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Kartini, Online Media, and the Politics of the Jokowi Era: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The indigenous education activist and feminist of the late Dutch colonial era, R.A. Kartini, has remained an enduring public icon for more than a century. While celebrated as a national hero in Indonesia, like many iconic women of the Global South, Kartini's symbolic force has been readily appropriated for political ends. As a 'floating signifier', her image absorbs fluctuating meanings and ideologies, making the analysis of her representation at a given point in time a valuable approach to political analysis. This article focuses on Kartini's portrayal in the second term of the Jokowi presidency in mainstream Indonesian online media discourse. Recognising the dialectical relationship between the online news media and dominant political discourse, we use critical discourse analysis to identify and examine the mainstream ideologies embedded in the news media's representations of Kartini. Our analysis provides a snapshot of dominant Indonesian political discourse, revealing a set of intersecting ideologies: conservative feminism, neoliberalism, softened Islamic piety, and perfunctory nationalism.

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Introduction

At critical junctures in Indonesia's modern history, exceptional women have emerged as ideological icons, their status enhanced by the perceived challenge they pose to the status quo and their difference from the male political norm (Ahlstrand, 2022; Brenner, 2011; Heryanto, 2008; Tiwon, 1996). Indeed, in societies across the world, through a continuous process of discursive reconstruction, norm-breaking women become not only public icons, but also permanent fixtures on the socio-political landscape. As 'floating signifiers' (Laclau, 2005), their image becomes a vehicle of fluid, intersecting, and even contradictory meanings across different temporal and socio-political contexts. Constructed against a post-colonial backdrop of fervent nationalism, women of the Global South become particularly susceptible to these ideological transformations. Mexican artist and activist, Frida Kahlo, for example, has been reimagined as a feminist, Marxist, anti-colonialist, and disability advocate by different groups at different times (Estrada, 2018; Irwin, 2007). In India, the activist-turned-politician

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Sarojini Naidu, who fought alongside Mahatma Gandhi for Indian independence, has been constructed as a women's rights advocate and anti-imperialist (Reddy, 2010). The study of iconic women and their representation in specific temporal contexts therefore becomes a way of capturing and critically examining the ideological make-up of a society, including the underlying tensions and contradictions that characterise socio-political transition.

Among Indonesia's feminine national icons, no one rivals the prominence and longevity of the colonial-era activist, Raden Ayu Kartini (1879–1904, henceforth Kartini). Known as an advocate for indigenous women's rights and education, her campaign for emancipation continues to resonate in Indonesia to this day. Kartini is immortalised by numerous schools and charities named in her honour, as well as edited collections of the letters she sent to progressive members of the Dutch elite with whom she shared her insights into the colonial world, the Javanese aristocracy, and her campaign for emancipation. Each year, on 21 April, Indonesians celebrate Kartini Day, which commemorates her status as a national hero and becomes a showcase for discussions and events focused on women's contributions to modern society, which have changed with the dynamics of Indonesian politics. Functioning as a floating signifier, Kartini's image has absorbed fluctuating and competing meanings throughout Indonesia's modern history, from colonialism to independence, and authoritarianism to the present-day democracy (Robinson, 2020).

In this article, we turn our attention to the discursive construction of Kartini in the democratic era, specifically over the ideologically complex period in the second term of the Joko Widodo (henceforth Jokowi) government between 2018 and 2022. The time-frame covers the first four years of Jokowi's second term in office, characterised by political change, including a growing focus on neoliberal economic policy and national development, the accommodation of Islam, increasing evidence of authoritarian leadership, and unmistakably, the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a theoretical and methodological framework grounded in critical discourse analysis (CDA), we analyse Kartini's representations in online news discourse as a way of interpreting the politics of the era and uncovering the ideologies that underpin it. We focus on two of Indonesia's most popular mainstream online newspapers, Kompas.com and Detik.com, in recognition of the strong relationship between online news media and political discourse, not only in Indonesia but also globally. Although the online news media does not function as a government mouthpiece, it both shapes and is shaped by dominant political discourse because of a combination of production and consumption habits and the political interests of media owners (Ahlstrand, 2021; Lim, 2017; Tapsell, 2015; 2017). Through our analysis of Kartini in the online media discourse, we present linguistic evidence to unravel the ideological complexities of the second term of the Jokowi presidency.

