given to their families the same advantages that we have had, and it has never resulted in anything but in native young ladies with European manners, who speak Dutch” [5, p. 41]. While criticizing other girls who just mimic European people, Kartini asserts her agency here. She does not simply imitate European manners and speak its language, but she has her own aspirations for what she wants to achieve for herself and her people. She also argues that her mastering the Dutch language would put her in a better position than the Dutch people.

For, you see I, as a born Javanese, know all about the Indian world. A European, no matter how long he may have lived in Java and studied existing conditions, can still know nothing of the inner native life. Much that is obscure now and a riddle to Europeans, I could make clear with a few words [5, p. 42].

Refusing the stereotype applied to native people as stupid, Kartini claims her superiority in understanding Javanese people because she is one of them: she knows better about herself and her people. She has the inside knowledge Europeans would never be able to acquire. Consequently, the European should learn from her. Therefore, her mastery of the Dutch language in this perspective would serve more to the colonizer’s advantage than hers.

While Kartini’s assertion of the superiority of educated Javanese women represents her ambivalence towards the Dutch, as a colonized woman, Kartini’s voice is hardly heard. Gayatri Spivak in her concluding sentences of “Can the Subaltern Speaks?” says: “both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” [7, p. 28]. Kartini may be part of the elite, yet her gender confines her to some extent to the subaltern status. Kartini understands the binary opposition made by the colonizer in their relations with the colonized: the European versus the Javanese; the master versus the governed. In a letter dated January 12, 1900, she writes about an incident related to the use of language as means of communication:

Not long ago, a Raden Ajoe was talking to a gentleman, and impulsively she said, “Sir, excuse me, but may I make a friendly request, please, speak to me in your own language. I understand and speak Malay very well, but alas, only high Malay. I do not understand this passer-Malay.” How our gentleman hung his head! [5, p. 61]

The story is interesting as the incident involves a Dutch gentleman and a native noble woman. Although some Javanese noblemen and common men were fluent in the Dutch language, the Dutch people often refused to talk to them in the Dutch to show their superiority. By requesting to be spoken to in the Dutch, this Raden Ajoe gives double-blows to the gentleman: she is fluent in the Dutch language (which may not be a common skill trait in women), and she claims that she can only speak high Malay, which means she is more refined in position and knowledge of language than the gentleman. In presenting such a story, Kartini challenges perspectives that see women as inferior others.

Kartini uses her fascination with European women as a source of emancipation but also ambivalence towards Europe. As stipulated by tradition, Kartini was released from her confinement when she was sixteen. Her parents took her to Semarang, the capital city of Central Java, for the festivities held in honor of the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina. Although Kartini marks that trip as the beginning of her “official” freedom, she yearns for more: “I long to be free, to be able to stand alone, to study, not to be subject to any one, and, above all, never, never to be obliged to marry” [5, p. 33]. Kartini seeks freedom and independence, she craves intellectual development, she wants to be her own

master, and she defines marriage as a form of oppression. When she puts “never to be obligated to marry” in the position of “above all” other things that she wants to accomplish for herself, Kartini suggests a single entity that prevents her from achieving her desires: her relation with men. As a girl, Kartini needs her father’s consent to do anything, and she believes that once she is married, the rights will be transferred to her husband. Kartini believes her father loves her, and whenever her cannot grant her wish, it is because of the constraint of the traditions. Kartini, however, does not believe that her future husband would do the same for her. Therefore, she does not see a marriage as an option. This sentence explains Kartini’s fascination with European modern women. They had already walked the path to freedom which Kartini was about to start. However, while looking at Europe as a standard, Kartini is also able to criticize it. A well-read Kartini uses her knowledge of history to support her claim of the similarity between the West and the East in terms of women’s struggle for emancipation.

How can anything else be expected, when in Europe, the centre of civilization, and of enlightenment, the strife should have been so long and so bitter for the good right of the woman? Could one in earnest expect that India, uncivilized, unenlightened, slumbering India, should take it well that her daughters, women who through centuries had been looked upon as beings of a lower order—yes, why should I not say it—as soulless creatures, should suddenly be regarded as human beings, who have a right to independent ideas, to freedom of thought, of feeling and of conduct? [5, p. 107]

Kartini’s reference to Europe as “the centre of civilization and of enlightenment” places the European on a high pedestal, but she immediately mentions that even there, it took so long for women to get their rights. Thus, if the Netherland India is deemed “uncivilized, unenlightened, slumbering,” Europe shared the same qualities. She also emphasizes that women everywhere share the same fate as the oppressed. If it takes “so long and so bitter” in Europe, Kartini realizes that her effort will not reap immediate result, yet it should not be disheartening because there is already an example of successful attempts in the West.

In terms of women movement, Kartini’s ambivalence manifests in her criticism of many Western women who do not seem to care about woman progress. In her earlier letters, Kartini associates herself with white women, but in later letters she expresses her camaraderie with her fellow non-white brown women. In a letter dated May 25, 1899, she complains about the white women in the Indies whom in her opinion do not set good examples, “The greater number of European women in India care little or nothing for the work of their sisters in the Fatherland” [5, p. 35]. In a her letter dated July 21, 1902, she recalls reading the life and writings of “this courageous Indian woman” Pudita Ramaba. She writes, “I trembled with excitement; not alone for the white woman is it possible to attain an independent position, the brown Indian too can make herself free. For days I thought of her, and I have never been able to forget her. See what one good brave example can do!” [5, p. 177]. Kartini learns to see that “brown women” are as capable as their “white sisters” in initiating change. In several different letters she mentions women in the Indies who have set an example: “some Chinese girls had asked permission to stand the teachers' examinations” [5, p. 172]; the daughter of Regent of Kutoardjo who speaks fluent Dutch and full of enthusiasm for freedom [5, p. 137]; a Sundanese daughter of Regent who was brought up with the Europeans [5, p. 137]. Although all the empowerment of the girls that Kartini mentions is the result of Western education, Kartini sees in them example and proof of possible progress for women coming from non-European women.

