

Research Article

Relational Dialectics of Women's Identity in the Colonial Era in RA Kartini's Letters

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the construction of women's identity through a relational dialectics approach implied in the letters of RA Kartini. With the context of Dutch colonialism and the dominance of Javanese patriarchal culture, the letters became an arena of discourse where Kartini constructed her identity as a modern Javanese woman. This research uses library methods on Kartini's correspondence in the book *Door Duisternis tot Licht (Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang)* and relevant archives. The analysis results show that Kartini not only fought for women's emancipation but also deconstructed the passive identity imposed on indigenous women by crafting a strong narrative of cultural resistance. The dialectic between Western values and local traditions creates complexity in her narrative of identity as a colonial woman.

Keywords: RA Kartini; Women's Identity; Colonialism; Relational Dialectics; Emancipation; Javanese Culture;

1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a country that adheres to a democratic system where all citizens have the freedom to express opinions, ideas, and thoughts, and even have the right and participation in politics and culture. In the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Article 28E, paragraph 3 states that every person has the right to freedom of association, assembly, and expression (Rizky Pratama Putra Karo Karo, 2023). The freedom referred to is the right to play an important role and exercise rights as citizens without distinction based on culture, gender, religion, and so on. However, this freedom could not be felt by women in Java during the colonial era due to the limitations imposed as part of the local cultural identity, as written in 1900 by RA Kartini (1879-1904), who was one of the observers and writers of Javanese culture. "We Javanese women are especially required to be obedient and submissive." We must be like clay that can be shaped at will. Kartini used the word 'we': with the meaning that her concern and attention towards Javanese culture were significant (Carey, Peter, 2024)

Raden Ajeng Kartini was a pioneer of gender equality between men and women, which is now referred to as emancipation in Indonesia. RA Kartini had an objective perspective on education and women's freedom during the colonial era. Women were considered to have roles only within the household but were not allowed to participate in the broader society. Traditions such as managing the household, educating, and raising children have become long-standing customs that women are obligated to perform. From the existence of this backward tradition, which ultimately makes women feel they do not have the same rights as men. In the end, this injustice sparked the thoughts of a Javanese woman who also felt the suffering and shackles of that era, namely R.A. Kartini. Kartini, who was intelligent and had critical thinking, felt restricted in all aspects, especially in terms of education. R.A. Kartini believed that education is the key for women to achieve freedom and equality in society. R.A. Kartini's views on education can be explained by several points, as follows: (1) women as the first educators, (2) education and teaching for women, (3) education without discrimination, (4) patriarchal culture (Samijo et al., 2024). One of the factors that led Kartini to have thoughts about women's education was she once experienced discrimination due to the rule that indigenous people were not allowed to get good grades and more than white children, women had to stop pursuing education due to customs and existing culture. Kartini had friends and they

exchanged letters. That's why Kartini has a broad and open-minded perspective in advocating for women's educational rights (Megawati, 2018)

There are several complaints and desires of Kartini in the dialectical process that the researcher has collected and processed from the sources. In her letters, RA Kartini wrote 30 letters containing complaints, desires, and criticisms about the condition of women during the colonial era, which were tied to customs and traditions. However, the researcher selected 6 letters that relate to the process of relational dialectics between desires and complaints, as well as the tensions that occurred in that era.

No	Date And Recipient	Message Contents
1	May 25, 1899 for Stella Zeehandelar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kartini's desire to live like Western women who experience freedom. ▪ Kartini's criticism of Javanese customs that do not allow education for girls. ▪ Kartini's story of being confined for 4 years.
2	August 23 1900 for Stella Zeehandelar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The spirit of Kartini who wants to progress and wants liberate themselves from existing customs and move to ignite the spirit of women to change injustice. ▪ Kartini's lament to Javanese customs that do not allow daughters to have dreams, dreams that can be dreamed by a girl is to get married. ▪ Kartini's criticism that women will not obtain happiness if men polygamy.
3	12 1900 January for Stella Zeehandelar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kartini wanted education for Bumiputera women. ▪ There is nothing that a child should aspire to except marriage girls except for marriage. ▪ Kartini's criticism of parental arranged marriages with a man who is already married and child.
4	August 1901 mrs. Van Kol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kartini's letter to Mrs. Ovink regarding her desire and her younger siblings' desire to study in Europe with government funding from the government. ▪ R.A Kartini's dream when she finished school in Europe would establish a special school for girls in the Indies ▪ Kartini demanded equality between men and women not to oppose them but rather to become valuable helpers and assistants for men.
5	January 25 1903 for Mr. J.H Abendanon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kartini's dream of studying in The Netherlands did not materialize because her father was ill. ▪ The plan of Mr. Abendanon and Kartini to want to build a school for girls.
6	April 25, 1903 for Stella Zeehandelar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Kartini's dream of going to the Netherlands did not realize. ▪ Kartini submitted to the Dutch East Indies government want to continue the School of Health or Teachers and establishing schools for the indigenous people.

