Kartini and Europe: A Mimicry

Laksmi Pamuntjak

Kartini is often spoken of as though she were whole, legible, resolved: a feminist, a figure of emancipation, a defender of the people, an anti-colonial heroine.

Yet we should remember that, in reading Kartini, we are in fact reading a substantial body of letters. She speaks not only of an "I" and a "You", but always to a particular "You"—one that must be interpreted, negotiated, even anticipated. Kartini offers a compelling example of how the "I" is never fully given, but always in process.

This is already evident in her opening letter to Stella Zeehandelaar, the Dutch feminist and socialist of Jewish descent, a journalist for *De Hollandsche Lelie*, a weekly magazine for progressive young women closely aligned with socialist circles in the Netherlands.

"Just call me Kartini—that is my name." The sentence is well known, not least because Pramoedya Ananta Toer chose it as the title of his book on the young woman from Jepara. Yet here Kartini asserts her "I" by adopting, at least in part, the gaze and language of the Other—the one who is not "I".

"When I gave my address to Mevrouw Van Wermeskerken, I could hardly write simply 'Kartini', could I? That would seem strange in Holland; and to write 'mejuffrouw' before my name—no, I have no right to that—I am only a Javanese," she writes.

This may register as irony, or as politeness towards a correspondent newly encountered. But it may also be read as an act of adjustment: a strategic rendering of the self in terms legible to a Dutch interlocutor.

A letter differs from a journal in precisely this respect: it must always situate itself in relation to another. At times Kartini writes with lyrical intensity, at times with rhetorical force, at times with an intimacy that borders on confession. She can be tender as a lover—"Later, Stella, my adored one, when I hold it in my hands, tightly, so tightly it cannot escape, then you will know"—yet also markedly reticent, as in her inability, in that first letter, to acknowledge that she is the daughter of a concubine.

A letter is also distinct from an essay. The essay tends towards a certain constancy—of structure, method, chronology, verifiable fact—whereas the letter is contingent: upon its addressee, their age, class, race, ideology, political inclination; and equally upon the writer's own shifting state of mind at the moment of writing.

Always "Other"

For me, Kartini is always "the other". Never fully this, never entirely that. She occupies a position at the margins.

She stands at the edge of Javanese social hierarchy, as part of the lesser *priyayi*. She stands at the edge of the colonial relation, as a member of that class afforded certain privileges, yet unable to realise them fully. She stands at the edge of the family, as her father's cherished daughter, yet also the child of a concubine rather than the principal wife—an ambiguity that allows her both to love her father and to reject the polygamous structure that defines her place within the household.

To inhabit the margins is to inhabit a particular kind of pain. She writes: “On the one hand I cannot return to my former world—yet on the other I cannot enter the new one; a thousand threads still bind me tightly to the old.”

This tension is especially acute within the family. When she tells Stella that her “mother is still closely connected to the Madurese court”, she is referring not to her biological mother, who came from a *pesantren* background, but to her stepmother. One may read here a complex layering of embarrassment at her father’s polygamy, anxiety over how such a fact might be received by a feminist correspondent, and perhaps also a quieter unease regarding her own status.

Kartini’s marginality also has an intellectual dimension. The freedom and education she received would not have been exceptional by European standards, yet in her own context they were already anomalous. And still she remained constrained—unable to realise what she described as her highest aspiration: to travel to Europe.

She educated herself through Western thought, yet when, at the age of sixteen, she was granted a measure of “freedom” to leave the house, she encountered the ambivalence of those around her. Mevrouw Ovink-Soer, a family acquaintance, asked: had they done right in allowing her to step beyond the walls that had contained her? Might it not have been better for her to remain within them?

The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse

Kartini's position may be read as emblematic of a broader ambivalence within colonial discourse.

Colonialism—indeed imperialism—may be understood as the apex of capitalism in its historical moment, and capitalism itself as a product of the Enlightenment: of the idea of the human as an autonomous subject, capable of mastering nature and advancing civilization, as articulated, for instance, in The Communist Manifesto. Yet this same movement also produces domination.

In the colonial setting, the colonizer encounters the colonized as Other—external to himself. What is to be done with this Other?

Given the Enlightenment imperative towards progress, one answer is education. In the Dutch East Indies, this takes the form of the Ethical Policy: an attempt to extend the benefits of enlightenment to the colonized population.

Yet this project is inherently unstable. If pursued fully, it risks eroding the distinction between colonizer and colonized, thereby threatening the identity—and indeed the authority—of the colonizer. Should the colonized attain equality, they may also claim autonomy, even independence, undermining the very logic of colonial rule.

Thus the project is curtailed from within. The colonized must remain Other—distinct, differentiated. What is preserved, in effect, is essentialism: the notion that identities are fixed, immutable, independent of history and locality.

At the same time, however, the colonized may appropriate this very project as a means of resistance. Through education, they transform themselves—and in doing so, destabilize essentialism itself.

In this context, Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry becomes instructive. Drawing, in part, on Jacques Derrida, Bhabha suggests that mimicry is not mere imitation, but a practice that both resembles and alters—producing something "almost the same, but not quite".

