DECOLONISING THE MYTH OF KARTINI

Saut Situmorang

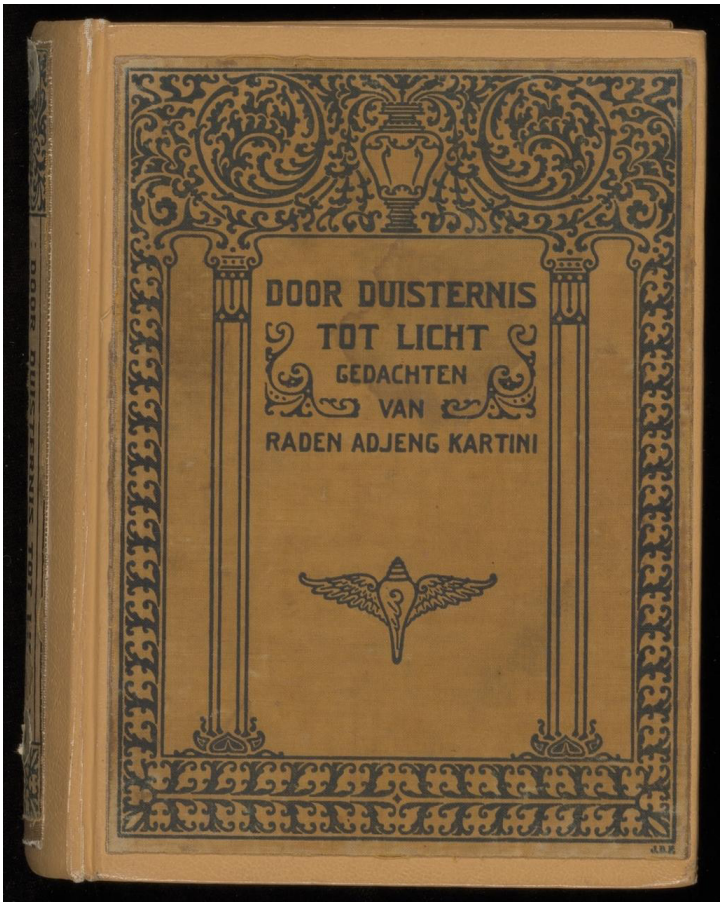

FIGURE 1
Book cover of *Door Duisternis tot Licht: Gedachten van Raden Ajeng Kartini*, G. C. T. Van Dorp & Co, 1911 (1st edition).

Poet and critic Saut Situmorang offers an insight into the way in which 'imperialist feminism' functions by tracing the ways in which Raden Ajeng Kartini's legacy was carefully crafted. As journalist and author Fitria Jelyta has stated 'The Dutch tend to glorify historical figures that are 'good'. What does that mean, when they are 'good'? When they are collaborative, when they are like Raden Ajeng Kartini'. But even outside of the mainstream glorification, in the context of 'decolonizing the university' activists currently urge to rename the colonial VOC-room at the University of Amsterdam to 'Kartini Room'. What is left of Kartini's legacy when we examine it critically in the context of the civilising project of the 'Ethical Policy'?

The history of Indonesia knows many female fighters who sacrificed their lives in the fight against Dutch colonialism. Cut Nyak Din from Aceh (in the North of Sumatra), Lopian Boru Sinambela from the Batak Land (North-Sumatra), and Martha Christina Tiahahu from the Moluccas (in the East of Indonesia) are just a few examples. Prominent in the struggle for women's rights and education, Dewi Sartika built a school for girls in Sunda Land (West-Java) in 1904. Ruhana Kuddus from Minangkabau (West-Sumatra), the first female journalist in Indonesia, also founded a school for girls in 1911.[1] But none of these women became quite as famous as Raden Ajeng Kartini,[2] who is internationally celebrated as the most iconic Indonesian feminist figure, even in the country of the former colonisers: the Netherlands. After Anne Frank, Kartini is the best-known Dutch-language author in the world.[3] The question is: why did she receive this acclaim while many other Indonesian heroines remain unknown outside of Indonesia? Was it her work alone that made her stand out? Through reflecting on the political and historical context of Kartini's writing, her status, and her connections, this essay will dissect her 'feminism' in relation to its time, namely the time of the 'Ethical period', and will examine how the myth-making of Kartini's legacy continues today.