Source: (Novasari et al., 2022) processed by researchers

"Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang," Kartini voiced the importance of education and freedom of thought for women. In the colonial era, this idea was very revolutionary, especially for a Javanese noblewoman living in a patriarchal feudal system. However, more than a century after her lifetime, Indonesian women still face various modern dilemmas that reflect Kartini's struggle is not yet fully over. Kartini fought for women's right to receive the same education as men. She believed that women have an important role not only in the household but also in the wider society. In her letters, Kartini criticized the patriarchal culture that placed women as second-class citizens and voiced the importance of social change through education and equality. Through her letters to her Dutch friends, Kartini expressed her inner struggles, social critiques, and hopes for the change in the fate of indigenous women. The idea that has great potential to improve women's welfare certainly cannot be easily fulfilled. Indonesia, under the rule of the colonial government, certainly could not freely obtain adequate educational rights. Kartini's efforts certainly did not go unnoticed; as one of her responses, she established the Girls' School (1912), with subjects including writing, reading, sewing, knitting, cooking, and other skill enhancements (Wahyuni, 2020).

Kartini's letters were not merely expressions of her desires but contained dreams she had to pursue, hoping that this struggle would bear fruit even if it could only be conveyed through writing. There is a process of Kartini forming her gender identity through language and writing. In her letters, the relational dialectic is also evident. Wherein in his thoughts there are elements that have different cultures between tradition and modernity, in addition to obedience or rebellion against culture and customs accompanied by the limitations of local culture with the increasingly widespread influence of the West. This research aims to explore how relational dialectics shape women's identity in the context of colonialism.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The method used in this study employs a library research approach. Library research can be defined as a series of activities related to the method of collecting library data, reading and taking notes, and processing research materials (Zed, 2003). Library research is a theoretical study, reference, and other scientific literature related to the culture, values, and norms that develop in the social situation being studied (Sugiyono, 2012). In library research, there are at least four main characteristics that the author needs to pay attention to, including: First, that the writer or researcher directly engages with texts (nash) or numerical data, not with firsthand knowledge from the field. Second, library data is "ready to use," meaning that researchers do not go directly to the field because they deal directly with data sources available in the library. Third, that library data is generally a secondary source, meaning that researchers obtain materials or data from a second-hand source and not original data from the first-hand source in the field. Fourth, the condition of library data is not limited by space and time (Zed, 2003). Based on the aforementioned, data collection in the research is conducted by reviewing and/or exploring several journals, books, and documents (both printed and electronic) as well as other data sources and/or information deemed relevant to the research or study. This research uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach. This method was chosen to analyze the texts of R.A. Kartini's letters as the primary data source in order to understand the performative representation of gender and the dialectic of women's identity in the colonial era.

Library research is a research activity conducted by collecting information and data with the help of various materials available in the library, such as reference books, previous similar research results, articles, notes, and various journals related to the problem to be solved. The activities are carried out systematically to collect, process, and conclude data using specific methods/techniques to find answers to the problems faced (Sari, 2020)

This approach allows researchers to interpret texts based on the social, cultural, and historical contexts that underlie them, as well as to relate them to gender performativity theory and postcolonial theory. This research is descriptive-analytical in nature, aiming to describe and analyze the contents of Kartini's letters with an emphasis on performative elements in the formation of indigenous women's gender identity. Kartini's letters, totaling 87 letters, are found in the book "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang," compiled by Armijn Pane. The main data sources in this research are three sources: a Dutch publication from 1911, an American publication from 1921, and a Balai Pustaka publication from 1922. Kartini's letters, compiled by Armijn Pane under the title "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang," are sourced from a Dutch publication titled "Door Duisternis Tot Licht" by J.H. Abendanon in 1911, which contains 106 letters. This Dutch publication was then translated into American English with the title Letters of a Javanese Princess by Agnes Louis Symmers in 1921. (Novasari et al., 1970).

3.1 Profile of RA Kartini

Raden Adjeng Kartini was born in Jepara, Central Java, on April 21, 1879, and passed away in Rembang, Central Java, on September 17, 1904, at the age of 25. She came from a Javanese noble family and was the daughter of Raden Mas Adipati Ario Sosroningrat, the Regent of Jepara, and M.A. Ngasirah, the daughter of a religious teacher. Although born to the first wife, her mother did not come from the high nobility, so Kartini's father remarried to meet the colonial administrative requirements to become a regent. Kartini was the fifth child among eleven biological and step-siblings. She attended ELS (Europese Lagere School) until the age of 12, when she then had to be sequestered according to Javanese customs. However, her enthusiasm for learning did not stop. With her proficiency in Dutch, she actively corresponded with friends from the Netherlands, especially Rosa Abendanon and Stella Zeehandelaar. From here, she gained a lot of influence from Western thought, especially regarding women's freedom and the right to education (MD & Hudaiddah, 2021).

