

A Philosophical and Feminist Analysis of Decoloniality in Indonesia: A Critical Study of Toeti Heraty, Kartini, and Siti Roehana

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Abstract

This research invites us to rethink the methods used in the feminist philosophy approach. Feminist studies in Indonesia need to use new perspectives to expose epistemic injustice. The decolonial feminism approach can provide new insights and questions about how feminist knowledge is formed in Indonesia. The author centers the writing on epistemic violence due to the hegemony of the feminist discourse carried out by power elites and colonial establishments. This study examines the case studies of Indonesian feminists Toeti Heraty, Kartini, and Siti Roehana to demonstrate how colonial knowledge and apparatus work. This paper's approach to decolonial feminism does not attempt to return to essentialism by glorifying nationalist discourses but instead uses a decoloniality framework to establish epistemic justice.

Keywords: decolonial feminism, epistemic violence, feminist philosophy

Introduction

Jurnal Perempuan (JP) team analyses, nurtures, collects, and shapes feminist knowledge in Indonesia. JP has been fostering experts on feminism for 26 years in Indonesia. JP's knowledge production does not take place at universities, because 26 years ago, no university published a journal specialising in feminist discourse. Back then, universities were allergic to the term feminism, rarely supported feminist research, and only presented the discourse of women in development in accordance with the State Policy Guidelines (*Garis Besar Haluan Negara /GBHN*).¹ The restriction of feminist discourse in Indonesia at that time was due to the strong role of the state in controlling both universities and freedom of speech. In comparison, in the West, feminist journals, which started in 1973, were based at universities. Three leading journals, such as *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (University of Chicago Press), *Feminist Studies* (University of Maryland), and *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* (University of Colorado), are independent but still face obstacles with the university bureaucracy. The managers of these journals told us that they struggled to change the university's "ivory tower" attitude that saw journals as a formality of academic activities. Feminist scholars at universities, through the journals they manage, produce feminist knowledge that becomes part of activism so that the articles produced

are useful and disseminated to foster feminist awareness in society (McDermott 1994).

Jurnal Perempuan, although all of its founders came from universities, decided to establish JP outside the campus because they wanted to have an active and not a passive journal. An active journal aims to foster feminist experts in Indonesia and build feminist knowledge communities at all levels including at the grassroots level. JP readers (members of Sahabat Jurnal Perempuan) are readers who are involved in JP's activities in disseminating JP's knowledge products. Hence, JP decided to establish an organization in order to publish JP. Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan (YJP) was established by four people: Toeti Heraty, Asikin Arif, Ida Dhanny, and myself. All of them were affiliated with the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Indonesia.

Philosophy is the heartbeat of *Jurnal Perempuan*. Since its first edition, *Jurnal Perempuan* has always been reviewing the thoughts of women philosophers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Hannah Arendt, Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, and so on. Their names appeared in various articles, YJP website, or highlights of feminist figures. Toeti Heraty, one of the founders of Yayasan Jurnal Perempuan, wrote her psychology thesis in 1961 on Simone de Beauvoir's feminine transcendence titled *Transendensi Feminin*,

Kesetaraan Gender menurut Simone de Beauvoir (Feminine Transcendence, Gender Equality According to Simone de Beauvoir), which was published by Gramedia in 2018. I myself wrote a dissertation on *Filsafat Berperspektif Feminis (FBF)* (Feminist Philosophy) in 2002, and was published by YJP in 2003. In the FBF book, the theories reviewed are extended to theories of multiculturalism, globalism, and post-modernism that seek to disrupt the dominant discourse of Western philosophy and to present marginalised narratives. *Jurnal Perempuan*, since its first issue, which was published on 10 August 1996 until now, covers various studies on the issues of Indonesian women who are marginalised on the grounds of class, ethnicity, sexuality, economy, culture, and environment. Therefore, it sees gender not only as a single category of women but also how it intersects with class, race, economy, culture, religion, and so on. Is what *Jurnal Perempuan* has done so far enough? Are there theories of philosophy and feminism that have not been reviewed and included in the rich collection of *Jurnal Perempuan*? Should *Jurnal Perempuan* critically discuss Indonesian feminist philosophers? These questions are important as an effort to reflect on the construction of feminist knowledge carried out by YJP and especially JP in sustaining feminist knowledge.

The discussion of feminist theories in JP is an integral part of JP's existence. In addition to presenting case studies of Indonesian women in every edition, JP is also strong in exploring theories of feminism and philosophy, in accordance with its purpose. I believe that *Jurnal Perempuan*, in its 26th year, needs to add the analytical knife of decolonial feminism to its repertoire of feminist knowledge. Therefore, I would like to discuss Toeti Heraty's thoughts as an Indonesian feminist philosopher and interrogate Kartini and Siti Roehana's thoughts in the frame of decolonial feminism. This research seeks to honestly and clearly understand the strengths and weaknesses of decolonial feminism theory in the Indonesian context by applying it to the thoughts of Indonesian feminist philosophers.