Embraced by the Colonial Elite

Already during her lifetime, Dutch people in high places took an interest in Kartini. Among these were Jacques Abendanon, the Director of Education, Religion, and Industry – the Dutch colonial equivalent to a Minister of Education – and his wife, Rosa Abendanon-Mandri. The powerful couple considered Kartini a friend during her short life. Perhaps most decisive for her fame was Jacques Abendanon's publication of an edited selection of her letters in 1911, seven years after her death, entitled: *Door Duisternis tot Licht: Gedachten over and voor het Javaansche Volk (Through Darkness to Light: Thoughts About and For the Javanese People).* Abendanon's prominent political position certainly helped the spreading of Kartini's name and work among the colonial elites of that time; he gave her work a legitimacy that these elites otherwise would likely not have perceived. The book received considerable attention and was translated into numerous languages, including Arabic, Sundanese, Javanese, Japanese, Russian, and French. Perhaps most influential was the English translation under the title *Letters of a Javanese Princess* in 1920.[4]

Was the rise of Kartini's star an inevitable or natural process? The involvement of political figures in the dissemination of her work helped build her status as an iconic figure. Those who published and translated her works inevitably had agendas of their own, so to understand her trajectory, we must ask: what were the interests of the people who made her world-famous?

1 See also the text 'Craft(wo)manship' by Raistiwar Pratama in this essay series.

2 Raden Ajeng Kartini, popularly known as Kartini (without the Javanese aristocratic title of Raden Ajeng), was born on 21 April, 1879, in Jepara (Central Java) into a family of eleven children. She was the second-oldest daughter of the Javanese regent Raden Mas Adipati Ario Samingun Sosroningrat, who had received Western education. Her father was considered sufficiently 'modern' as he broke with Javanese tradition by allowing Kartini and her sisters to attend a European school. Her mother was Sosroningrat's secondary wife and the daughter of an influential religious scholar in Jepara. Following local customs, Kartini was forced to spend four years in solitary confinement before she entered an arranged marriage with Raden Mas Ario Djojo Adiningrat. He was the regent of Rembang (Central-Java) and a Dutch-educated widower who already had twelve children at the time, and who had spent some years in the Netherlands before. Kartini became his fourth wife, with a 26-year age difference between them. Both her father and her husband were seen as progressive Javanese leaders. On September 17, 1904, Kartini died at age twenty-five just a few days after giving birth to her only son.

3 J. Gelman Taylor, 'Afterword', in: P. Bijl and G. V. S. Chin (eds), *Appropriating Kartini: Colonial, National and Transnational Memories of an Indonesian Icon*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020, p. 175.

4 Bijl and Chin, p. 1.

Notably, Abendanon played a major role in implementing the Dutch government's Ethical Policy programme. This policy, which existed from 1901 until the Japanese occupation in 1942, aimed to improve the welfare of the indigenous people of Indonesia who had suffered under Dutch colonial rule.[5] As a high-ranking Dutch colonial official, Jacques Abendanon's presentation of Kartini as a feminist and an educator was very influential for her image. He carefully selected and edited Kartini's letters, highlighting the parts where she praised the success of the Dutch colonial project and, crucially, removing the parts where she criticised the Dutch colonial rule. The metaphor that Abendanon chose from her writings as the title of the book, *Door Duisternis tot Licht (Through Darkness to Light)* was meaningful, too. He clearly wanted to convince the readership that a Javanese woman, for so long living in darkness (i.e. her patriarchal indigenous Javanese culture) was now able to reach the light (through European 'civilisation'), and that this possibility was the result of Dutch intervention. As such, Kartini's letters were used as an example of the Dutch self-proclaimed success of the Ethical Policy.[6]