Kartini became very critical of the Javanese social and cultural structures, which were considered to oppress women. She challenged the seclusion system, forced marriages, and polygamy. She emphasized the importance of education for women and voiced her ideas in letters that were later compiled into a book. She also voiced ideas about humanity, solidarity,

nationalism, and even criticism of religion, which was used as a tool to justify the oppression of women (Widiarto, 2025). In 1903, Kartini married K.R.M. Adipati Ario Singgih Djojo Adhiningrat, the Regent of Rembang. Although she initially rejected arranged marriages, she eventually accepted the marriage considering that her husband supported her ideals in advocating for women's education. Kartini also established a women's school in Rembang, which later inspired the founding of Kartini Schools in various cities such as Semarang, Surabaya, and Yogyakarta.

Kartini passed away after giving birth to her first child, Soesalit Djojoadhiningrat, just four days after childbirth. Although her life was short, her thoughts had a significant impact on the women's struggle in Indonesia. After his death, J.H. Abendanon, a Dutch East Indies official, compiled his letters into "Door Duisternis tot Licht" (1911), which was translated into various languages, including Malay as "Habis Gelap Terbitlah Terang" (Widiarto, 2025). Translations and other versions were also published, among others by Armijn Pane, Sulastin Sutrisno, and Joost Coté. Kartini is considered a pioneer of Indonesian women's emancipation, and her thoughts made significant contributions to the national awakening. In 1964, President Sukarno declared Kartini as a National Independence Hero, and her birthday, April 21, is commemorated as Kartini Day (Iman, 2025). Women's identity is never formed in a singular and stable manner, but rather through dynamic relationships with the surrounding social, cultural, and power structures. In identity communication theory (Hecht, 1993) and feminist approaches, women's identity is understood as the result of relational dialectics, which is a continuous negotiation process between individuals and the social norms that govern them.

This dialectic places women in an active position, not just as victims of structure, but also as agents who can negotiate, reject, and reconstruct their own identities. This thinking reinforces the understanding that gender identity is processual, not something static. The identity of women depicted in Kartini's letters is relational, formed through dialogue between herself, her family, the Javanese indigenous community, and Dutch colonialism. This dialectic shows how women's identity is not singular or stable, but rather formed through continuous negotiation and interaction with the surrounding social and cultural structures. Kartini demonstrated an awareness that she was a product of various forces: the local patriarchal tradition, Western modernity promising freedom, and the ambivalent colonial reality. Her identity as an indigenous woman is articulated in the tug-of-war between loyalty to cultural roots and aspirations for change. Her letters manifest a dialectical process: on one hand, Kartini criticizes the customary structures that oppress women, while on the other hand, she expresses pride in Javanese culture. This relationship forms a complex female identity, not black-and-white, but full of tension, ambivalence, and relational dynamics.

3.1.1 Women's Identity as a Process of Negotiation

Women's Identity as a Process of Negotiation

In the perspective of relational dialectics, women's identity is formed through the negotiation between personal desires and social expectations. In a patriarchal society, women are often faced with the demand to adhere to traditional norms while simultaneously struggling to express their individuality. According to Nasution (2020), women's identity is a negotiation space between personal subjectivity and cultural collectivity, where women continuously shape themselves within this tension (Nasution, 2020, p. 77). This negotiation is clearly evident in the experiences of modern women who strive to achieve education and professional careers, yet are still burdened by the expectations of domestic roles. In Kartini's letter, it was written that:

"We, the girls, are still bound by old customs, and we gain little happiness from the advancement of education." We girls go to school, leave the house every day, and just that alone is already considered a great violation of tradition. (Letter to Miss Zeehandelaar, Jepara, May 25, 1899).

In this letter, it is clear that RA Kartini laments the condition of a woman who is very restricted even in learning and going out of the house, which has become a custom and a part of the culture in Javanese society. Kartini's desire to learn and build schools was to provide opportunities for women to assist in a man's work, not to replace his position. This very revolutionary desire is certainly not easy when faced with the long-standing customs of the family and society, which would not only tarnish the customs but also the family's good name. Negotiation efforts continue even though they do not receive a good response. Kartini, with her successful efforts, has led to emancipation, and modern Kartini, as the next generation, can now become law enforcers, teachers, and even political figures who play important roles in governance.

