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# Batik and Kebaya as Social Class Indicator and the Fight of Women's Freedom with R. A. Kartini

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***ABSTRACT***

***Batik and Kebaya became indicators of social class in the 18th and 19th centuries. This study explores information related to women's struggle for educational freedom and independence with the influence of R.A. Kartini. This study uses a literature review method obtained from various sources of books, research papers, journals, and different websites. Indonesia's very long social, historical and cultural heritage is in line with the pride of Indonesia's cultural heritage, especially Batik and Kebaya related to the history of R.A. Kartini. A Javanese female hero who inspired women from generation to generation to fight for rights, education, and freedom. This study further examines how batik and kebaya function not only as cultural heritage but also as visual markers of social hierarchy in Javanese society. The findings highlight that specific materials, patterns, and ways of wearing these traditional garments were closely associated with class distinction, particularly among the nobility. In addition, this research discusses how patriarchal values embedded in society limited women's access to education and freedom, even for those from higher social classes such as Kartini. Through the analysis of historical sources and cultural context, this study emphasizes the relevance of Kartini's thoughts in contemporary society. Despite significant progress in women's rights, issues related to gender inequality and patriarchal norms still persist. Therefore, batik and kebaya can also be interpreted as symbols within the broader discourse of women's emancipation in Indonesia, reflecting both cultural identity and the ongoing struggle for equality.***

***Keywords: batik, kebaya, R. A. Kartini, women's rights***

*Research Article*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### The history of batik and kebaya in Java culture

Batik is one of Indonesia's most known cultures. Almost every Indonesians have at least one batik in their closet whether it's in a form of a shirt, dress, or skirt. It doesn't even have to be in a clothing form since batik can also come in a household equipment. Starting from cups, glasses, pans, trays, frames, and etc. It's a part of Indonesian's lifestyle and it has become a necessity to Indonesian people.

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Figure 1. Batik on jugs
Source: (Admin, 2018)

Batik originated from Java and it comes from the word "*amba*" which means writing and dots. It was traditionally made with wax painted on a piece of fabric using a canting in a writing method. The painting method is called wax-resist dyeing meaning the wax blocks out the dye when it's dipped in a dye solution. In Java culture, batik embodies the personality, worldview, and aspirations of both the artist and the wearer. It also has to do with the wearer's desire to participate in a particular ceremony or event. Certain colors and motifs were created to signify particular meanings (Bahruddin, 2015). Kebaya was first worn during the 15$^{th}$ and 16$^{th}$ centuries after the Dutch colonization. It was worn by all Javanese women and usually made with velvet, guipure, nylon, and silk. Wearing a kebaya makes a woman to move carefully and elegantly because of its tight fitted design which at this era women are encouraged to be gentle, soft and polite. The kebaya has become a symbol of women's liberation in Indonesia, as it is associated with Raden A. Kartini, a prominent figure of the 19$^{th}$ century who is considered a precursor to feminism (Sugandy, 2022).



Figure 2. Women in kebaya
Source: (Astuti, 2020)

**Patriarchal views in Indonesia and women's freedom**

In 2017, the Indonesian Ministry of Women and Child Protection, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund, carried out the initial trustworthy

comprehensive study on gender-based violence across the country. Interestingly, the findings revealed that Indonesia's incidence of violence against women aligns with the global average, indicating that approximately one in three women experience sexual violence during their lifetime (Dunstan, 2019).

Kartini holds a significant place in Indonesian history as a prominent figure and is recognized as one of the early champions of emancipation. Her role extends beyond advocating for justice and gender equality, she also played a crucial part in questioning the concepts of nationality and occupation. During her time, progressive thinking was not a common occurrence, especially for a Javanese woman constrained by cultural norms. However, Kartini's intellectual contributions surpassed the boundaries of her era, particularly in Indonesia (Wacana, 2016).

Through her letters to her Dutch friends, Kartini demonstrated her broad access to knowledge, a privilege not accessible to everyone during that period. The inner turmoil she experienced provided her with a mental space to engage in thoughtful discussions with her Dutch acquaintances (Wacana, 2016).

A significant portion of Indonesian society actually reinforces the establishment of a patriarchal culture, which negatively impacts women. This aligns with Nurmila's observation that Indonesian society as a whole is patriarchal in nature, with males constantly holding the highest, most important, and dominating positions while women continue to be seen as inferior to men (Nurmila, 2015).

The significance of these issues is greatly magnified when subordination and inequality are present in the workplace. The unjust patriarchal system, that casts women while granting men dominance, is closely intertwined with women's opposition to male authority. The term "patriarchal culture" derives from "patriarchy," which represents a structure where men are regarded as the exclusive, central, and all-powerful leaders. As a result, the pervasive gender inequality and injustice that impact various aspects of life stem from the dominant patriarchal system within society's culture (Alfian, 2016).