The first English translation published in 1920 was based on Abendanon's book and did not undergo heavy editorial alteration except for the censoring of Kartini's criticism of European colonialism and paternalism. The English translator Agnes Louise Symmers defended her choice by stating that she merely wanted to portray Kartini as a 'modern girl' who was 'in love!' The construction of Kartini's image as a feminist role model in the Western world reached a peak in 1960 when UNESCO published a French edition of Abendanon's book with a foreword by orientalist Louis Massignon. Soon after came a reprint of the English translation in 1964, which even included a foreword by Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of former US president Franklin D. Roosevelt.[7]

White people's fascination for Kartini, which made her particularly famous in the West, did not end there. In 1987, one year after the Abendanon family archive was released, archivist and historian Frits Jacquet published another selection of Kartini's letters, which contained more of her correspondence with the Abendanon couple.[8] In 2014, Australian historian Joost Coté published the 'complete writings' of Kartini in an English translation, a volume of 900 pages.[9] In a review of the book, Dutch scholar Paul Bijl compares Kartini to such anticolonial thinkers as W. E. B. Dubois and Frantz Fanon.[10] In 2020, Bijl, together with Malaysian scholar Grace V. S. Chin, edited the essay collection *Appropriating Kartini: Colonial, National and Transnational Memories of an Indonesian Icon.*

Kartini appears as a popular icon outside of historical literature; we can see it in other elements of society. In the Netherlands, at least eight street names[11] and two prizes are named after her.[12] The Dutch Royal Institute for Linguistics, Geography and Ethnology (KITLV) dedicated a special collection to her.[13] Last

5 See also the essay 'Occupation as requirement for 'development', the emergence of Dutch Ethical Imperialism in Indonesia' by Rosa te Velde this essay series.

6 In 1922, at the request of Abendanon himself, the first Malay/Indonesian translation was published by the colonial publishing agency Balai Pustaka under a comparable title: *Habis gelap terbitlah terang (When Darkness Ends, Light Appears).*

7 Bijl & Chin, p. 2.

8 F. G. P. Jacquet, *Brieven aan mevrouw R.M. Abendanon-Mandri en haar echtgenoot*, Dordrecht, Foris Publications, 1987.

9 J. Coté, *Kartini: The Complete Writings 1898-1904*, Melbourne, Monash University, 2021.

10 P. Bijl, 'Kartini: The Complete Writings 1898-1904, Written by Kartini', in: *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 172: 4 (2016), pp. 554-555.

11 L. Nuberg and F. Sukmana, *De mooiste brieven van Kartini*, De Geus, 2025, p. 20.

12 P. Bijl, 'Kartini and the Politics of European Multiculturalism', in: Bijl & Chin, *Appropriating Kartini*, pp. 159-160.

13 See: https://collectionguides.universiteitleiden.nl/resources/ubl324.

April, a discussion at the University of Amsterdam was held with the intention of renaming the VOC-room to 'Kartini Room' in the context of decolonizing the university.[14] And most recently, Dutch historian Lara Nuberg and Indonesian historian Feba Sukmana published *De mooiste brieven van Kartini (The Most Beautiful Letters of Kartini) in Dutch*.[15] They mention the remarkable fact that the Dutch Royal Family made the first donation to the Kartini Fund in 1913, but do not draw any conclusion from it. Instead, they present her as an inspiring woman with anticolonial views that were never recognised as such. They do not seem interested in knowing the reason why Dutch colonisers, together with other Europeans, chose Kartini in particular as their heroine.[16]

Notably, committed anti-colonial thinkers like Dubois and Fanon[17] were never appropriated, celebrated, and idealised by the colonial elite in the same way the Dutch appropriated Kartini. While Abendanon's publication may have been a careful selection that excluded her criticism of Dutch colonial rule, the fact that she also praised her Dutch masters shows that even though criticism was a part of her analysis, her standpoint was not fundamentally anti-colonial. After all, wishing the colonisers to better themselves is not the same as working on the destruction of the system. It is one thing to acknowledge that Kartini has been appropriated, as the title of the essay collection of Bijl and Chin suggests, but it is another thing to understand why.

FIGURE 2
Kartini and her sisters Roekmini, Kartinah and Soemarti as teachers, Jepara, Jawa, year unknown. Leiden University Libraries, KITLV 503280.