For our study, we adopt van Dijk's (1998, 120–121) definition of ideology as the 'foundational beliefs that underlie the shared social representations of specific kinds of social groups that form the basis of discourse and other social practices'. We also acknowledge van Dijk's assertion that while ideological discourse takes both explicit and implicit forms, the implicit form requires critical attention in that it can enact power relations and dominance, by convincing readers to align with a set of dominant beliefs that are 'not necessarily in their best interests' (van Dijk, 1995, 11). Through consistent engagement with implicit ideological content, particularly from elite institutions such as

the news media, ‘active consensus will replace passive or tacit consent’ (van Dijk, 1995, 16), which means ideological control becomes ‘virtually total, or hegemonic’ (van Dijk, 1995, 16). Through systematic, context-based linguistic analysis of Kartini’s representation in the mainstream online news media, we seek to make these underlying ideologies and the structures of power they support transparent.

Our study breaks away from a typical focus on male political players, party politics, and institutions to concentrate on the representation of a feminine historical figure as a new point of entry into political critique. Our work also strengthens the field of CDA by applying and expanding on van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework of social actor analysis to study a historical figure as a floating signifier. Moreover, by demonstrating the pertinence of both a language and a woman from the Global South as a source of ideological analysis, our study contributes to the decolonising of social science, upholding the work of S. H. Alatas (2000; 2002; 2006) and S. F. Alatas (2006), who advocate knowledge production from the Global South to inform communities of knowledge in the Global North.

The Many Ideological Faces of Kartini

Kartini was a member of the Javanese aristocracy, or *priyayi* class, who lived at a time of extraordinary social change in the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia). In 1901, the Dutch introduced the Ethical Policy aimed at improving native welfare, and colonial administrators offered greater educational opportunities to members of the indigenous aristocracy, who were anticipated to work in allegiance with the colonial powers. In this context, Kartini gained privileged yet limited access to a Dutch-language school education normally beyond the reach of Javanese women. While her father removed her from schooling at the age of 12 to undertake *pingitan* (seclusion in the transition from girlhood to adulthood) and later marriage (Taylor, 1989), Kartini maintained a commitment to self-education, reading widely and engaging in critical intellectual discussions with a broad circle of friends. Writing in impeccable Dutch, Kartini corresponded enthusiastically with progressive members of Dutch society, expressing a desire for Western education for women and to participate in a new modernity, while simultaneously criticising the colonial regime and seeking to preserve her class and its associated traditions.

The apparent contradictions in her letters reflected the social upheaval at the time, during which Kartini became a master navigator of two worlds (Coté, 2014; Rutherford, 2020). Her ambiguous legacy has invoked multiple interpretations by different ideological groups, in both local and global political contexts, in which Kartini’s discursive ambiguity became a political resource (Bijl, 2020; Coté, 2020; Molony, 2006; Robinson, 2020; Rutherford, 2020). By analysing a particular representation of Kartini at a given point of time, it becomes possible to identify the underlying ideologies and politics that have penetrated the discourse, along with the structures of power sustained by these ideologies. Within Kartini’s lifetime, for example, Molony (2006, 521–522) asserts that the Dutch proponents of the Ethical Policy presented her as a symbol of its success: a self-congratulatory example of the effective blending of Javanese and Dutch values. Coté (2020, 19) argues that such a portrayal undermines Kartini’s agency, presenting her as

a victim of tradition and an object of colonial benevolence, which ultimately reinforced a colonial hierarchy.

After Kartini's untimely death at the age of 25 following the birth of her first child, the Director of Native Education in the Netherlands East Indies, Jacques Abendanon, published a collection of her letters in 1911. Entitled *Door duisternis tot licht* (Out of Dark Comes Light), the book helped share Kartini's emancipatory message with a wider audience of Dutch-language readers. Scholars have claimed that the book itself represents a colonial depiction of Kartini and that Abendanon altered her voice significantly, thereby creating what Coté (2014, 61) contends was 'a Kartini for public consumption in the Netherlands'. Indeed, through a comparative analysis, Tominaga (2019) revealed that Abendanon censored more than 70 per cent of Kartini's original letters. Scholars have also shown that a colonial framework was reproduced in subsequent translations of the book into French and English. Coté (2020, 19, 38), for example, argues that the US publications transformed Kartini into 'a monument of self-congratulatory imperialism' and thereby rationalised the conquest and reform of 'primitive' native societies. Bijl (2020, 55–56), meanwhile, asserts that UNESCO's publication of her letters in the 1960s reproduced structural power differences, mapping relations between 'the Orient' and 'the West', while promoting an ideology of American exceptionalism.

