

Raden Ajeng Kartini's Letters as Reflected in Social Feminism

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Abstract

Raden Ajeng Kartini is one of Indonesian heroines who lived in early 1900. She is the pioneer in woman's emancipation in Indonesia. Her brilliant and encouraging ideas for women are written in her letters. Learning from her letters is a good way to realize that women nowadays are not living in the *darkness era* but *brightness era*. Kartini has done something remarkable at that time though she *was imprisoned* because she is a woman. She wrote that she was living surrounded by thick walls during her growth from a girl to a woman. The world outside was out of her reach because the Javanese tradition forbid a girl and woman to go outside of their homes especially for royal families. Her reading help her thinking that women should not give up to fight for their freedom because women also have their rights like the right to choose their future husband, to get education and to work. She has written letters to her close friends in Netherlands and those letters are compiled into a remarkable writing containing many wise lessons especially for female. According to Barbara Ehrenrich (1976) that the socialist and feminist both have something in common that is they are critical ways of looking at the world. Both rip away popular mythology and "common sense" wisdom and force us to look at experience in a new way. Both seek to understand the world – not in terms of static balances, symmetries, etc. (as in conventional social science) – but in terms of antagonisms. They lead to conclusions which are jarring and disturbing at the same time that they are liberating. There is no way to have a Marxist or feminist outlook and remain a spectator. To understand the reality laid bare by these analyses is to move into action to change it. This article is about an analysis of Kartini's ten short writings as parts of her letters using socialist feminism.

Keywords: *socialist, feminist, social feminism*

I. Introduction

Literary works are varied and one of them is in the form of writing. The written literary works have been produced in the form of short stories, novels, poems, plays and even short writing like the wise words. Those are the result of literary works that we can read. Reading literary work is different from reading books especially text books. When we read a poem we should use our feeling but on the other hand, when we read a text book we have to use our knowledge to understand its content. The intuitions may not be helpful in reading textbook but for reading a literary work it is useful therefore it is very interpretative in nature.

This article is about an analysis of Kartini's ten writings taking from her letters written to her friends. Kartini has written many letters to her close friends in

Netherlands telling about her feeling as a woman who did not have the rights just because she is a woman. As one of Indonesian heroines, she has no rights to talk about her own voice that is her rights. She was suffered in the name of men's dominant role who took control over women's life. She thought that if only she has the right to get education like men in her era she will get freedom to realize her voices.

Kartini was born in Jepara in 21 April 1879, her father's name is Raden Mas Adipati Ario Sosroningrat and her mother's name is M.A. Ngasirah. Her mother is the first wife but she is not from a royal family therefore her father married again to a woman whose name is Raden Adjeng Woerjan (Moerjam) who is the descendant of King Madura. Kartini was the 5th child out of 11 siblings including step sisters and brothers. She became the daughter of a royal family so that she has to follow the strict tradition which tied up all her wish. She was schooling in ELS (Europese Lagere School) until she was 12 years old. Her school was close to her house therefore she did not have to walk away from her house. When she was 12 years she has to follow Javanese tradition called *pingitan* which means that she is not allowed to go to school and see the world outside. She was thinking that she has a miserable life.

She likes reading and she has read many magazines, newspapers and books like Semarang's newspaper called *De Locomotief* produced by Pieter Brooshooft, she also subscribed *leestrommel* (magazine packages for customers) for instance cultural and science magazines also Dutch female magazine named *De Hollandsche Lelie*. She has read *Max Havelaar* and Love Letter written by Multatuli, and she has read them twice in November 1901. She also read *De Stille Kraacht* (magical power) by Louis Coperus, the work of Van Eeden which is very qualified one, and the work of Augusta de Witt, feminist romance by Nyonya Goekoop de-Jong Van Beek and an anti-war romance by Berta Von Suttner, *Die Waffen Nieder* (Put off Gun). All things that she has read are written in Dutch language. Kartini's reading habit help her broaden her way of thinking and the way she viewed the world especially when she compared the life of woman in Europe and in Indonesia. Since then she wanted to improve the life of Javanese women known as *wanita pribumi* who have lower social status through education. Then she opened a girl's school in Jepara and she had nine students who were her family and relatives.