Linguistic Imperialism

The letters that Kartini wrote in Dutch are commonly used to support the claim that she was a feminist and a 'modern girl'. From a colonial perspective, the ability to speak and write in the language of the coloniser was a symbol

14 M. van der Vlist, 'Can UvA really use the name Kartini Room? This symposium gives UvA the benefit of the doubt', in: *Folia*, 23 April 2025. Accessed through: https://www.folia.nl/en/actueel/166182/can-uva-really-use-the-name-kartini-room-this-symposium-gives-uva-the-benefit-of-the-doubt.

15 Nuberg & Sukmana, *De mooiste brieven*.

16 In Indonesia itself, the construction of the myth around Kartini was greatly influenced by two books, namely *Just Call Me Kartini* (1962) by Indonesia's most famous novelist Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and *Kartini, A Biography* (1977) by Sitisoemandari Soeroto. American anthropologist Danilyn Rutherford, in her essay 'Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People' (1993), compared the two books, stating that: 'Both writers claim Kartini for the Indonesian people as a pioneer of their yet-to-be-discovered nation. Both argue that Kartini's colonial patrons obscured the true power of her thought.' Danilyn Rutherford, 'Unpacking a National Heroine: Two Kartinis and Their People', in: Bijl & Chin, *Appropriating Kartini: Colonial, National and Transnational Memories of an Indonesian Icon*, p. 105.

17 In the case of Fanon, for instance, it would have been very difficult for French ethical imperialists to make a colonial-friendly version of his writings. Whether based on a careful selection or not, his thought was too fundamentally critical of colonialism to be portrayed otherwise. Actually, as he deconstructed the effect of the European 'civilising mission' on colonised people, Kartini could have served as an illustration of the typical colonised mind that Fanon described in his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks*.

of modernity and progress. The Scottish linguist Robert Phillipson coined the term 'linguistic imperialism',[18] which he defined as:

> [...] a form of linguicism, a favouring of one language over others in ways that parallel societal structuring through racism, sexism and class. It is ideological: beliefs, attitudes and imagery glorify the dominant language, stigmatise others, and rationalise the linguistic hierarchy; the dominance is hegemonic, it is internalised and naturalised as being 'normal'. [...] In essence it is about exploitation, injustice, inequality and hierarchy that privileges those able to use the dominant language.[19]

Kartini's mastery of the Dutch language opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed. It is through her language skills that she first became known among the colonial Dutch elite. They invited her to events, of which many were organised by the Dutch colonial regime, and they even offered her the opportunity to continue her education in the Netherlands. There are no records of Kartini flinching at any of this, in fact she openly glorified the dominance of the Dutch language, which she associated with the superiority of Dutch culture compared to her own language and culture. In her letter to Stella Zeehandelaar, a well-educated Dutch feminist and socialist, Kartini wrote on November 6, 1899:

> Oh, Stella, can you imagine what it is like to want something terribly and to recognise yourself powerless to achieve it! I have no doubt that if he were able to, Father would not have hesitated to send us to your cold and far-off country. [...] Do you now see why I so long to master your beautiful language? No, do not try to fool me. I feel my inadequacy only too clearly. If I had full command of the Dutch language then my future would be guaranteed.[20]

Dark versus the Light

Kartini went much further than glorifying Dutch culture; she also demeaned her own Javanese origin using childish and ahistorical comparisons. Her metaphorical use of 'darkness' and 'light' is very dominant in her letters. Islam was also not spared from her insults,[21] which today would certainly be considered Islamophobic:

> I am a Muslim only because my ancestors were. How can I love my teachings if I do not know them, may not know them? The Koran is too holy to be translated, no matter what the language. Here nobody knows Arabic. People here are taught to read from the Koran but what is read is not understood. I think it is ridiculous – teaching someone to read without understanding what is read. It is as though you taught me to read an English book completely by heart without explaining a single word to me.[22]

18 R. Phillipson, 'Imperialism and Colonialism' in: *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*, edited by Bernard Spolsky, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 203-225.