Methodology

For this research, I use decolonial methodology. According to Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021), there is no standard model of decolonial methodology. According to them, decolonial methodology includes: (1) exercising critical reflexivity, (2) reciprocity and respect for self-determination, (3) embracing "other(ed)" ways of knowing, and (4) embodying a transformative praxis.

All of these elements are an effort to practice an equal and just epistemology (Dei 2008) with the understanding that the existing knowledge sets are the result of colonial knowledge that produces unequal power relations. This understanding is close to Audre Lorde's assertion that "the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house" (Lorde 1984). A more radical view asserts that in order to be free from the influence of Western knowledge, the academic world must completely reject all Western-derived knowledge tools and practices (McGuire-Adams 2020). This undoubtedly has an impact on the rejection of publications in foreign languages, foreign journals, and knowledge standards formed by the West. A more balanced opinion is from Garroutte (2003), who tries to build indigenous knowledge by communicating with other knowledge and recognising that local knowledge is part of a global community and is very diverse.

My own position refers to Thambinathan and Kinsella and avoids a position of essentialism or glorifying all non-Western sources. To me, the critical reflexivity approach aims to highlight power imbalances produced both by Western and non-Western knowledge, and to build critical communication in philosophy and feminism scholar works. Critical reflection within the framework of a decolonial approach values a knowledgeable community and positions a researcher as "the learner" rather than "the discoverer" of new knowledge. This way of thinking respects differences and at the same time fosters diverse knowledge not only from Western-centric but also local-centric environments. In the end, I believe that the decolonial approach is not an attempt to uphold a sense of nationalism, but to foster love and wisdom in knowledge itself while remaining critical. Through the decolonial approach, it is hoped that a new understanding of oppression, injustice, loss, and power will emerge. This research does not simply want to "present the right story" or simply an "add on" to the list of Indonesian women philosophers and feminists on the world stage, but wants to raise new questions.

Through a decolonial feminist approach, I would like to review the thoughts of Toeti Heraty, Kartini, and Siti Roehana,² and raise new questions. These three Indonesian philosophers and feminists occupy a unique position because analysing them goes beyond an academic activity as they were all activists. This research is not prepared for the sake of an academic activity but more so, to shape the mind of activism. As Fortier (2017) says, the decolonial approach strengthens the scholar-activist, and is thus entirely praxis.

In Search of Southeast Asian Feminist Philosophers³

I will begin the discussion of this research by raising the issue of marginalised Asian women philosophers. In Indonesia, there are only a few women, who have a focus in philosophy professionally and their contributions are rarely recognised. Before addressing Toeti Heraty as a philosopher and feminist, I would like to discuss the position of women philosophers as a whole.

Both Western and Eastern philosophies have a less than harmonious relationship with women. It is often said that the root of Western philosophy's sexism and misogyny lies in the view that the female body is imperfect or "mutilated" compared to the male body. This view concludes that women are morally inferior to men, although this view is false (Mercer 2018). The seeds of sexism in Western philosophy were planted thousands of years ago by prominent Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. Similarly, Eastern philosophy such as Confucianism is considered the "enemy of feminism" as feminist scholars have produced numerous studies on the role of Confucianism and the subordination of women (Koh 2008).

For centuries, women philosophers were sidelined and ignored although in the 17th century, women philosophers such as Elisabeth of Bohemia, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Conway had significantly contributed to the European philosophical thoughts. Recognition of their work took a long time, and it was only in the early 1990s there were books that described the contributions of women philosophers such as Mary Ellen Waith's book (1978), *On a History of Women Philosophers*, which was published in three volumes. However, outside of Europe, women philosophers are not valued and their contributions to philosophy are ignored. For women of colour in philosophy, being a woman and a person of colour puts them in a weak position because white women philosophers are more respected. Yoko Arisaka's article, *Asian Women: Invisibility, Locations, and Claims to Philosophy in Women of Colour and Philosophy* (2000) asserts that Asian women philosophers are more invisible and even weaker than black and Latin American women philosophers. Arisaka's research only highlights Asian women philosophers as a whole, but I would like to highlight that Southeast Asian women philosophers are even more underrepresented, let alone Indonesian women philosophers. Filipino women philosophers have realised the importance of building an association of women philosophers, and in 2020 they formed Women Doing Philosophy.⁴ The formation of this group was inspired by an article written by Tracy Llanera (2019),

which was published in the *Hypathia* journal titled *The Brown's Babe's Burden*. In the article, Llanera recounts the twists and turns of the experience of being a woman philosopher.