3.1.2 Relationality as the Basis for Identity Formation

The relational theory emphasizes that women's identity does not develop in solitude, but rather always in relation to others: family, partners, friends, community, and even legal and religious systems. Hecht (1993) states that individual identity is formed through dialogue and relationships with others, rather than stemming solely from internal essence (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). In the context of women, these relationships can either strengthen or hinder self-expression. Support from women's communities can strengthen women's identities as empowered individuals, while social pressure can weaken or distort authentic expression. According to Pratiwi (2022), relationality opens up possibilities for women to build solidarity, articulate collective experiences, and claim new social spaces (Pratiwi, 2022, p. 123).

"Know this, the customs of my country strictly forbid young girls from going out alone. " We are not allowed to go anywhere - and the only educational institution, which is the reason this small town feels blessed, is the primary school exclusively for Europeans. Not only that, when I turned twelve, I was asked to stay inside the house - like being put into a closed box. I was locked in my room, isolated from the outside world. We are not allowed to return to that world except with a husband, a completely foreign figure, whom our parents arranged for us, without our knowledge, and only with him can we marry" (Letter to Stella Zeehandelaar, May 25, 1899).

In the colonial era, women only worked at home helping the family and managing the kitchen; when it was time to marry, they would be betrothed. This is certainly different from children in Europe who can spend their time learning and playing at their age. This is what RA Kartini lamented, that support from family and customs must be obtained. This is for the intelligence of the next generation, who should not only manage the household, grow up, and get married, but also receive an education to help with work and child-rearing. even in her era, it was not uncommon for small children to die due to the lack of and almost no healthcare facilities, and the healthcare workers relied solely on midwives.

3.1.3 Transformation through dialectics

Although full of tension, this dialectic also opens up space for transformation. Women's identity is not only constructed by society but can also be reconstructed by women themselves through critical reflection, resistance, and solidarity. In poststructuralist feminist studies, it is mentioned that women are capable of "disrupting" the dominant narrative by narrating their own experiences (C, 1987). RA Kartini always conveyed her desires, complaints, and criticisms in her letters. However, there is doubt because of her love for her homeland.

"This centuries-old Eastern tradition is indeed very solid and strong, though I feel it could also be shaken, broken, if there were no other bonds stronger and more solid than the old customs, which, no matter what, always want to connect to my entire world: my love for those who raised me, to whom I owe everything" (Letter to Stella Zeehandelaar, May 25, 1899).

R.A. Kartini's letters reflect the dialectical struggle between traditional Javanese values and the modern ideas she absorbed from her correspondence with her Dutch friends. In the repressive colonial conditions, Kartini wrote not merely to pour out her heart, but as a reflective and critical effort against the social and cultural structures that oppress women. In her letters, Kartini questioned patriarchal norms and educational inequalities, while simultaneously developing a new awareness of the position and role of women in society. This dialectic became a tool of transformation for Kartini, ultimately shaping her progressive and ahead-of-her-time thinking.

The transformation experienced by Kartini through her correspondence was not only personal but also opened a space for discourse on the emancipation of indigenous women. She did not completely reject Javanese culture, but tried to reconcile tradition with the idea of liberation. Her letters display a calm yet sharp spirit of resistance, reflecting an intellectual struggle rooted in critical awareness. By using letters as a medium of dialectics, Kartini carved an important mark in the history of Indonesian women's thought, building a bridge between colonial discourse and the local voice that sought intellectual and social independence.

3. CONCLUSION

The study of RA Kartini's letters shows that the process of forming women's identity in the colonial context does not occur in a linear or singular manner. That identity is the result of a continuous dialectical process between various conflicting forces—between traditional Javanese values and Western modernism, between the resignation of patriarchal culture and the emancipatory spirit, as well as between the position of being a colonized native subject and an agent of change with critical awareness. Kartini, in her letters, positions herself as a subject who not only reflects the suffering of Javanese women but also negotiates various structures of domination surrounding her. She did not outright reject traditional values,

but she also did not accept them blindly. It is precisely through her letters that she shows how tradition can be challenged, reinterpreted, and adapted to the demands of the times, as long as it is done with awareness and a clear purpose. The relational dialectic in Kartini's writings reveals a form of symbolic struggle that is not carried out through violence or physical confrontation, but rather through the production of discourse. By using the Dutch language and communicating with the colonial elite, Kartini infiltrated the power system itself, making her voice and thoughts not only heard in the local environment but also within the circles of colonial power. Furthermore, the identity that Kartini formed in her letters was transformative. She did not merely strive to free women from the shackles of feudalism, but also sought to open new spaces for women to think, express opinions, and contribute beyond the domestic sphere. She desired changes that were not only structural but also cultural and mental. Thus, RA Kartini's letters can be read as important artifacts in the history of Indonesian women's thought. Through a relational dialectics approach, we can understand that the identity of colonial women is not a single construction determined from above, but rather a dynamic process involving individual agency, collective experiences, and interactions with power structures and culture. Kartini became a symbol of a conscious and active subject in creating alternative narratives for women amidst the dominance of colonialism and patriarchy.

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