These deep-rooted patriarchal views that has been existing for years made women in Indonesia is the reason why women got limited job opportunities and access to education compared to men. The perception that women are primarily suited for household and service- oriented roles, such as domestic helpers or waitstaff, significantly restricts their potential. This lack of positive utilization of women's skills and employability further contributes to a lack of trust in female workers and imposes additional restrictions on them that are not imposed on men. Hence it's also difficult for women and girls to gain new skills and education due to the perception of Indonesian patriarchal society to women.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method. This method is used to collect and analyze relevant information related to batik and kebaya as indicators of social class, as well as women's struggle for freedom and education influenced by R. A. Kartini. A literature review allows researchers to examine existing

knowledge and theories from previous studies in order to build a comprehensive understanding of a topic (Arivia & Subono, 2017).

The data used in this study are secondary data obtained from various sources, including books, academic journals, research articles, and credible online publications. These sources provide historical, cultural, and social perspectives on the development of batik and kebaya in Javanese society, along with discussions on patriarchal culture and women's roles in Indonesia (Alfian, 2016; Nurmila, 2015).

The data collection process was conducted by identifying, selecting, and reviewing literature relevant to the research topics. The selected sources were then analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method, where the information was interpreted and connected to the context of women's social conditions, both in the past and present (Idrus et al., 2023).

Through this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how batik and kebaya function not only as cultural artifacts but also as representations of social class and symbols within the broader discourse of women's rights and emancipation in Indonesia.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Batik and kebaya as an indicator of social class

As wearing kebaya makes a woman hard to move freely and comfortable. A woman is expected to move in elegance and swift with softness and in polite manners. A woman is expected to be *kalem* and sit prettily, especially from a Kartini since she came from a prestigious family. A certain behaviour is expected to be implied on her daily life. In this scene, we see Kartini sit with her sisters that is seemed to be against the social rules of a Indonesian women in that era (Sintowoko, 2022).




Figure 3. Kartini sitting with her sisters
Source: (Bramantyo, 2017)



Figure 4. Polished look of the java princesses
Source: (Bramantyo, 2017)



Figure 5. Kartini practicing jongkok
Source: (Bramantyo, 2017)

We could also see Kartini and her sister's social class by their outfits in these scenes. They are wearing a white kebaya with batik *Jarik* that wraps around their waist as a skirt. Around the 1800s, it was only worn by the nobles since not all Indonesians can afford batik *Jarik*. We could also view her social class by her appearance. How their hair is always styled neatly in a bun with a soft – make up look which around that time is kept simple to highlight their natural appearance.

There is also a difference of class we could spot in figure 03 where Kartini and her sister would look clean and polished, wearing a kebaya that looks very much in high quality and completed with accessories and jewelleries compared to her helper in figure 4, wearing only simple kebaya that looks like it was made with mediocre quality of fabric

**Women's difficulty to education, world of work, freedom and independence**

The time period preceding Kartini, specifically the 18$^{th}$ and 19$^{th}$ centuries, is often referred to as the era of actual colonial rule, known as the high colonial period. This era extended from the Java or Diponegoro War (1825-1830 AD) until the onset of the Japanese military occupation (1942-1945). According to Carey and Houben, this period, encompassing the time before and after the Java War, was crucial in understanding the shifts in the roles and influence of Javanese women. It was a time before they were heavily impacted by the authority of European colonialism, which was predominantly controlled by patriarchal men, and before the ascendancy of patriarchal Islam-Javanese power became prominent (Carey & Houben, 2016)**.**

Kartini was a woman who was struggling with her freedom during her era, on the 18th century. Despite her social status as member of a nobleman. It's still hard for her to speak out her mind, and to be herself as she was chained by the expected role of a woman. In Figure 5, The situation showed how Kartini strongly reject to the idea of her being married to a man who already has 3 wives at the moment. Girls are told to always be obedient, speaking our mind about something we disagree is seen as a bad behaviour of a woman and hence this behaviour lead her to being confined in her room as a punishment as it was seen as a selfish behaviour from her step mother.



Figure 6. Kartini confined in her room
Source: (Bramantyo, 2017)

The letters written by Kartini to her Dutch friends Mrs. Abendanon, Stella, Mrs. Ovink- Soer, and so on, were the real situation of how women in Indonesia were struggling at that time. The letters were then compiled to a book called Door Duisternis Tot Licht in 1911 and then translated into Indonesian, Habislah Gelap Terbitlah Terang in 1922 (Arivia & Subono, 2017).

In Door Duisternis Tot Licht, Kartini wrote down her ideas about the restraints of the feudal and colonial systems which hindered the progress of the Indonesian natives. In addition, Kartini also put forward her ideas about how the role of women should be in the life of society and the state. The feudal system is the granting of special privileges to some people who only come from the nobility, educated, or powerful people. While the colonial system is to give privileges only to colonizers and people who work for the colonialists (Bestari, 2022).