Kartini’s shift of perception regarding the importance of going to the Netherland to further her education exemplifies her mimicry and ambivalence. In a letter dated January 12, 1900, Kartini writes “To go to Europe! Till my last breath that shall always be my ideal” [5, p. 49]. She believes that to be able to educate her people, she needs to go to the Netherlands to study and be qualified to teach. Almost

three years later, in her letter dated October 27, 1902, she writes: “We do not expect the European world to make us happier. The time has long gone by when we seriously believed that the European is the only true civilization, supreme and unsurpassed” [5, p. 201]. The shift of conviction not only exemplifies mimicry and ambivalence but also reveals Kartini’s growing understanding of the virtues of her own civilization. She initially sets Europe as the center of civilization that she needs to go there to become more civilized. However, her encounters with European people in the Indies show the many flaws in Western civilization. At the same time Kartini learns the virtue of her Javanese civilization. She calls for equality in a letter dated August 17, 1902: “Could not that bit of our life history, become the life history of two peoples, of the Hollanders and of the Javanese? Would it not be possible for nothing but mutual love and respect to bind the Netherlands and Java together?” [5, p. 188]. Not only does she assert her agency here, but she also demands agency for her people. In her support for education, not only for herself but also for her people, Kartini challenges the colonial government, “The Europeans are troubled by many traits in the Javanese, by their indifference and lack of initiative. Very well, Netherlander, if you are troubled so much by these things why do you not do something to remedy the cause?” [5, p. 58]. This is a smart way to show that the colonial government is responsible for educating Javanese people; that they cannot just lay the blame on the native people as if they inherently possess only bad qualities.

Acknowledging the importance of European education, Kartini refuses to be seen as fully embodying European ideals. Kartini’s ambivalence regarding her identity is shown earlier in her letter dated August 1, 1901: “It is so often said that we are more European than Javanese in our hearts. Sad thought! We know that we are impregnated with European ideas and feelings—but the blood, the Javanese blood that flows live and warm through our veins, can never die” [5, p. 111]. Kartini wants to emphasize that she is still a Javanese person even though her European education marks her as different from her common Javanese people. She asserts that she is not going to teach her students to forget their Javanese identity. In a letter June 10, 1902, Kartini starts by showing her willingness to learn not only language and math but also the history of ancient people, yet she ends with a paragraph that starts with, “We do not wish to make of our pupils half Europeans or European Javanese” [5, p. 172]. She is willing to make the Javanese a strong Javanese who are proud with their own land and people.

Kartini’s decision to decline the offer to study to the Netherland and to accept a marriage proposal from the Regent of Rembang marks her mimicry and ambivalence in her final years. Her decision to get married instead of pursuing the education that she had been working on for years can be seen as her giving up her progressive ideals. Kartini is aware of such possible accusation. There are a number of factors that lead to Kartini’s decision. On the one hand, it took too long for the Dutch government to decide whether they would give the grant for Kartini and her sister to study in the Netherlands or to study in Batavia, the capital city of the Dutch East Indies. The government offer came right after Kartini’s father accepted the marriage proposal. On the other hand, Kartini learns to rely on her own resources to educate her people. While waiting for the decision from the colonial government, Kartini had started her school at her father’s house. Kartini could still have chosen to pursue her study, but circumstances forced her to focus a bigger picture for the realization of her dreams. When the Dutch government announced that they will build a school for the daughters of the Regent and other native officials, the Regents refused to send their daughter to be educated by European people. In a letter dated April 25, 1903, Kartini writes, “If the people do not like to trust their daughters to European women, how much less would they be willing to trust them to those who were worse in their eyes, Javanese turned European” [5, p. 220]. Kartini realizes then that if she goes to the Netherlands, people will accuse her of being European Javanese, and no parents will allow their daughter to study with her. While her reasoning stems from her understanding of practical reality, it also shows her ambivalence about her identity as a colonized subject.

Kartini, who strongly opposes polygamy, ends up consenting to marry the Regent of Rembang, a widow of three wives (his principal wife just died) who was thirty years older than her. Kartini defends her choice: “With someone of the same age, I would constantly be arguing, I could not bear to be censored and a simpleton would be an abomination. I cannot be treated as an inferior and find it disgusting if someone looks up to me [5, p. 473]. Kartini’s reasoning explains the difficult position of a woman who is ahead of her time in finding an equal partner. With him, Kartini can claim that they both “the bearers of new ideas”. On the other hand, her decision is also based on altruistic reason that her future husband will support her and provide her not only with a status of a Regent wife but also with the infrastructure that she needs to build her school for girls. In a letter sent after her marriage, Kartini writes in her letter dated April 10, 1904: “Everything that was noble and beautiful in my eyes I find here realized before me. Some of the dreams that I still dream he has carried out years ago, or he dreams them now with me. We are so entirely one in thought and ideas that often I am frightened” [5, p. 238]. Kartini’s choice may be seen as a sign of feminist failure, but it can also be seen from a more optimistic point of view that she makes the meeting of minds to still realize her dreams for educating girls while still conforming to the Javanese tradition that she has learned to appreciate more.

4. Conclusions

Kartini’s position as a female colonized subject puts her in a subaltern status. Her voice was not generally heard while she was alive. Her letters were directed to very few selected people, mostly European recipients. Yet, with the publications of her letters, Kartini’s subaltern voice emerges and reaches wider audience. The letters record her mimicry and ambivalence as she returns the gaze and speak back to the colonizer in terms of what matters most for her: woman’s position in society and woman’s education.

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