19 Phillipson, p. 214.

20 Coté, p. 81.

21 With Dr. Nicolaus Adriani, a Dutch missionary linguist, Kartini exchanged most letters discussing religion. He encouraged her criticism of Islam. Joost Coté notes that she must have been aware of the then-current references to 'fanatical Islam' in European circles. Both Adriani and Abendanon were personally engaged in a strategy to obstruct the spread of Islam in Central Sulawesi. Kartini was very positive about the Dutch Christian mission: 'We indeed have much sympathy for the work of the Christian mission in the Netherlands Indies and we are interested in everything concerning that work, the efforts and the lives of those noble of heart who station themselves in the most remote regions, wildernesses, far removed from their own country.' See: Coté, p. 52 and p. 191.

22 Coté, p. 84.

In Kartini's first letter to Zeehandelaar, she opened with:

> I have so longed to make the acquaintance of a 'modern girl' – the proud, independent girl whom I admire so much; who walks through life with confidence, is cheerful and in high spirits, full of enthusiasm and commitment; working not just for her own benefit and happiness alone but also offering herself to the wider society, working for the good of her fellow human beings. I am burning with excitement about this new era and – yes – I can say that even though I will not experience it in the Indies, as regards my thoughts and feelings, I am not part of today's Indies but completely share those of my progressive white sisters in the far-off West.[23]

How excited Kartini was to be part of the 'new era' happening in the 'far-off West'! In the same letter, she continued:

> Oh, you can't know what it is like to love this present, this new age – your age – with heart and soul, yet, at the same time, be still bound, hand and foot, chained to the laws, practices and customs of one's land from which it is impossible to escape. And the practices and customs of our country are contrary to those which I would dearly like to see introduced into our society. Day and night I ponder on the means by which it might yet be possible to escape the strict traditions and customs of my country, and yet....[24]

Oh, how terrible Kartini's native country was! How different from the 'far-off West' and its 'new era'! In her view, the practices and customs of her country were completely contrary to Western values, which she so hoped to see introduced into her own society. She openly proclaimed her belief that Indonesia could only be changed by 'the voices from outside, from the civilised, reformed Europe', leaving little to be imagined in terms of her opinions on colonial intervention.[25] Completely in line with the ideals of those implementing the Dutch colonial regimes' Ethical Policy, Kartini believed that 'progress' could only be achieved by opening up to 'guests from far across the sea: that is, Western culture'. She praised her grandfather, Prince Ario Condronegoro of Demak, who was a great proponent of progress, because: 'all his children received only a European education'.[26] In the same letter, Kartini stated:

> We girls, chained as we still are to the old practices and customs, were only able to benefit slightly from this progress as regards education. It had already been a great offence against the morals and customs of my country for us girls to go out and be educated and therefore we had to go out of our house every day to attend school. You see, the adat of our country strongly forbids young girls to go outside their home. We were not allowed to go anywhere else – and the only educational institution with which our little town is blessed is just an ordinary public elementary school for Europeans.[27]

23 Coté, p. 67.
24 Coté.
25 Coté, p. 68.
26 Coté, p. 68.
27 Coté, p. 69.

Under the deadly constraints of Javanese local customs, the *adat*, Kartini was happy that her small town was 'blessed' with a European school. During the 'terrible, dark period' of four years, when tradition required her to stay at home as an unmarried girl, she was relieved that she:

> [...] was not denied the reading of Dutch books or correspondence with Dutch friends. These were the only highlights in that terrible, dark period. They were everything to me – without them I may have died, or worse still: my soul, my spirit would have died.[28]

What she wrote in her early letters to Zeehandelaar is typical of all her letters addressed to several important Dutch people, including the Abendanons, Dr. Nicolaus Adriani (a Dutch missionary linguist), Marie Ovink-Soer (wife of Jepara's assistant resident), as well as Nellie van Kol (wife of Henri van Kol, the leader of the Dutch Social Democratic Workers' Party).