Kartini's own life offers a vivid illustration. She spoke fluent Dutch, prepared Dutch dishes, recorded recipes in Western form (as noted by Suryatini N. Ganie), and read widely from European texts. Such practices might be read as imitation of the coloniser—but they also entail transformation. Cultural transmission is never neutral: it produces hybridity.

This hybridity is often regarded with suspicion in nationalist discourse, which tends to privilege notions of purity. Mimicry, in such a view, appears as mere copying. Yet, as Bhabha argues, mimicry simultaneously consolidates and distorts colonial authority.

Kartini herself captures this tension: "Dear Stella, I am so happy that you consider me equal to your Dutch friends… I want nothing more than for you to call me by my name, and with 'je' and 'jij'. You see how smoothly I imitate you."

What emerges is a sustained effort to render mimicry a form of resistance. At times Kartini positions Stella herself as the Other—distant, insufficiently understanding—while affirming Javanese culture as refined, inwardly rich: "Javanese culture is not inferior in its spiritual depth."

Yet here another paradox appears. In asserting an "authentic" identity—through tradition, language, religion—the colonized resist the norms imposed by what Jacques Lacan terms the Big Other. And yet this very assertion remains entangled within its framework.

Thus mimicry may take more than one form: one that destabilizes essentialism, and another that, even in resistance, risks reaffirming it.

When Kartini speaks of "Java" as though it were unchanging, she resists by asserting identity—yet in doing so reproduces the essentialism embedded in colonial discourse.

At the same time, she is far from consistent. She can also write: "What do I care for these customs? I am glad to tear apart these ridiculous Javanese rules. They are made by humans; to me they are repulsive."

Why, then, does she continue to mobilize such strategies of identity?

"Europe" in Kartini's Life

We may then ask: what kind of "Europe" enters Kartini's life—and through what channels?

First, through education: a grandfather progressive for his time, a father who continued that trajectory.
Second, through her reading of European literature.
Third, through the adoption of European modes of domestic life, including food.
Fourth, through social interaction: direct encounters, correspondence, and observation.

Her engagement with European literature is marked not only by breadth but by persistence. Although her responses are rarely elaborated in systematic terms, there is a clear sense that she reflects on what she reads, allowing it to shape her attitudes and decisions.

Her admiration for Cécile de Jong van Beek en Donk, whose *Hilda van Suylenburg* (1897) was widely influential, contributed to her resistance to marriage. She also admired Multatuli, and was able to compare the colonial conditions of her own time with those depicted in *Max Havelaar*.

Kartini was also a prolific writer. In addition to contributing an essay on batik to the 1898 Women's Exhibition in the Netherlands, she compiled a recipe book—an unusual undertaking in her context.

Through such practices, Europe enters not only her intellectual life but also her domestic one. The recipes she records testify to the ways in which colonial elites adopted—and adapted—the culinary practices of their rulers, themselves already hybrid. The *uurtje*, or afternoon tea, for instance, was not originally Dutch but English, yet became a colonial ritual in the Indies. Dishes such as vegetable soup (*groentesoep*), Madeira sauce, or *selat Solo* reveal layers of adaptation: Indonesian borrowing from Dutch, Dutch from French.

One might speculate that Kartini's decision to compile a recipe book reflects an attempt to construct a Javanese dining culture through a European paradigm—as a means of establishing equivalence with the coloniser's culture.

A similar ambivalence is evident in her social relations. With Stella, she seeks a relation of equality. With Rosa Abendanon-Mandri, her tone shifts: admiration deepens into something more effusive, at times almost rapturous—perhaps a function of youth, perhaps also shaped by the political influence Rosa and her husband wielded over her educational prospects.

Rosa's own difference may also have played a role. Of Spanish background, born in Puerto Rico, she occupied a somewhat marginal position within the

Dutch colonial milieu. “She is a foreigner,” Kartini writes, “full of warmth, enchanting, beautiful, romantic.”

In Rosa, Europe appears not as an abstract structure of power, but as a person.

At the same time, Kartini’s critique of Dutch colonialism becomes increasingly incisive. She observes its arrogance, its violence, its exploitation—particularly during her travels with her father, the Regent of Jepara, whose concern for ordinary people exposed her to these realities.

“…and still some Dutch call the Indies a ‘terrible monkey country’. I am enraged when I hear people speak of a ‘poor Indies’. How easily they forget that this ‘poor monkey land’ has filled their empty pockets with gold when they return to the patria.”

Here, her analysis attains both breadth and depth, tracing the structures of colonial domination and their material consequences: poverty, dispossession, backwardness.

A Universalist Nationalism

In closing, it may not be excessive to suggest that Kartini anticipates a form of Indonesian nationalism grounded not in fixed ethnic or cultural identity, but in a shared human condition.

She tells Stella that she wishes “to work not only for my own satisfaction but to give myself to society, to work for the good of others”, and that she desires nothing more than “to devote myself entirely to what women in Europe have done”.

At the same time, she insists that this impulse does not arise solely from Europe—that something within her preceded her encounter with European ideas.

The demand for freedom, then, is not derivative. It may arise within a Javanese woman simply because she is constrained. It is not bound to geography. It is universal.

And it is perhaps only from the margins—from a position not wholly contained within any single identity—that such a view becomes possible.

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