Kartini

Kartini. The Complete Writings 1898–1904, edited and translated by Joost Coté, Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2014, xviii + 868 pp. ISBN 9781922235107. Price: EUR 115.00 (paperback).

It is hard to overestimate the importance of the publication of this volume, not only for Dutch and Indonesian (literary) history, but also for postcolonial, gender, and critical legal studies, to name just a few fields in which Kartini's work is highly meaningful. Her work contains many sharp insights on issues with which the postcolonial world still struggles, including the paternalism of humanitarianism, the exclusionary practices of racism, the double standards concerning women of colour and a defence of human rights that does not stop at the gender or colour line. Add to this a formidable sense of irony and you have an author who is irresistible for anyone with the slightest postcolonial sensibility. To give just one example that many contemporary readers will love and read with shocked admiration, Kartini wrote on 6 November 1899 to her pen friend Stella Zeehandelaar in Amsterdam on the topic of the European habit of kissing each other: 'No matter how fond I was of someone (a Dutch person of course, we Javanese never kiss each other), it would never enter my head to volunteer to be the one to kiss first. Because, you see, I would not know if she would like this. For us it is a joy to brush a soft pale cheek with our lips, but whether the owner of that cheek also likes the feel of a dirty black face against her is another question' (pp. 85–6). This is, quite simply, perfect writing for *The Daily Show*.

Before this edition, figuring out how to find all of Kartini's work was a painstaking enterprise with little chance of success, as some of her writings could only be found in old journals, yellowed booklets from the first decades after World War II, and unique documents only available in archival storage in Leiden. Joost Coté not only took the trouble to collect these journals and booklets, but even retrieved some of Kartini's writings that had been cut by her first editor J.H. Abendanon as he was preparing a typescript for publication. At the same time, this volume is a painful reminder of the state of literary and historical scholarship in the Netherlands, where an edition like the one Coté has made is not easily imaginable. Kartini herself probably would feel honoured to find her complete writings like this, but, at least initially, surprised they were translated into English.

Coté opens this almost 900-page tome with a brief overview of his sources and an indication of earlier editions and translations, opening the way for further investigations. (What is the story behind the Arabic translation of some letters in 1926, for instance?) Next, in a sixty page historical introduction, he

provides an overview of Kartini's life and offers perspectives on her letters through sections on her position in Javanese society, her relation with Dutch colonial ('ethical') policy, a detailed portrait of all the recipients of the letters, an analysis of the relations which were established with these recipients through the letters and in person, and an overview of what Coté calls 'Kartini's "agenda"' with a focus on feminism, nationalism (not in a political, but in a socio-cultural sense), modernity, education, Javanese arts and crafts, and religion.

The introduction ends with a section on the importance of *Through Darkness to Light* (*Door duisternis tot licht*), the 1911 edited volume of her letters which brought Kartini world fame, not in the least because of its American translation as *Letters of a Javanese Princess* from 1920. Next, the letters are presented in chronological order from 1899 until 1904, with each year receiving a short introduction on its most important events and themes. The last part of the book contains three longer, personal narratives from Kartini's life, four published short stories and a poem, two ethnographic articles on batik and Koja marriage, and a number of educational memoranda. Coté ends his edited volume with a complete overview of Kartini's impressive international library and an elaborate register which contains, next to names of people and places, also many thematic entries. The book, finally, has a section with twenty-five photographs of, among other things, Kartini's house, her family members, some of her recipients and Kartini as a teacher with some of her students.

What is exciting about this volume is not only the many sharp and highly informed insights Coté provides us with, but also the possibilities it opens for further research that is no longer hampered by incomplete documentation. Coté, for instance, has a convincing account of Kartini's Javanese cultural nationalism, but the letters prove that Kartini, who was aware of the work done by Qasim Amin from Egypt, Pandita Ramabai from India, and dozens of European authors and social reformers, can also be analyzed from a transnational perspective with attention for lateral relations that do not directly involve Europe. Another topic that merits further investigation is the increasing attention Kartini shows for Islam and *agama Jawa*, as briefly noted by Coté. Kartini's work is a treasure trove of insights for our colonial and postcolonial age, and this volume makes it all the more likely she can take up her rightful place in a postcolonial canon together with W.E.B. Dubois, Frantz Fanon, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

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