Asian women philosophers are predominantly from East and South Asia, such as China, Japan, Korea, and India. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight their contributions that have shaped the discourse of classical philosophy. For example, the *Global and Comparative History of Ideas* (SGOKI 2018) includes Gargi Vachaknavi as one of the hidden figures in the *Upanishads*. *The Philosopher Queens* (2020) mentions Ban Zhao as an intellectual woman in the antiquity of Chinese history, who contributed to *The Book of Han*. In the book, several Muslim women philosophers are highlighted such as the 16th-century thinker Ai'ishah al Ba'undiyyah from Damascus, who wrote *The Principles of Sufism*. A unique figure, who is considered to be both a Muslim and Hindu thinker is the 14th-century Lalla from Kashmir. She is referred to as Lalleshwati by Hindus and Lalla Arifa by Muslims.

The decolonial feminist approach argues that it is not enough to name women philosophers and mention their work without highlighting their contributions to dismantling power relations, oppression, and social change. I agree with Alcoff (2017) that decolonialising feminist philosophy must present a different approach to the philosophical practice. Philosophy is not just a love of wisdom, but needs to oppose all forms of oppression. Like Vergès (2019), I aspire for a philosophy that is capable of destroying sexism, racism, capitalism, and imperialism. As I mentioned above, the decolonial approach to me is not to uphold philosophical nationalism or non-relationalism with other forms of philosophy, including Western philosophy. This puritanical stance of philosophy is actually similar to the analytic philosophy of European philosophy. Eastern philosophy adopts a similar position, which is often reactive to Western philosophy and preoccupied with being "anti" the West without advancing more progressive thinking.

In the context of this argument, feminist philosophy is more advanced. Feminist philosophy is built on the foundation of equality and justice for women. Transnational feminism extends the definition of rights to social justice (McLaren 2017). In *Singing in the Fire: Stories of Women in Philosophy*, Alcoff (2003) collects essays by women philosophers about their experiences in philosophy and reveals the discrimination, exploitation, and violence they have experienced. She includes the diverse views of women philosophers, including those

of colour such as Uma Narayan's *What's a Brown Girl like You Doing in the Ivory Tower?*. Narayan describes her journey to becoming a feminist philosopher. Narayan tells the story of her education when she was eight to fourteen years old in Uganda at an all-girls school run by Franciscan nuns. When Idi Amin expelled Asians from Uganda in 1973, Narayan had a difficult time. So, she returned to India and did an undergraduate programme in philosophy in Bombay and read Socrates, Locke, Marx, and Mill. After completing her master's degree in 1979, Narayan became a women's rights activist in various organisations. It was only then that she realised that she had not read the writings of women philosophers at all during her study. She went on to do a doctoral programme in the United States after receiving a scholarship and had to compete with other candidates who all studied engineering and were men.

Why is personal experience important? Personal experience in the feminist methodology is valued and considered important, which is in stark contrast to mainstream philosophical methodology that is based on universalism and ignores particularities. The decolonial approach also considers personal experience. Mohanty (2010) argues that there cannot be a single view based on a single experience, including idealising a single representation without looking at the context. Thus, knowledge is always situated and the personal experiences of feminist philosophers are important to note.

Indonesian Feminist Philosopher

It is undeniable that Toeti Heraty was a leading feminist philosopher in, although when Toeti passed away in 2021, most media outlets remembered her as a poet, cultural activist, businesswoman, and her of philanthropic activities. Very few discussed her work as a philosopher, let alone regarded Toeti Heraty as a feminist philosopher. Some excerpts of comments included in her last book, *Ajaib, Nyata, Kadang Lucu* (2020): "Toeti Heraty was the only woman poet among the leading Indonesian poets" (Prof. Dr. A. Teeuw); "With a distinctive style, Toeti expressed the feelings of women who need to be considered in a world that is too dominated by men" (Balai Pustaka); "Toeti Heraty was able to make her poetry truly her own. As a poet, she was her own person". In his writing, *Sajak-Sajak Toeti Heraty*, Subagio Sastrowardoyo also states that Toeti Heraty was able to stand outside the mainstream, and therefore, was not the same as other poets" (Budi Darma). These comments illustrate that being a philosopher in Indonesia must

be purely philosophical and cannot be combined with other identities, let alone as a feminist or an activist. Toeti Heraty's works are full of philosophical discussions and feminism, for example, *Aku dalam Budaya* (2013), *Berpijak pada Filsafat* (2013), *Tentang Manusia Indonesia* (2015), *Transendensi Feminin* (2018), *Sajak-sajak 33* (1974), *Calon Arang* (2006), and so on.