Separated by more than a century, the colonialist interpretations of Kartini bear striking similarities to contemporary Western media coverage of Pakistani women's education activist, Malala Yousafzai. While celebrating Yousafzai as a courageous ambassador of girls' education, media representations simultaneously undermine her cultural and religious background, and produce a racialised hierarchy. Khurshid and Pitts (2019), for example, contend that Yousafzai is constructed as an ally of the West, an exception to her traditional, backward culture, and a justification for Western interventions. In a media analysis, Walters (2016) detects a strong admiration of Yousafzai in the UK coupled, however, with the demonisation of Pakistani society and, more broadly, the global Muslim population. Thomas and Shukul (2015) highlight the ideological divide between Western and Pakistani media portrayals, with the West constructing Yousafzai as both an activist and a victim, and the Pakistani media portraying her as a tool of a Western agenda.

In a similar way, Kartini's meaning to the indigenous Indonesian population deviates significantly from that of the West. Unlike Yousafzai, however, interpretations of Kartini have remained largely positive: to Indonesians, Kartini is first and foremost a *pahlawan nasional* (national hero). While living three decades before the emergence of fully fledged nationalism, Kartini inadvertently became a potent nationalist symbol in the early anti-colonial movement through the publication of *Door duisternis tot licht*. Dutch-educated indigenous nationalists identified seeds of anti-colonial sentiment in the Abendanon edition and embraced Kartini as a nationalist icon in their campaign (Molony, 2006). In 1964, almost 20 years after the declaration of independence, the first President of the Republic of Indonesia, Soekarno, officially named Kartini a *pahlawan nasional* and established her birthday (21 April) as Kartini Day (Rutherford, 2020; Woodward, 2015, 35). To maintain power by revitalising the momentum of the nationalist movement while upholding a leftist ideology, Soekarno's Old Order government emphasised Kartini's revolutionary status and her contribution to 'the foundation, welfare, and history' of Indonesia, while concealing her aristocratic roots (Woodward, 2015, 34).

In 1965, the politics of Indonesia, and accordingly, the portrayal of Kartini, changed dramatically. Following an anti-Communist purge led by the military, Soekarno was removed from power and replaced by Suharto, who established the New Order government. Suharto maintained control of the population with strict conservatism and regard to development and stability, while consolidating his family's wealth and power. The politically active Indonesian women's movement (Gerwani) was outlawed and defamed, with many of its members killed in a state-sanctioned campaign of violence (Blackburn, 2004; Hearman & McGregor, 2007; Pohlman, 2013; 2015a; 2015b). Thereafter, the New Order government depicted the women's political activism as a threat, linked to the morally corrupt Gerwani (Wieringa, 2015). The revolutionary Kartini was thus replaced by an aristocratic *Ibu Kartini* (Mother/Madam Kartini) who became a symbol of the regime's hegemonic gender ideology. In this framework, women were expected to contribute to national development through marriage, motherhood, and the ideal nuclear family (Bennett, 2005; Robinson, 2009). Kartini Day became a centrepiece of the regime and a celebration of normative gender values (Robinson, 2009; Tiwon, 2000; Woodward, 2015).

In 1998, before the collapse of the New Order, the motherhood trope became politicised. *Suara Ibu Peduli* (SIP, the Voice of Concerned Mothers) famously used the guise of motherhood to challenge Suharto on the grounds of his failure as 'father of the nation'. Kartini Day was also reclaimed as a day of protest against the regime. Following a short-lived period of post-authoritarian euphoria, Kartini's image has become a vehicle of the competing discourses and ideologies in the democratic era. Kartini is celebrated as a pioneer of women's emancipation, a national hero, and a symbol of a conservative gender order (Robinson, 2009; 2020). Altered images of a veiled Kartini now circulate on Indonesian social media, demonstrating the growing relevance of Islamic interpretations of womanhood. The varied depictions of Kartini call for a systematic analysis to provide an accurate account of the ideologies and structures of power that penetrate them.

The Politics of the Jokowi Era

First elected in 2014 on the back of a pro-people, nationalist campaign, Jokowi initially appeared poised to advance democratic reform. After a short honeymoon, however, his administration began to introduce more authoritarian tactics reminiscent of the New Order (McGregor & Setiawan, 2019; Power, 2018; Setiawan, 2019). The first hints of change occurred when nationalism under Jokowi became increasingly aligned with economic and territorial interests, creating a version of nationalism that was vastly different from the independence movement and the Soekarno era (Aspinall, 2015). Facing challenges from political rivals, oligarchic forces, militant Islam, and civil society groups, Jokowi prioritised security, stability, and economic growth at the expense of human rights and freedom of speech.