Besides reading, Kartini was also like writing letters addressed to her friends and one of them is Rosa Abendanon, a Dutch female. In her letter, Kartini wrote that she had a dream to help women to have their equality for their rights between men and women. She was quite productive in writing and some of her works have been published in *De Hollandsche Lelie*, a Dutch magazine. Her attention was not focus on women's emancipation only but also on social life. She thought that women were fighting to get their freedom, autonomy and have law equity as a part of bigger moves.

Actually Kartini has ever got a scholarship given by Dutch government because of her remarkable writings but her father rejected and asked her to marry to the Rembang regent named R.M.A.A. Singgih Djojo Adhiningrat who has already had three wives. She got married in 12 November 1903 and after that she moved to live in Rembang with her husband. Her husband knew her passion and granted her wish to open a school for female in the eastern part of the gate of Rembang Regent's office or in a building which is known as Gedung Pramuka. From her marriage she had a son who was born on 13 September 1904. Her son's name is Soesalit Djojoadhiningrat. A

few days later after giving birth on 17 September 1904 Kartini died when she was 25 years old. She was buried in Bulu Village, Rembang.

After her death, Mr J.H. Abendanon collected and compiled her letters into a book, her letters which were ever sent by R.A. Kartini to her friends in Europe. Abendanon was a Minister of Cultural, Religion and Netherland's Art. The book is entitled *Door Duisternis tot Licht* which is literally meant "*Dari Kegelapan Menuju Cahaya*" (from darkness into the light) and it was published in 1911. The book was published for five times and on the last publication there is an additional of Kartini's letter. The book was translated into Melayu language by Armijn Pane entitled "*Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang*". Her writings were translated in different languages and even famous world's leaders like Lady Roosevelt quoted one of Kartini's letters in her speech in front of the Human Rights Commission. Lady Roosevelt was the leader of the commission therefore in her speech she declared the Universe Human Rights Declaration.

II. Theoretical Framework

Feminism is developed from time to time. The historical development begun when there is a new version of Cinderella story. According to Charles E. Bressler in his book entitled *Literary Criticism* (1999: 180) he said that the central issues of feminism were produced based on the new version of Cinderella fairy tale namely:

- a. Men, either unconsciously or consciously, have oppressed women, allowing them little or no voice in the political, social, or economic issues of their society.
- b. By not giving voice to women's opinions, responses, and writings, men have therefore suppressed the female, defined what it means to be feminine and thereby devalued, devalued, and trivialized what it means to be a woman.
- c. In effect, men have made woman the 'nonsignificant other'.

Those are the issues which led to the goal of feminism that is to change the degrading view of women so that all women realize that they are not a 'nonsignificant other' but that each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man. Feminists declare hope to create a society where the male and female voices are equally valued. With reference to feminist's view that the roots of prejudice against women have long been embedded in Western culture. (p.180). In late 1700s a faint voice crying in the wilderness against such patriarchal opinions arose and began to be heard. Then in 1919, a British scholar, teacher, and early feminist Virginia Woolf declared that men have and continued to treat women as inferiors. (p.181). With the 1949 publication of French writer Simone de Beavoir's *The Second Sex*, she declared that both French and Western societies are patriarchal, controlled by males. Then by the advent of the '1960s created by Kate Millett that one's gender however is a social construct, being created by cultural ideas and norms established by society.(p.183).

Later in 1980s there was a predominant voice of feminist criticism by Elaine Showalter which stated that there are three historical phases of evolution in female writing namely: the feminine phase (1840-1880), the feminist phase (1880-1920) and the female phase (1970-present). (p.184). Culture is also included into one among four areas of investigation about female model of literary analysis. By analyzing culture forces (such as the importance and value of women's roles in a given society), critics

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who emphasizes this area of study investigate how society shapes a woman's understanding of herself, her society, and her world. (p.191)

Another opinion about socialist feminism said that if feminism broadly understood is concerned with improving the conditions of women society, feminist social theory is about developing ideas, concepts, philosophies, and other intellectual programs that meet the agenda. Feminist social theory like any theoretical tradition, is best seen as a continuing conversations of many voices and viewpoints. (Routledge). While Barbara Ehrenrich (1976) wrote that Socialist feminists, while agreeing that there is something timeless and universal about women's oppression, have insisted that it takes different forms in different settings, and that the differences are of vital importance. There is a difference between a society in which sexism is expressed in the form of female infanticide and a society in which sexism takes the form of unequal representation on the Central Committee. And the difference is worth dying for.