Toeti in her book, *Ajaib, Nyata, Kadang Lucu* (2020), describes her life journey memories, including her comments on the Covid-19 pandemic that hit Indonesia, and also expresses her disappointment with the university bureaucracy and especially the Philosophy Major. She experienced many obstacles, from her doctoral promotion in 1979, a stalled promotion, an erratic professor appointment that took more than 10 years, barriers to being the Department secretary,⁵ to having to go through the appointment process of becoming a civil servant (*Pegawai Negeri Sipil/PNS*) four times. When she was the Head of the Department, she was asked to retire at the age of 55. Her frustration was evident in her writing and she finally consoled herself by saying that the bureaucracy and politics in Higher Education did not discourage her because in the end she did a lot of work and was recognised outside the University of Indonesia (UI). Toeti Heraty's story reminds me of Alcoff's book (2003), which contains sad stories of feminist philosophers in higher education in various countries. The testimonies of women philosophers, such as Sandra Lee Bartky, Teresa Brennan, Claudia Card, Virginia Held, Alison M Jaggar, Stephanie R Lewis, Uma Narayan, Martha C. Nussbaum, Andrea Nye, Ofelia Schutte, Kristin Shrader-Frechette, and Karen J. Warren corroborate the systematic marginalisation of feminist philosophers in higher education. Several stories describe experiences of neglect, obstruction, gossip, exploitation, and sexual harassment.

Although Toeti Heraty experienced turbulence in her career as a philosophy lecturer at UI, her figure as an Indonesian philosopher cannot be taken lightly. Toeti Heraty's contributions to advancing philosophy in Indonesia were recognised domestically and internationally. One of her most significant contributions in my opinion was her effort to include 15 Indonesian philosophers in the French encyclopedia, *Dictionnaire des Philosophes*, published by Press Universitaire in 1984. She included the following list: Mpu Kanwa (11th century), Empu Tantular (14th century), Yasadipura (1729-1830), Pakubuwana (1768-1820), Ranggawasita (1802-1973), Mangkunegara (1811-1881), Agus Salim (1884-1954), Ki Hajar Dewantara (1889-1958), Soekarno (1901-1971),

Hamka (1908-1981), Notonegoro (1905-1981), M. Natsir (1908-1993), S.T. Alisjahbana (1908-1994), Driyarkara (1913-1967), and Sumantri Hardjoprakoso (1917-1970). It should be noted that of the fifteen names proposed, eleven were predominantly of Javanese ethnicity.

I was heartbroken to read that not a single woman philosopher was on her *Dictionnaire des Philosophes* list. Although in her book, *Tentang Manusia Indonesia* (2015), Toeti regretted it and included Kartini, a Javanese aristocrat, as a woman philosopher. Of course, I am happy with her regret, but my impression is that Kartini was added to the list as an “add on”. Similarly, the list of fifteen Indonesian philosophers above was just an add-on and did not really critically question their thinking. If we are to be optimistic, the inclusion of the names of Indonesian philosophers is an attempt to disrupt Western thoughts. This is certainly in line with post-colonial ideas (Bhaba in Bhambra 2014). The idea of decolonial feminism seeks to expose the power of colonial thinking and re-read colonial consciousness by relating it to race, gender, and sexuality (Lugones 2010). In my opinion, Lugones’ argument extends to debates on class oppression and ethnicity. Lugones builds on Quijano’s theory that it is necessary to understand power structures through relations of domination, exploitation, and conflict. Lugones goes deeper than Quijano to underline the importance of intersections with race, class, gender, and sexuality. Lugones, quoting Oyewumi (1997), states that inferiority works not only at the level of race and ethnicity, but also at the level of inferiority of *anafemales*,

which includes the exclusion of women from leadership, access to education and economy, ownership, existence, and so on.

Case Studies of Kartini and Siti Roehana

The question is why Toeti Heraty included Kartini on the list as an Indonesian philosopher with the fifteen figures above and not Siti Roehana or Dewi Sartika? All three were from the same era and they were all among the first Indonesian feminists. If the argument is that Kartini shared her feminist thoughts through her letters in Dutch to her Dutch friend, Stella Zehandelaar, then Siti Roehana was actually more progressive. Roehana published her thoughts in *Soenting Melajoe*, the first women’s newspaper published on 10 July 1912 for indigenous peoples, which used the Malay language and was anti-colonial in nature. Referring to Lugones and Oyewumi’s framework, it can be concluded that Toeti Heraty’s analyses were influenced by a colonial framework that provides space for the dominant race/ethnicity and elite class. The decolonial feminist approach becomes useful in analysing Kartini. New questions that arise are around the close relationship between colonialism and the elites, and how both reproduce colonial ways of thinking in representing women. It is important to question this because the reproduction of colonial logic continues to be developed to this day. Using the decolonial feminist approach, the differences between Kartini and Siti Roehana are as follows:

Table 1. Critical Analysis of Raden Ajeng Kartini

Raden Ajeng Kartini (21 April 1879 – 17 September 1904)			
Class	Education	Work	Recognition
Javanese aristocrat.	Attended school until the age of 12 due to the aristocrat class.	Wrote letters to her Dutch friend, Estella Zehandelaar.	Raden Ajeng (R.A.) Kartini was declared a national hero on 2 May 1964 by President Soekarno, who issued Presidential Decree of the Republic of Indonesia Number 108 and set out to commemorate the birthday of R.A. Kartini on every 21 April.
Daughter of Raden Mas Adipati Ario Sosroningrat.	Fluent in speaking and writing in Dutch.	Her work was edited, titled, and published by the Dutch in the Netherlands.	In the New Order era, Kartini’s day was symbolised with kebaya clothes by Dharma Wanita and it was mandatory to commemorate Kartini’s day with kebaya.
Became the third wife of an aristocrat husband, Raden Adipati Joyodiningrat.	Got access to readings from Dutch friends.	Submitted an article to the Dutch women’s magazine, <i>De Hollandsche Lelie</i> .	W.R. Supratman composed a special song for Kartini.
Polygamous Marriage.		Kartini School was built in 1912 with the assistance from the Dutch.	Recognised by the Dutch and academic world as a feminist figure.

Table 2. Critical Analysis of Siti Roehana

Siti Roehana (20 December 1884 – 17 August 1972)			
Class	Education	Work	Recognition
An ordinary person. Born in Koto Gadang, Agam Regency, West Sumatra. Active in the community.	Never attended school because she was not of the noble class.	Published the first women's newspaper, <i>Soenting Melajoe (SM)</i> , in 1912 and was the editor of SM for 7 years.	Minister Harmoko's decree, awarded as Indonesia's First Journalist (1974), on the 3 rd National Press Day, 9 February 1987.
Daughter of Mohamad Rasjad Maharadja Soetan, an ordinary employee.	Learned to read and write from her father. Foreign reading materials (newspapers and books) were obtained from Singapore.	Wrote her thoughts in various indigenous newspapers.	Named as a national figure by President Joko Widodo through the Minister of Social Affairs number: 23/MS/A/09/2019 dated 9 September 2019.
Married to Abdoel Koeddoes, an anti-Dutch activist.	Learned to knit and weave.	Built a girls' school, Amai Setia, in 1911 in Koto Gadang. Built Roehana School in 1915 in Bukittinggi.	Recognised by local people as a figure who came up with the idea of smuggling weapons from Koto Gadang to Bukittinggi via Ngarai Sianok.
		Drove local economy for women by teaching them how to weave. Active in the local community.	Not widely recognised as an Indonesian feminist figure in the academic world (very little discussion of Siti Roehana as a feminist figure).

Kartini, as has been written by many researchers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer, came from a privileged background, who was fascinated by the Western world. She got along closely with European children. In the Western world, she felt freer, fuller, and more at home in the democratic Western atmosphere. Her love for the Western world was obvious and combined with her fondness for all things European, especially science (Toer 2000). Hence, Kartini wanted to master the Dutch language in order to reach European civilisation (Letter dated 18 August 1900 to Mrs Abendanon). In a letter of 25 May 1899, Kartini more explicitly expressed her alignment with the white nation, "my heart is beating; I am excited about the new era, yes, in fact I can say, judging by my thoughts and feelings, I do not fit in this Indian era, but I have lived in the era of my white sisters who are eager for progress, in the far West". Although Kartini was fascinated by the Western science and way of life, she also criticised the West. In a letter of 12 January 1900, she questioned the attitude of the Dutch people, who looked down on the Javanese.⁶ Here, Kartini's concern was limited to the interests of the Javanese and the aristocrats (*priayi*)⁷, and did not see herself as a larger part of the Javanese nation. Perhaps due to her limitations to get out of the confines of her palace environment, she could not understand the people living outside Java or try to understand the lives of women in other regions. Kartini's letters were full of hegemonic discourse from the elites and went hand in

hand with the Dutch discourse that seeks to promote the success of the colonial period (*The Dutch Golden Age*)⁸.

The pride of elitism influenced the discourse of feminism in Indonesia, and made other feminists in the same era as Kartini as "others". The hegemony of this discourse, if examined, continued after the Dutch colonial era⁹. My reading through the methodology of decolonial feminism is that both Kartini and the Dutch's mindset favoured the elite class (both *priayi* and white), thus remaining colonial in mentality. Take the example of Kartini's statement in her letter to Mrs MCE Ovink-Soer in 1900¹⁰, when she had wishful thinking of going to school in the Netherlands and when she returned, she said, "we will return to Java and open a school for girls of aristocratic descent ..." (Symmers 1921).