In a public memorandum dated 'Jepara, January 1903' and entitled *Give the Javanese Education!*, Kartini wrote about how important Dutch school education was for native Javanese women. However, she was only talking about the women from her own class, the aristocracy:

> While it may be absolutely impossible to provide an entire population of 27 million people with education immediately, it would not be impossible to begin by providing education to the upper layers of that population and developing it in such a way that they could be of benefit to those below them. The people are very attached to their nobility; what emanates from them finds ready acceptance amongst them.[29]

So, for Kartini, 'the upper layers of the population' were key to the development of the rest of colonial society:

> Native society has a great need for an improvement of its moral foundations, without which the measures taken by the Government, however well intended they may be, will, if not totally fail, at best have only minimal results. Therefore the moral basis of Native society must be improved; once a decent moral base has been established, then the seeds of progress can be successfully cultivated.[30]

In her reasoning, the native people were experiencing an acute moral crisis, and it was the duty of the Dutch colonial regime to fix it. But how could she expect something good of the foreign invaders that had occupied her land for centuries? Obviously, indigenous Indonesians were suffering under Dutch rule, but to what extent was the crisis a moral one? And what about the morality of the coloniser? Apparently, it did not cross her mind that the Dutch colonial system of oppression was the actual *cause* of so many problems – instead, Kartini hoped that the Dutch would save her people by, among other means, providing education for women:

28 Coté, p. 69.
29 Coté, Kartini, p. 810.
30 Coté, Kartini, p. 811.

> Really, an important factor in the uplifting of the population will be the progress of the Javanese woman! Therefore it should be the first task of the Government to raise the moral awareness of the Javanese woman, to educate her, to instruct her, to make of her a capable, wise mother and nurturer![31]

But, she added:

> It is not the intention to teach the Dutch language to the entire Javanese people: what use would the agricultural labourer, the woodcutter, the grass cutter, etc., have for Dutch? It should be taught only to those elements of society who have an aptitude for, and are suitable for, learning Dutch.[32]

Kartini described the mastery of Dutch language as the key that could unlock 'the treasure houses of Western civilisation and knowledge', and she believed that these treasures were only meaningful to those with an interest in it, namely Javanese nobility like herself.

FIGURE 3
Kartini with her husband Raden Adipati Djojoadiningrat, regent of Rembang, 1903. Photo by Tee Han Sioe. Leiden University Library, KITLV 15470.

Malaysian scholar Grace V. S. Chin, in her chapter in the essay collection *Appropriating Kartini* (2020), unpacks the limitations of Kartini's feminism as it roots for aristocratic women like herself while remaining silent on the issues facing women of the lower classes. In her essay, Chin convincingly deconstructs the popular narrative of Kartini's feminist progressiveness:

> On the one hand, there is her impassioned cry for women's rights to

31 Coté, Kartini, p. 812.
32 Coté, Kartini, p. 815.

> education and work as well as the eradication of feudal customs like polygamy and arranged marriage, but on the other hand, there is her complicit silence on the plight of lower-class women that include the *selir*.[33] Her vision of the educated *priyayi* woman bringing light to the masses as both mother and educator of Java's future leaders not only implicitly excluded lower-class women by conforming to the hierarchies of class, rank and privilege, but it also complicated the celebrated trope of her progressive feminism.[34]

Not only did Kartini ignore the plight of women of the lower classes, she also believed that it was necessary for education to benefit the colonial regime itself. In reference to her grandfather Condronegoro, the Prince of Demak, whose children were allowed to attend a European school, she wrote that the Dutch profited directly from this decision because four of his sons and two grandsons had become successful regents and received praise from their Dutch masters. Nowhere does Kartini question this arrangement; her only wish was that aristocratic women would receive education too:

> If the nobility knew that the Government desired that its daughters be more highly cultured then, initially, it may not send its daughters from personal conviction, but it would nevertheless send them of their own volition. The nobility must be encouraged in this direction. What does it matter with what motives their daughters are sent to school? The issue is that they are sent to school![35]

She also argued that the mothers of aristocratic children should be educated, because: 'it is from the home in particular that moral guidance must come'. Kartini believed that at that point in time, the aristocrat's wife – the mother – was totally unprepared for this guiding role.[36] Therefore she thought that by encouraging aristocratic leaders to educate their daughters, their esteem would no longer be defined by birthright alone:

> A good background must be coupled with qualifications if one is to be considered for high office. This will act as a stimulus to high-born and high-placed parents to educate their children as well as possible.[37]

