

Kartini (1879-1904) was a young woman from an Indonesian aristocratic family who lived when Indonesia was ruled by the Netherlands. She learned Dutch as a child. Society greatly restricted her freedom as a teenager, but her family allowed her free access to contemporary Dutch journals and literature. She was inspired by Dutch feminism and exchanged many letters with sympathetic Dutch women, some in the Netherlands and some in Indonesia. After Kartini's death in childbirth at the age of 24, many of these letters were published. Despite her radical views, Kartini became a national hero in Indonesia, particularly for her promotion of women's education. Her birthday, this coming Monday April 21, is a national holiday, Kartini Day.



In her earliest letters, from 1899, she describes her situation to her Dutch feminist correspondents. Her parents were quite liberal by Indonesian standards, but still supported arranged marriage. Note that in her writing Kartini uses the word "India" to mean the region which is now Indonesia. All quotations are from letters originally written in Dutch.

In the following year, at the time of the investiture of our young Princess, [Wilhemina, Queen of the Netherlands] our parents presented us "officially" with our freedom. For the first time in our lives we were allowed to leave our native town, and to go to the city where the festivities were held in honour of the occasion. What a great and priceless victory it was! That young girls of our position should show themselves in public was here an unheard-of occurrence. The "world" stood aghast; tongues were set wagging at the unprecedented crime. Our European friends rejoiced, and as for ourselves, no queen was so rich as we. But I am far from satisfied. I would go still further, always further. I do not desire to go out to feasts, and little frivolous amusements. That has never been the cause of my longing for freedom. I long to be free, to be able to stand alone, to study, not to be subject to any one, and, above all, never, never to be obliged to marry.

But we must marry, must, must. Not to marry is the greatest sin which the Mohammedan woman can commit; it is the greatest disgrace which a native girl can bring to her family.

And marriage among us—Miserable is too feeble an expression for it. How can it be otherwise, when the laws have made everything for the man and nothing for the woman? When law and convention both are for the man; when everything is allowed to him?

Love! what do we know here of love? How can we love a man whom we have never known? And how could he love us? That in itself would not be possible. Young girls and men must be kept rigidly apart, and are never allowed to meet.

From later in 1899

Among us there is no marriage feast without drinking. And at the festivals of the natives, where they are not of strong religious convictions, (and usually they are Mohammedans only because their fathers, grandfathers and remote ancestors were Mohammedans—in reality, they are little better than heathen), large square bottles are always kept standing, and they are not sparing in the use of these.

But an evil greater than alcohol is here and that is opium. Oh! the misery, the inexpressible horror it has brought to my country! Opium is the pest of Java. Yes, opium is far worse than the pest. The pest does not remain for ever; sooner or later, it goes away, but the evil of opium, once established, grows. It spreads more and more, and will never leave us, never grow less—for to speak plainly—it is protected by the Government! The more general the use of opium in Java, the fuller the treasury.

The opium tax is one of the richest sources of income of the Government—what matter if it go well or ill with the people?—the Government prospers. This curse of the people fills the treasury of the Dutch Indian Government with thousands—nay, with millions. Many say that the use of opium is no evil, but those who say that have never known India, or else they are blind.

What are our daily murders, incendiary fires, robberies, but the direct result of the use of opium? True, the desire for opium is not so great an evil as long as one can get it—when one has money to buy the poison; but when one cannot obtain it—when one has no money with which to buy it, and is a confirmed user of it? Then one is dangerous, then one is lost. Hunger will make a man a thief, but the hunger for opium will make him a murderer. There is a saying here—"At first you eat opium, but in the end it will devour you."

It is terrible to see so much evil and to be powerless to fight against it.

That splendid book by Madam Goekoop I know. I have read it three times. [1] I could never grow tired of it. What would I not give to be able to live in Hilda's environment. Oh, that we in India had gone so far, that a book could cause such violent controversy among us, as

"Hilda van Suylenburg" has in your country. I shall never rest till H.v.S. appears in my own language to do good as well as harm to our Indian world. It is a matter of indifference whether good or harm, if it but makes an impression, for that shows that one is no longer sleeping, and Java is still in deep slumber. And how will her people ever be awakened, when those who should serve as examples, themselves love sleep so much. The greater number of European women in India care little or nothing for the work of their sisters in the Fatherland.