The comparison between Kartini and Siti Roehana is very contrast. Siti Roehana came from Koto Gadang, West Sumatra, and was an anti-Dutch ordinary person.¹¹ She did not go to school because of her non-aristocratic status. Roehana learned to read and write from her father, and gained knowledge by herself. Siti Roehana's writings were published in various newspapers, but she wrote intensely in *Soenting Melajoe*, the first women's newspaper in Indonesia,¹² published on 10 July 1912. The newspaper was owned by Datuk Soetan Maharadja, who published *Oetoesan Melajoe*. Roehana argued strongly when lobbying Datuk Soetan Maharadja by saying

“my real wish is not just to ask for a space for mothers in the *Oetoesan Melajoe* newspaper that you lead, but to publish a special newspaper for women” (Fitriyanti 2001). Datuk Soetan Maharadja eventually agreed to help Siti Roehana publish *Soenting Melajoe* as long as her daughter Zoebeidah Ratna Djoewita joined her as an editor. Roehana accepted the proposal because she was busy running a girls’ school, Kerajinan Amai Setia (KAS) school in Koto Gadang, which she established in 1911 on the veranda of her house. This school taught women from among the ordinary people to read and write. Roehana later also established Roehana School in 1915 in Bukittinggi.

Soenting Melajoe was published in Padang by the Snelpersdrukkerij printing house with the tagline “*Soerat Chabar Perempoean, Orang Alam Minang Kabau*”. Each edition of this newspaper was four-page thick. At first, *Soenting Melajoe* was published every Saturday and then changed to every Thursday with a one-year subscription fee of f. 0.45 for three months and f. 1.80 for readers in the Dutch East Indies. Roehana thought hard to fund her newspaper so that it could continue to be published, so she looked for adverts¹³. Roehana managed *Soenting Melajoe* for 7 years, and there were more than 360 entries in the form of articles, visit reports, news briefs, and replies to letters to the editor. Roehana wrote extensively on women’s issues in the country. Some of her interesting writings include: “*Perhiasan Pakaian*” (*Soenting Melajoe* No. 10, Year 1, 7 August 1912). She urged women to be economically independent by exploring their skills. Roehana encouraged women in Koto Gadang to learn to weave, and by learning to weave they appreciated the weavings and crafts in Koto Gadang. Roehana was determined to improve the economy of poor women through handicrafts. An article titled *Setia Gerakan Perempuan Zaman Ini* (*Soenting Melajoe*, No. 22, Year 2, 23 May 1913) outlined the importance of women forming associations and not being outdone by the many young men who established associations to achieve independence. In this article, Roehana equated the independence of the nation with the independence of women. Roehana called for “loyalty to the nation, the land, and the village, and to keep moving forward”. Her article titled *Rendah Hati* (*Soenting Melajoe*, No. 9, Year 2, 20 February 1913) expressed her gratitude that young ordinary women could now go to school and her hope that young women would grow to be compassionate, loving, and merciful, especially to the poor. To her, it is very important that young women have a sense of empathy for the poor. Many of Roehana’s writings touched on the

problems of the lower classes and appealed that more must be done for the lower classes. Roehana’s writing mentions all women, including those from Papua. In the article, *Gerakan Kesukaan Perempuan di Zaman Ini* (*Soenting Melajoe*, No. 28, Year 2, 4 July 1913), Roehana reviewed the likes of women from both Europe and non-Europe, including those who were half-Europeans. She looked at the differences between the various women and noted the favourites of Europeans with their clothes, luxury goods, and travelling. She noticed that Malay women were less privileged, and Roehana thought of how to improve the situation of indigenous women.

Roehana’s writings were not limited to talking about women in Indonesia, but also gave a place to discuss women in other countries, including Muslim women in Egypt. What is interesting about *Soenting Melajoe* is that most of the writers were women because Roehana really made sure that women’s voices were heard. She stressed this to Datuk Soetan Maharadja, “I will try to get women writers so that the newspaper will truly be the voice of women” (Fitriyanti 2001). Many women wrote for *Soenting Melajoe* and discussed various issues, such as access to education, constraints of traditions, anti-polygamy, anti-colonialism, and economic access for women. Roehana patiently welcomed visitors, who wanted to meet her and answered all questions about women, including readers who criticised *Soenting Melajoe*’s writings as progressive. However, many from various regions, including from abroad such as Egypt also praised *Soenting Melajoe*. One of the most interesting letters *Soenting Melajoe* received was from a father who said his daughter always could not wait for *Soenting Melajoe* to be published every Thursday and read all the contents.