This confirms that, in Kartini's mind, native aristocratic women had to be sent to European schools for the benefit of the Javanese nobility in particular, who were, after all, the representatives of the Dutch colonial regime on Java. Just how colonial-minded she actually was can be read at the end of the public memorandum, where she underlines what she believed was the ultimate purpose of educating aristocratic women and Indonesians at large:

> Therefore, the Netherlands should make it possible for the sons and daughters of Java to qualify themselves which would enable them to raise their people to a higher level of spiritual development and greater

33 *Selir* is the Javanese word for 'secondary wife'. Kartini's mother was a 'selir', something she never mentioned in her letters to Zeehandelaar.
34 G. V. S. Chin, 'Ambivalent Narration: Kartini's Silence and the Other Woman', in: Bijl and V. S. Chin, *Appropriating Kartini*, 2020, p. 95.
35 Coté, *Kartini*, 2021, p. 814.
36 Coté, Kartini, 2021, p. 814.
37 Coté, Kartini, 2021, p. 821.

flowering – to the honour and glory of the Netherlands.[38]

White Colonial Feminism

Kartini's feminism is an example of what is called colonial or imperialist feminism, an ideology that uses feminist rhetoric to justify European imperialism. This kind of 'feminism' is more damaging than useful because it perpetuates inaccurate and demeaning stereotypes about the status of women in the Global South, while supporting goals that harm rather than defend all women. In the late nineteenth century, when Europeans openly ruled large populations of non-white and non-Western people, they justified their domination with the so-called 'civilising mission'. The argument was that women in these nations were oppressed by the native male population due to sexist, patriarchal ideologies as necessitated by local cultural traditions. European rule, they claimed, would liberate these women from the oppression of their male counterparts.[39]

Edward Said, the famous Palestinian-American professor of literature, taught us that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Western colonialists came up with 'Orientalism' as a new body of ideas that justified colonialism. The colonisers created the concept of the 'Far East' and its accompanying population in order to promote the idea that the West, in opposition, was superior. The East, on the contrary, was positioned as a backwards realm that had to be civilised. Eastern women, and especially Muslim women, were a central part of the Orientalist framework. The Indian-American scholar Deepa Kumar describes colonial feminism as:

> [...] based on the appropriation of women's rights in the service of empire. Birthed in the nineteenth century in the context of European colonialism, it rests on the construction of a barbaric, misogynistic 'Muslim world' that must be civilized by a liberal, enlightened West; a rhetoric also known as gendered Orientalism.[40]

In another essay she writes:

> Many scholars have shown that Muslim women were seen either as sex objects in a fantasy world of the harem, or as downtrodden victims who were imprisoned, secluded, shrouded, and treated as the slaves of men. In both constructions, it fell upon various colonial officials and overlords to supposedly rescue these women.[41]

It is clear that Dutch colonisers in Indonesia were influenced by Orientalism. In 1914, the Dutch *Mindere Welvaart Commissie* (The Lesser Welfare Committee) published a report entitled 'De Verheffing van de Inlandsche Vrouw' ('The Elevation of the Native Woman') that investigated how indigenous women could be saved from polygamy and child marriage. In this way, imperial feminism functioned as a tool of the Ethical Policy, which can be understood as the Dutch

38 Coté, Kartini, 2021, p. 825.
39 V. Amos and P. Parmar, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism,' *Feminist Review,* No 17, July 1984, p. 3-19.
40 D. Kumar, 'Imperialist Feminism and Liberalism', *openDemocracy*, November 6, 2014. See: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/imperialist-feminism-and-liberalism/.
41 D. Kumar, 'Imperialist Feminism', *International Socialist Review*, issue 102, Fall 2016. See: https://isreview.org/issue/102/imperialist-feminism/.

version of the ‘civilising mission’ and the ‘White Man’s Burden’.[42]

Kumar argues that Western imperial feminism is characterised by its racist, patronising attitude towards women of colour who are not seen as allies but rather as victims in need of rescue.[43] Occasionally, Kartini wrote cynically about her encounters with European women.[44] For example, when she reflected on her contribution to the Women’s Exhibition in the Hague, she noted that ‘it didn’t end well’, but she did not disclose the details.[45]

It is telling that Nuberg and Sukmana propose Kartini as an example of an intersectional feminist while not recognizing that her thought aligned with the Dutch colonial agenda: ‘Kartini considered all people equal and saw mechanisms of oppression in the different layers of Javanese colonial society.’[46] Although many of her writings indicate otherwise, they present her as class conscious: ‘Kartini already understood how abuse of power and inequality look in different facets of a society: from rich to poor, from white to brown, from man to woman, from nobility to worker, from one religion to another.’