III. Data



In this article, I will try to analyze RA Kartini's letter but only ten writings will be the data. Those writings are written in Indonesian and they are as follows:

1. Surat Kartini kepada Stella, 18 Agustus 1899

“Bagi saya hanya ada dua macam keningratan, keningratan fikiran (fikroh) dan keningratan budi (akhlak). Tidak ada manusia yang lebih gila dan bodoh menurut persepsi saya dari pada melihat orang membanggakan asal keturunannya. Apakah berarti sudah beramal sholih orang yang bergelar macam Graaf atau Baron?... Tidaklah dapat dimengerti oleh pikiranku yang picik ini,...”

2. Surat kartini kepada Nyonya Abendon, Agustus 1900

“Kita dapat menjadi manusia sepenuhnya, tanpa berhenti menjadi wanita sepenuhnya”.

3. Surat Kartini kepada Nyonya Abendon, 4 September 1901

“Pergilah, laksanakan cita-citamu. Bekerjalah untuk hari depan. Bekerjalah untuk kebahagiaan beribu-ribu orang yang tertindas. Dibawah hukum yang tidak adil dan

paham-paham palsu tentang mana yang baik dan mana yang jahat. Pergi! Pergilah! Berjuang dan menderitalah, tetapi bekerja untuk kepentingan yang abadi”.

4. Surat Kartini kepada Prof. Anton dan Nyonya, 4 Oktober 1901

“Kami disini memohon diusahakan pengajaran dan pendidikan anak-anak wanita, bukan sekali-kali karena kami menginginkan anak-anak wanita itu menjadi saingan laki-laki dalam hidupnya. Tapi karena kami yakin akan pengaruhnya yang besar sekali bagi kaum wanita, agar wanita lebih cakap melakukan kewajibannya yang diserahkan alam (sunatullah) sendiri ke dalam tangannya : menjadi ibu, pendidik manusia yang pertama-tama”.

5. Surat Kartini kepada Nyonya Abendon, 10 Juni 1902

“Kami sekali-kali tidak hendak menjadikan murid-murid kami menjadi orang setengah Eropa atau orang Jawa yang kebarat-baratan”.

6. Surat Kartini kepada Nyonya van Kol, 21 Juli 1902

“Moga-moga kami mendapat rahmat, dapat bekerja membuat agama lain memandang agama Islam patut disukai”.

7. Surat kartini kepada Nyonya Abendanon, 12 Oktober 1902

“Dan saya menjawab, tidak ada Tuhan kecuali Allah. Kami mengatakan bahwa kami beriman kepada Allah dan kami tetap beriman kepada-Nya. Kami ingin mengabdikan kepada Allah dan bukan kepada manusia. Jika sebaliknya tentulah kami sudah memuja orang dan bukan Allah”.

8. Surat Kartini kepada Nyonya Abendanon, 27 Oktober 1902

“Sudah lewat masanya, tadinya kami mengira bahwa masyarakat Eropa itu benar-benar satu-satunya yang paling baik, tiada taranya. Maafkan kami, tetapi apakah ibu sendiri menganggap masyarakat Eropa itu sempurna? Dapatkah ibu menyangkal bahwa dibalik hal yang indah dalam masyarakat ibu terdapat banyak hal-hal yang sama sekali tidak patut sebagai peradaban?”

9. Surat Kartini kepada Nyonya Abendanon, 25 Agustus 1903

“Ya Allah, alangkah malangnya; saya akan sampai disana pada waktu Puasa-Lebaran-Tahun Baru, di saat-saat keramaian yang biasa terjadi setiap tahun sedang memuncak. Sudah saya katakana, saya tidak suka kaki saya dicium. Tidak pernah saya ijin orang berbuat demikian pada saya. Yang saya kehendaki kasih sayang dalam hati sanubari mereka, bukan tata cara lahiriah!”