Soenting Melajoe, which was led by Roehana, presented a dialogue with various women and this, in my opinion, was Roehana’s strength in giving space to all women. The women’s writings she published in *Soenting Melajoe* came from various regions that were sensitive to the conditions of women across the country. Roehana also produced news stories on women’s activities, including the announcement of the opening of a school in Sukabumi in 1912 and the Kartini School in Semarang in 1913.

Besides writing, Roehana also wrote poetry.¹⁴ *Pelita Kapas* was published on the first page of *Soenting Melajoe* No. 4 on 27 July 1912. It encouraged women to take an active role in social life, including politics, and to reject Dutch colonialism.

Pelita Kapas

Pelbagai benih buah pikiran,
percaturan politik yang bertaburan;
perempuan dan laki-laki berhamburan,
peri kemajuan dan kemunduran.

Ikhlas dan tulus segala muda,
elok dan buruk mana yang ada;
hamburkanlah ilmu di dalam dada,
endracht macht maakt
(persatuan membuat kekuatan) maju berenda.

Lalai dan lengah jangan dibuat,
langsung cecahkan pena kedawat,
lajukan pikiran seperti kawat,
laju kemajuan lekaslah jawat.

Ilmu kepandaian mana yang ada,
yang tertoreh di dalam dada;
isilah waktu nyatalah sudah,
iris menerawang atau merenda.

Teluk dan rantau Soenting lajari,
tembus kembali gunung dan duri;
tepek bersorak sambil menari,
tontonan pahlawan dan bidadari.

Allah tiada melarang kita,
ansurlah diri ke tepi kota;
hari kiamat hampirlah nyata,
ampun dan maaf beribu juta.

Kekal dan sakral sumur dunia,
kemajuan dituntut segala manusia;
keraskan hati dengan setia,
kelak berhasil masuk yang mulia.

Ayolah! mari ke taman Soenting,
hamburkan benih yang penting-penting,
halus dan kasar dahan dan ranting,
anyam menganyam gunting-menggunting.

Perempuan harus menggerakkan diri,
patutlah pula mengeluarkan peri;
sejarah nan kasat na' hilang duri,
pelantikan gunjing sehari-hari.

Akan menjadi tiru teladan,
anak padusi na' jan njo edan,
adik ke sekolah maju ke medan,
ajarliah hormat merendahkan badan.

Sungguh seruan tiada sempurna,
seboleh-bolelah harap ta' lena,
sekalian pembaca muda terima,
sambutlah salam hormat,

Roehana
(Redactrice *Soenting Melajoe*)

Closing

The decolonial feminist approach allows us to re-examine the knowledge that has been shaped by the elites and colonial regime that control women's discourse. To me, the purpose of decolonial feminism is not merely to use non-white and indigenous figures as a token, or to counter and to be against everything related to knowledge from foreign countries. The decolonial approach is far from a matter of "revenge", but rather an attempt to show the existence of epistemic violence and how to build a just epistemic and ethics-based dialogue and solidarity. In feminist theory, the seeds of decolonial feminism have been seen through Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint (1987), black feminist thoughts through the intersectionality of Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw, as well as multiculturalism, post-colonial, and transnational theories.

Vergès (2020) says that the purpose of the decolonial feminist approach is to give visibility to the struggles of women who have been side-lined by the dominant races/ethnicities and obscured by history for being "others". Visibility (the visible) and non-visibility (the invisible) are strategic calculations made by the dominant group. Narratives and characters that are given visibility are inseparable from the circle of power, while narratives and characters that are made non-visible are those that are oppressed, denied access, ignored, not considered, or pretend not to be seen and heard (Timofei Gerber Interview with Vergès 2020).

I began by discussing the international marginalisation of feminist philosophers in Southeast Asia and highlighted Toeti Heraty as an Indonesian feminist philosopher. However, I also underlined the marginalisation of Toeti, who was ignored in her country as a philosopher, let alone a feminist philosopher. I pointed out the same thing in the case of Kartini and Siti Roehana. Roehana was marginalised as an Indonesian feminist figure (not at the same level as Kartini) and recognised only as the first female journalist. Kartini's letters in Dutch to her Dutch friends were highlighted and given a special place in Dutch museums and applauded at home. Kartini was so important to the colonial regime and the elites that W.R. Supratman (the composer of Indonesia Raya song) composed a special song for her. Meanwhile, *Soenting Melajoe* newspaper, which was initiated, published, and written by Siti Roehana in Malay for indigenous women, was obscured, invisible, and not even discussed as a feminist work. The systematic marginalisation of Siti Roehana is important to me because it has major consequences for other marginalised feminists such as

Dewi Sartika, who was in the same era as Kartini. The decolonial feminism approach is useful to question why other feminist figures from among ordinary people do not appear or should not appear?