Figure 7. Habis Gelap Terbitlah terang
Source: (Kartini, 2017)

According to Saskia Wieringa (Wieringa, 1988), a professor in the Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands, Kartini wished for 3 things to be done. First, women should be able to access education, that education is essential for women since it could improve women as a person and it could be used to educate their children. Second, All women, no matter in what social class they are from, all should be able to be independent and be given the chance to be a breadwinner of a family through a chance from finding an occupation that they prefer. The third and the last one, polygyny should be abolished since it devalues the dignity of women (Wieringa, 1988).

**Living as an Indonesian woman in this modern world**

We live in a modern world where we could breathe and let our minds flow and that is all thanks to R.A Kartini and all women involved in making this happen. So how are we progressing? Have the issues thrown into our gender evolved? Has it changed? Or has it calmed down over the years? What makes today's situation differ from the past? Or are we facing the same problem over and over again against the oppressing men's opinions and the patriarchal views that swims around the Indonesian culture?

The definition of "women's rights" has evolved over time and differs across various cultures. Presently, there remains a lack of unanimous agreement on the exact scope of women's rights. Some individuals argue that a fundamental women's right includes the ability to make decisions regarding family planning and reproductive choices. Others emphasize workplace equality and equal opportunities for women to serve in the military, mirroring the rights afforded to men. Many believe that all of these aspects should be recognized as women's rights (Lewis, 2019).

Child marriage was normal in Indonesia due to the fact that women is viewed as a child bearing object to the society because of its deep-rooted gender norms. Young girls are stripped from their choice of marriage decisions. Marriage at such young age makes it harder for them later on to continue their education and ability to find a job or to enter employment market. This came from a variety of issues aside from the normalized gender norms of women. And some of that includes low levels of education, and discriminatory legislation that plays a role in perpetuating child marriage practices (Lewis, 2019).

Figure 7 shows the situation of a woman in the past around $18^{th}$ to $19^{th}$ century who wants to become a *Raden Ayu*, they must went to a process called *pingitan* which is a process which a woman must be secluded after their first menstruation until they were married. These women back then doesn't have a choice to decide their marriage. A woman will be kept confined in a room until a man comes to propose a marriage. They are not allowed to reject a proposal of a man even it means to become their first, second or even the third wive of a man.




Figure 8. Kartini in pingitan
Source: (Bramantyo, 2017)

The law Indonesia sets a legal marriage for marriage is at 21. But with parents' agreement, girls could marry at the age of 16 and boys can marry at the age of 19. This create an unfair situation for the girls since they could be married off younger than the boys. In some cases, the age of consent could go even lower, allowing girls to be married off as young as 13 years old. Indonesia has been fighting extremely hard to reform legislation that discriminates against women and girls, there is an improvement, but it still requires attention from the government and society (Tarahita & Rakhmat, 2018).

There is an improvement of women moving in politics with the act of our president Joko Widodo whose existing cabinet has the highest women in Indonesia's history. Strong, smart and capable women are finally stepping of the shadow and came to collect the position they deserve as political figures. Some of them are, Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, Susi Pudjiastuti. Minister of Finance, Sri Mulyani Indrawati. Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, Yohana Susana Yembise. These women are the living proof of how capable women are in the political world, and there should be more of these women coming from the young generation (Tarahita & Rakhmat, 2018).

That is an improvement we can see in education, child marriage and work world. How about as a woman living our everyday life? While the gender gap in the education and working world has decreased, gender inequality's improvement is still lacking in Indonesia. We are still unheard, our opinions are still disregarded, credits for achievement are still prioritized for men and our souls are still confined by the culture that runs in Indonesia. The first national survey by the government showed that 75% of women in Indonesia face physical and sexual abuse. 33% of women between 16 and 64 has experienced abuse.

Our country is ranked the 88th out of 144 countries in the world Economic Forum's 2016 Gender Gap Index . Over the last 10 years, our economy has improved but the view against women with traditional social perceptions and attitudes remains unchanged (Tarahita & Rakhmat, 2018).

Living as a woman in Indonesia is still hard. We got called out every day in our way to school or work. Our opinions are sometimes heard but neglected. We are disrespected and ignored because of our gender. But in believing there are powerful women back then like Kartini and her sisters as well as Sri Mulyani Indrawati and other women in this era making us feel seen and heard. I believe we could become something more and we could stan against men's and society's oppressing view about women.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Over the years Batik and Kebaya has been one of the most worn fashion items to Indonesian people, as for today it has also come in many forms. These 2 items can tell a lot of a person's background from a culture, social status and a meaning waiting to be told to the viewer. Just like how kebaya has become associated with our hero who's brave and smart, care enough to sacrifice herself for the women in her entire nation, Raden Ajeng Kartini Djojo Adhiningrat.

R.A Kartini is the start of feminism in Indonesia, she fought for women's access to education, women's independence to have a chance in a working world and the dignity of a women, how men and women should be equal and that the patriarchal views should be demolished. Living in this modern world as a woman is still hard, because no matter how hard we as a woman fight for equality, the toxic culture in Indonesia and the patriarchal views from the society cannot be stopped. But because of powerful figures like Kartini and so many other brave women shows that we, women can also fight, be heard, have choices and independence is what has kept the young girls to keep fighting for their dreams.

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