Will you not tell me something of the labours, the struggles, the sentiments, of the woman of today in the Netherlands? We take deep interest in all that concerns the Woman's Movement.

I do not know the modern languages. Alas! We girls are not allowed by our law to learn languages; it was a great innovation for us to learn Dutch. I long to know languages, not so much to be able to speak them, as for the far greater joy of being able to read the many beautiful works of foreign authors in their own tongue. Is it not true that never mind how good a translation may be, it is never so fine as the original? That is always stronger—more charming.

We have much time for reading, and reading is our greatest pleasure—we, that is, the younger sisters and I. We three have had the same bringing up, and are much with one another. We differ in age, each from the other, but one year. Among us three there is the greatest harmony. Naturally we sometimes have little differences of opinion, but that does not weaken the tie that binds us together. Our little quarrels are splendid, I find them so: I love the reconciliations which follow. It is the greatest of all lies—do you not think so too?—that any two human beings can think alike in everything. That cannot be; people who say that must be hypocrites.

I have not yet told you how old I am. I was just twenty last month. Strange, that when I was sixteen I felt so frightfully old, and had so many melancholy moods! Now that I can put two crosses behind me, I feel young and full of the joy of life, and the struggle of life, too.

Call me simply Kartini; that is my name. We Javanese have no family names. Kartini is my given name and my family name, both at the same time.

[1] Kartini is referring to the book *Hilda van Suylenburg* a popular 1897 novel considered a milestone in Dutch feminism.

In another letter, Kartini makes clear her objection to all aristocracy. She refers to the fact that in the Netherlands she was commonly referred to as a "Javanese Princess"

You are well informed about the Javanese titles. Before you mentioned it, I had never given the matter a thought, that I am, as you say, "highly born." Am I a princess? No more than you yourself are one. The last prince of our house, from whom I am directly descended in the male line, was, I believe, twenty-five generations back; but Mamma is closely related to the princely house of Medeira; her great-grandfather was a reigning prince, and her grandmother a princess. But we do not give a two-pence for all that. To my mind there are only two kinds of aristocracy, the aristocracy of the mind, and the aristocracy of the soul—of those who are noble in spirit. I think there is nothing more commonplace than those people who allow themselves to depend upon their so called "high birth." What worth is there in simply being a count or baron? I cannot see it with my little understanding.

Kartini thought a lot about religion.

I cannot tell you anything of the Mohammedan law, Stella. Its followers are forbidden to speak of it with those of another faith. And, in truth, I am a Mohammedan only because my ancestors were. How can I love a doctrine which I do not know—may never know? The Koran is too holy to be translated into any language whatever. Here no one speaks Arabic. It is customary to read from the Koran; but what is read no one understands! To me it is a silly thing to be obliged to read something without being able to understand it. It is as though I were compelled to read an English book, and the whole thing should go through my head without my being able to comprehend the meaning of a single word. If I wished to know and understand our religion, I should have to go to Arabia to learn the language. Nevertheless, one can be good without being pious. Is not that true, Stella?

Religion is intended as a blessing to mankind—a bond between all the creatures of God. They should be as brothers and sisters, not because they have the same human parents, but because they are all children of one Father, of Him who is enthroned in the heavens above. Brothers and sisters must love one another, help, strengthen and support one another. O God! sometimes I wish that there had never been a religion, because that which should unite mankind into one common brotherhood has been through all the ages a cause of strife, of discord, and of bloodshed. Members of the same family have persecuted one another because of the different manner in which they worshipped one and the same God. Those who ought to have been bound together by the tenderest love have turned with hatred from one another. Differences of Church, albeit in each the same word, God, is spoken, have built a dividing wall between two throbbing hearts. I often ask myself uneasily: is religion indeed a blessing to mankind? Religion, which is meant to save us from our sins, how many sins are committed in thy name? I

And later

In thinking over Javanese and European conditions and comparing them with one another, one can easily see that it is hardly better there than here in so far as the morality of the men is concerned, and that women are unfortunate there as here, with this difference, however, that the great majority there, of their own free will follow the man in the marriage bond; while here the women have no say at all in the matter, but are simply married out of hand, according to the will of their parents, to whomsoever those powerful ones shall find good.