The decolonial approach provides a fundamental understanding that colonisation is not only limited to territorial colonisation and economic exploitation but also includes epistemological colonisation. This epistemological colonisation shapes the colonial mindset or frame of thinking. To me, the decolonial feminist approach is not imperative, and there is no need to adopt it. The decolonial feminist approach is a choice. A choice to free oneself from epistemic violence.

Endnotes

- 1 See, State Policy Guidelines (GBHN) in 1993 and T. Ihromi's book, *Women's Studies in Development* (1995).
- 2 I use Siti Roehana instead of Rohana Koeddoes because Siti Roehana wrote her name as Siti Roehana in every publication of *Soenting Melajoe*. Sometimes, she wrote her name Siti Rohana without the *oe* spelling. Koeddoes was her husband's name, but she did not use her husband's name but her own.
- 3 Parts of this paper have been written for the EuroSEAS Conference in Paris, EHESS, 28 June-1 July 2022.
- 4 See more on <https://blog.apaonline.org/2021/03/02/the-women-doing-philosophy-group-in-the-philippines/>.
- 5 The name of UI Philosophy Major was used from 1974 to the 1980s, and changed to the Department of Philosophy in the 1990s.
- 6 Kartini's ambivalence between defending the Netherlands and Java is well explained by Grace VS Chin in her article, *Ambivalent Narration: Kartini's Silence and the Other Woman*. She uses the concept of "Janus-Faced" from Homi K. Bhabha. I simply interpret "Janus-Faced" as two-faced. This ambivalence can also be seen in Kartini's attitude, which initially considered polygamy a sin (Letter 6 November 1899).
- 7 Kartini's letters to Zeehandelaar showed how she was very proud of her aristocrat descent and did not say anything about her mother, who was actually a concubine named Ngasirah. Kartini deliberately hid her mother's identity. She spoke of Raden Ayu Moerjam as her mother, who was actually her stepmother. See, Chin (2020), *Ambivalent Narration: Kartini's Silence and the Other Woman*.
- 8 Remember that the selection and publication of Kartini's letters were completely controlled and released by the Dutch.
- 9 Raden Ajeng (R.A.) Kartini was declared a national hero on 2 May 1964 by President Soekarno, who issued Presidential Decree of the Republic of Indonesia Number 108 and set out to commemorate the birthday of R.A. Kartini on every 21 April. In the New Order era, Kartini's day was symbolised by the wearing of kebaya clothes by Dharma Wanita and it was compulsory to commemorate Kartini's day in kebaya. In the Reformation era, especially under President Joko Widodo's leadership, Kartini was proclaimed as the Nation's Feminist by her supporters. Although Joko Widodo, through the decision of the Minister of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia Number 23/MS/A/09/2019 dated 9 September 2019, named Siti Roehana as a national figure, her image remained in the corridor of the press (as in Minister Harmoko's decree awarding her as Indonesia's First Journalist (1974), on the 3rd National Press Day, 9 February 1987), and not as a female or feminist figure equal to Kartini. This note is important to show the appropriation and politicisation of Kartini throughout history and the silencing of other female figures who have fought for women's rights more tangibly.
- 10 Kartini's interesting relationship with Mrs Ovink (who was still Kartini's relative) illustrates Mrs Ovink's role in advertising Kartini's desire to correspond with the Dutch. The advertisement was submitted to *De Hollandsche Lelie*, *De Echo*, and *Nederlandsche Taal*, Dutch feminist journals. Read, Joost Coté's writing in *Introduction, On Feminism and Nationalism*, and in *Kukathas, The Dilemma of a Dutiful Daughter* (2009).
- 11 During the colonial era, Roehana pioneered the establishment of soup kitchens and social agencies for the fighters. Roehana was credited with coming up with the brilliant idea of smuggling weapons from Koto Gadang to Bukittinggi via Ngarai Sianok. See, Nusrat Uyun, *Modern Women's Education and the Pioneer Journalist (Roehana Koeddoes, Education, and Indonesian Female Journalist)*, Universitas Muhammadiyah, Ponorogo.
- 12 The women's newspaper *Poetri Hindia* was published in Batavia in 1908. This newspaper, however, was founded by Javanese men and aristocrats, Raden Mas Tirta Adhi Soerjo and R.T.A. Tirtokoesoemo. They acted as editors.
- 13 It is interesting to see the advertisements published in *Soenting Melajoe*. There were various advertisements of businesses managed by women. Siti Roehana paid great attention to advancing women's businesses.
- 14 Roehana's artwork was not limited to writing poetry. She was also known for producing theatre performance *Tonel Bundo Kandung*. This performance was shown in Koto Gadang and received an overwhelming response from the local community. Roehana's obsession with the struggle for women's rights was reflected not only through her writings, but also her arts.

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