10. Surat Kartini kepada Nyonya Abendanon, 12 Desember 1903

“Tidak, ia tidak mempunyai ilmu, tidak mempunyai jimat, tidak juga senjata sakti. Kalaupun rumahnya tidak ikut terbakar itu dikarenakan dia mempunyai Allah saja”

IV. Analysis

Those letters written by Kartini will be analyzed based on Socialist Feminism point of views as formulated in previous Theoretical Framework.

1. Her first letter implies that she wanted to share her voice about nobility of thinking and attitudes. She did not understand why people proud of their nobility especially that they are from royal family. Her viewpoint is that she emphasized her ideas more on the way of thinking and attitude rather than being proud of their royal family descendant. Though she belonged to one of Javanese Royal families and this condition made her suffered but she wanted to show to the world that she would not give up doing something to get equal position with men.

2. Her second letter described about herself as a Javanese woman who is bound with Javanese culture. She was envy with the life of European women but she was struggle not to stop writing about her voices as a Javanese female who is oppressed by male dominance even though she was being oppressed but she did not give up to improve her quality by reading and writing. She devoted her ideas to another Javanese women though she lived in patriarchal tradition but she would not give up to get her rights.
3. In her third letter she was brave enough to state her voice about female's voice who will not surrender by the situation and condition which imprisoned herself. She wrote how women have inequality because of they are female. Men have oppressed Javanese women and allowing them little or no voice in the political, social and economic issue of their society. Javanese society in her era did not give enough space for women to get education and make them as nonsignificant other. They were just jewels for men without having their rights to speak out about their freedom.
4. Her fourth letter is about her idea in the future. She wrote that by giving more chances for women to get education like men, it would make them become real women. Being educated women, they will have their roles as mother of their future children as well as the first teacher and educator for their future children because the role lied on their hands. It is woman's obligation to fulfil their destiny as a mother and first teacher in their family.
5. In her fifth letter she wrote about her pride as a Javanese woman who respects Javanese culture. She said that she will not change Javanese woman into Westernized Javanese woman or half European women. By getting education it will not turn Javanese women into another culture's women become Javanese they still kept on living in the Javanese culture.
6. In her sixth letter she wrote that she wanted to do something good in the name of God so that she will be blessed for what she has done in order to make other people respect her religion. This letter implied that she was a woman who was very loyal and did her obligation to pray as a Moslem woman before she did something. She did not do something because of men were superior than women based on the world's view but because she belief in God.
7. In her seventh letter she wrote that she was really believed in Allah and only to Him that she wanted to devote all what she has done. She did not want to devote herself for another human being. It implied that she as a Javanese female wished for telling her viewpoints about good deed that is aimed at respecting Allah and not for human. Because she did not want to make men as Gods though at her era men are consciously oppressed women and women were suppressed by men's dominant position.
8. In her eighth letter she showed herself as a Javanese woman who keeps on doing everything in terms of Javanese culture. She would never did something bad in her society because the society was also influenced her for not doing something against the tradition though as a Javanese woman she did have the chance to speak her voice. It implied that she could differ clearly what Javanese women should and should not do culturally.
9. Her ninth letter frankly showed her equal position as human being. In her letter she wrote that though Javanese tradition tightened herself to follow the

tradition which made lower social class people and female below her it made her disappointed. She had a viewpoint that God has created every men and women equally and it is not because men were superior than women. Her voice against the inequality which happened in the world as a result of patriarchal tradition.

10. In her tenth letter she wrote about her belief in her God that though she has been through the worst situation, God will save her. It also implied that she though she was living surrounded by big walls which made her lose her freedom to see the world outside, but she had her brain to help her thinking of the world. Her viewpoint about the world is that she would not feel as an inferior Javanese women even men treated her in such a way. She still had power through her letter to encourage women to keep doing something in order to get their freedom.

V. Conclusion

RA Kartini's letters are very impressive in the content. Women who are living in this modern era will learn many valuable lessons from her letters. She did what she had to do though Javanese culture at that time imprisoned her body but her soul was free. Living in the patriarchal tradition where men oppressed women because they are male and female, by their respective gender, but Kartini would not give up to get women's rights. Women were forbidden to get education and did not have space to share their ideas, but Kartini fought for this kind of tradition. She kept reading and writing to share her ideas and voices until she died. Her letters proved that she is the heroine who were fighting for women's emancipation so that women will be enlightened by getting proper education.

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