In the Mohammedan world the approval, yes, even the presence of the woman is not necessary at a marriage. Father can come home any day at all and say to me, "You are married to so and so." I must then follow my husband. It is true I can refuse, but that gives the man the right to chain me to him for my whole life, without ever having come near me. I am his wife although I will not follow him, and if he will not allow me to be divorced, then I am bound to him all my life, while he is free to do as he pleases. He may marry as many women as he chooses without being concerned in the least about me. If Father should marry me off in this manner then I should find a way out at the beginning, one way or another. But then Father would never do that.

God has created woman as the companion of man and the calling of woman is marriage. Good! it is not to be denied, and I gladly acknowledge that the highest happiness for a woman is, and shall be centuries after us, a harmonious union with the man of her choice.

But how can one speak of a harmonious union as our marriage laws are now? I have tried to picture them to you. Must I not for myself, hate the idea of marriage, scorn it, when by it the woman is so cruelly wronged?

Kartini's was very interested in learning about how different cultures approached the issues she cared about, particularly the role of women and religion. One person that caught her imagination was Pandita Ramabai, an Indian woman religious reformer of the late 1800s. Ramabai was associated with the Indian liberal Brahmo Samaj movement. In 1872 Ramabai gave a speech to the American Unitarian Association in Boston.

Is there a Dutch translation of Lessing's works, and of the life and writings of Pudita Ramabai? I was still going to school when I heard of this courageous Indian woman for the first time. I remember it still so well; I was very young, a child of ten or eleven, when, glowing with enthusiasm, I read of her in the paper. I trembled with excitement; not alone for the white woman it is possible to attain an independent position, the brown Indian too can make herself free. For days I thought of her, and I have never been able to forget her. See what one good brave example can do! It spreads its influence so far.

Kartini read whatever she could find in Dutch. *Quo Vadis* was a popular Polish novel about early Christianity. *We Two* was a fictionalized account of the famous British atheist Charles Bradlaugh. Bradlaugh founded the UK National Secular Society in 1866. *Soul of a People* was a sympathetic account of Buddhism written by British person living in Burma. Israel Zangwill was a Jewish writer who wrote about Jewish immigrants in New York, popularizing the phrase “Melting Pot”.

Of whatever belief or race a man may be, a great soul is a great soul—a noble character, a noble character. I have read "Quo Vadis," and I have been thrilled with admiration for the martyrs to their faith, who amid the bitterest suffering, still looked faithfully and trustingly toward the Highest and proclaimed His praise in beautiful song. I have suffered with them and I have rejoiced with them.

Do you know "We Two," by Edna Lyall? That is a very fine book. It treats of atheism and Christianity, of true Christianity and of its frightful perversion, of which, alas, there is so much in the world. The atheist, Luke Raeburn, is a great figure, and Erica Raeburn too is a noble character, who from a zealous atheist becomes a sincere and believing Christian. They were a father and daughter who loved each other devotedly, and depended each upon the other.

We read too the "Soul of a People." That is about Buddhism and is also a beautiful book. We are anxious now to read something about Judaism (do you not say that?). Perhaps Zangwill's book "Dreams of the Ghetto" will be what we seek.

In a later letter (1902) Kartini concluded:

We were turned away for a long time from all religion, because we saw so much uncharitableness under its mantle. We learned, at first slowly; that it is not religion that is uncharitable, but man who has made what was originally Godlike and beautiful, bad and ugly. We think that love is the highest religion, and must one be a Christian in order to love according to that Heavenly command? For the Buddhist, the Brahmin, the Jew, the Mohammedan and even the Heathen can lead lives of pure love.