It is quite confusing how Nuberg and Sukmana see in Kartini an example of intersectional feminism while not recognising why she aligned with the Dutch colonial agenda. As explained, Kartini’s case does not teach us about intersectionality but rather about imperial feminism. The difference between these concepts is meaningful and important. Intersectional feminism is concerned with how different forms of discrimination, such as sexism, racism, and classism, can overlap and intersect, creating unique individual experiences of oppression.[47] Imperial feminism describes the practices in which feminism is used to further imperialist agendas, resulting in policies that harm the lives and well-being of women in colonised nations. To this day, the colonial powers in the world make use of imperial feminism by imposing Western cultural norms on non-Western societies in the name of Western values.[48]

Conclusion

Most Indonesian heroines, like the Acehnese resistance fighter Cut Nyak Din and her many comrades, are not celebrated internationally, and the reason is that they were truly anti-colonial. They gave their lives in the bloody struggle against Dutch oppression, while the ‘Javanese Princess’ Raden Ajeng Kartini benefited from it.

The promotion of Kartini as a brilliant anti-colonial thinker, equalling Frantz Fanon, is a myth. The Dutch hyperfocus on her legacy can be explained by the colonial ideas that she produced. Despite her occasional criticism of Dutch rule, she only wanted reform under Dutch leadership. Her mind was so indoctrinated by colonialism that she openly expressed her admiration for European ‘civilisation’, and expected her salvation from it. Nothing in her

42 'The White Man's Burden' (1899) is the title of a poem by the British poet Rudyard Kipling. He defended the US occupation of the Philippines by presenting colonial conquests as elements of a civilising mission, based on the idea of the white men's superiority over the colonised masses. Since white women also took part in the civilising mission, this is commonly referred to as the 'White Woman's Burden'.

43 Kumar, 2014.

44 See for example 'From a Forgotten Corner', where Kartini mocks white womens' fears of being in the sun and getting 'the colour of a native', or their anxiety of 'those dirty fingers of those little monkeys', Coté, Kartini, p. 772.

45 Grever & Waaldijk, *Feministische Openbaarheid: De Nationale Tentoonstelling van vrouwenarbeid in 1898*, 1998, p. 190.

46 Nuberg and Sukmana, 2025.

47 This framework was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, who coined the term 'intersectionality' to highlight how interlocking systems of power affect those who are most marginalised in society.

48 Take for instance the widespread idea that hijab-wearing women are all oppressed and in need of white Western saviours. Until today, white western feminists continue to promote the idea of the 'veil' as a symbol of oppression, advocating for its removal, without understanding its cultural and religious significance in many societies. See: H. Hakeem, 'Imperial Feminism', *The News International*, April 14, 2023. See: https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1060403-imperial-feminism.

writings indicates that she thought even once about the idea of her people's independence from the Dutch. Instead, she strongly believed that her people could advance intellectually through Dutch school education, which would in turn benefit the Dutch colonial regime. This is the central thought that she produced through her work, as can be read in most of her letters and other writings. Not only did Kartini hold the classist prejudice that what would benefit the upper class would eventually 'trickle down' to lower classes,[49] she was also fully indoctrinated by linguistic imperialism, feeling a proud superiority because of her Dutch language skills. The fact that her letters were published by high-ranking Dutch officials for the benefit of the Dutch Ethical Policy programme shows clearly just how useful she was for them; her imperial feminism proven in the end to be another colonial tool.

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49 See also: F. Gouda, 'Teaching Indonesian Girls in Java and Bali, 1900-1942: Dutch progressives, the infatuation with 'Oriental' refinement, and 'Western' ideas about proper womanhood', in: *Women's History Review* 4:1, 1995.