Kartini was sensitive to the criticism that her interest in foreign cultures reflected a lack of loyalty to Javanese culture. She wrote:

We Javanese cannot live without flowers and sweet odours. The native flowers in their splendour awaken in me a world of thought and feeling whenever I breathe in their perfume. Days afterwards it lives in my memory, and I feel the strong Javanese blood coursing through my veins. Oh soul of my people, that used to be too beautiful, that was full of kindness, poetry, gentleness and modesty—what has become of you? What have time and slothfulness not made of you?

It is so often said that we are more European than Javanese in our hearts. Sad thought! We know that we are impregnated with European ideas and feelings—but the blood, the Javanese blood that flows live and warm through our veins, can never die. We feel it in the smell of incense and in the perfume of flowers, in the tones of the gamelan, in the sighing of the wind through the tops of the cocoa-nut trees, the cooing of the turtle doves, the whistling of the fields of ripened rice, in the pounding of the haddi-blokken at the time of the rice harvest.

Kartini believed that promoting the education of women was one of the best ways to achieve the social changes she supported. In this she was quite successful. From shortly after her death, girl's schools throughout Indonesia were called "Kartini Schools".

I have thought so long and so much about education, especially of late, and I think it such a high, holy task that I feel that it would be a sin to dedicate myself to it, and not be able to fill in my account to the utmost; if I thought otherwise, I should be a teacher without worth.

Education means the forming of the mind and of the soul. I feel that with the education of the mind the task of the teacher is not complete. The duty of forming the character is his; it is not included in the letter of the law, but it is a moral duty. I ask myself if I am able to do this? I who am still so uneducated myself.

I often hear it asserted that when the mind is cultivated, the spirit grows of itself; but I have seen for a long time that that is not always the case, that education and intellect are not always a patent of morality. But one must not judge those whose spirits remain unawakened, who lack the higher education of the soul, too harshly; in most cases the fault lies not in themselves, but in their bringing up. Great care has been taken in the cultivation of the understanding, but in the cultivation of the character, none!

I subscribe warmly to Mijnheer's idea, which is set forth so clearly in his paper on the "Education of Native Girls," "Woman as the Carrier of Civilization!" Not because she has always shared the fate of man, and is a partner in his destiny, but because as I too am firmly convinced, she has a great and far-reaching influence, which can be for either good or evil; and because she, most of all, can help toward the spiritual regeneration of the world.

Man receives from woman his very earliest nourishment, at her breast, the child learns to feel, to think and to speak; and I see more and more clearly that the very earliest education has an influence which extends over one's whole after life. But how can the native women teach their children when they themselves are so ignorant?

There is great interest in education in the whole world of native women, so far as we know it. Many wish that they might be children again, so that they might profit by this opportunity.



And splendid! the number of native scholars at Parti, Kodoes, Japara and the other districts are the first visible foreshadowings of success. Already there are some girls' schools among the people and their number is increasing.

Despite her opposition to Indonesian marriage customs, Kartini did in fact marry in 1903. She would have preferred a scholarship to study in Europe, but at least her husband, a liberal traditional ruler like her father, supported her goal of founding schools for girls. Before her marriage she had not been very interested in economics. As the spouse of a local ruler, she learned more about how things worked, writing in 1904:

Why is it that the Javanese is so poor, they ask? And at the same time, they are thinking how they will be able to get more money out of him. Who will that money come from? Naturally from the little man for whose woe and weal we express such extreme concern that a whole commission is named to inquire into the cause of his retrogression; "What makes the Javanese so poor?" When grass-cutters who earn 10 or 12 cents a day are made to pay a trade tax. Every time a goat or a sheep is butchered a tax of twenty cents is paid. A Satee merchant who butchers two every day, must pay this tax, which amounts to one hundred and forty-four florins in the course of a year. What is left for his profit? Barely enough to live on.

I learned much of this at my parents' house, but here where my husband shares every thought with me, where I share his whole life, his work and his troubles, I have come to know of conditions of which I was not only in ignorance, but the very existence of which I did not dream.

There is so much crying injustice, and he who loves righteousness and holds office, must suffer indeed. He must see much, and do much himself that is against all principles of right.

On September 17, 1904 Kartini died 4 days after giving birth to her only child. Today she is a hero to all Indonesians, from Communists to Islamists, although they emphasize different aspects of her legacy.