In his second term, which is the focus of this article, Jokowi began to rely increasingly on law enforcement and security institutions to maintain power and repress democratic opposition (McGregor & Setiawan, 2019; Setiawan, 2019). Scholars also highlight the prioritisation of infrastructure development as the new cornerstone of the presidency, and its uncanny resemblance to the New Order's developmentalist agenda (Mujani & Liddle, 2021; Warburton, 2016). In contrast to the New Order's development

programme, however, Jokowi adopted an increasingly neoliberal approach (Al-Fadhat, 2022). Neoliberalism became particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as Jokowi and his political allies resisted strict lockdowns in order to keep the economy running (Mietzner, 2021). As the Delta variant spread throughout the country, the non-interventionist strategy left Indonesian civil society to fend for itself and develop local interventions in order to survive (Setijadi, 2022).

Approaching the end of his first term in office, some Islamic groups began to voice concerns about Jokowi's Islamic credentials (Arifianto, 2021). Hard-line Islam, religious intolerance, and home-grown extremism began to intensify during his first term, despite Jokowi's assertions that Indonesian Islam was tolerant and progressive (Fealy, 2016; Nur et al., 2020). Jokowi navigated these challenges by building an alliance with Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), known for its advocacy of moderate Islam, its emphasis on the leadership of the *ulama* (clerics), and its accommodation of traditions (Arifianto, 2021).

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Through a focus on the representation of Kartini in the mainstream online news, this article seeks to identify and critically examine the complex ideological forces that constitute the dominant political discourse during Jokowi's second term in office. We analysed a total of 140 news reports featuring Kartini as the main social actor, published between 2018 and 2022, by two of Indonesia's most popular and influential online news sites, Kompas.com and Detik.com. Most of the reports were published on or around Kartini Day each year, in an annual pattern of brief yet fervent discussion of Kartini's ongoing significance and women's issues.

In accordance with the principles of CDA, we developed 'conceptual tools relevant to the research problem and context' (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, 7) to mediate 'between text and institution, between communication and structure, and between discourse and society' (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, 9). In recognition of the enduring socio-political salience of Kartini as a key historical icon, coupled with the potential for social actors to bridge language, structures, and power, we engaged van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Analysis as the foundational analytical tool. The study of social actors and groups and their social actions is recognised as an important way of mediating between the micro-level of language use and the macro-level of the social order (van Dijk, 2015, 468). We conducted an initial pilot analysis of the news reports through van Leeuwen's framework.

Through the pilot study, a selection of salient representational categories from van Leeuwen's social actor toolkit were identified. These included transitivity structures, originally based on the work of Halliday (1985) to demonstrate agency and participation in a range of social processes, categories of nomination or identification through naming, and objectification such as the representation of social actors by reference to an abstract concept, or reference to the body rather than the human through somatisation. Grammatical features from the toolkit to conceal or remove agency included the transformation of verbs into nouns through nominalisation, passive agent deletion, and the allocation of ownership through possessivation.

To strengthen the analysis, the categories of lexicalisation, temporality, and local coherence from the CDA paradigm were added to the social actor framework.

Lexicalisation refers to concepts, meanings, or ideas expressed through an ideological vocabulary (van Dijk, 2010). The category of lexicalisation has a long tradition in Indonesian sociolinguistics, and streamlines the study of political discourse by identifying key words that function as ideological shorthand (Heryanto, 1995; van Langenberg, 1986). Given Kartini's status as a historical figure, the data showed consistent reference to the past and present, enhancing the relevance of temporality as an analytical category. Temporality refers to the representation of social change over time, reflected through transformations and ruptures in coherence, as well as continuity and inertia in discourse (Hamann & Suckert, 2018). Markers of temporal coherence, including contrast, comparison, and continuity, were thus added to the framework to understand the relationship between past and present, and thus social change. The addition of local coherence markers of causality and contrast also helped uncover how ideas were connected, arguments were construed, and ideological knowledge was conveyed to the reader (van Dijk, 2010).

The second stage of analysis of Kartini's representation took place through this complete framework and maintained consistent reference to the socio-political context. Asking the overarching question of 'how does the discourse construct Kartini as an ideological icon?', we developed several sub-questions:

- How are Kartini and other social actors identified?
- How is agency allocated to Kartini and other social actors?
- What politically salient keywords are used in the texts?
- How is the relationship between the past and present portrayed?
- How is coherence applied, and what arguments does it support?

The analysis revealed patterns of representations, known as discourse strategies, which support distinct ideological functions consisting of clusters of co-occurring discursive representations. Discourse strategies are defined as 'the planned discursive activities, the political aims and functions of these activities, and the linguistic means designed to help realise these aims' (Wodak et al., 2009, 34). We focused on the political aims, and the latent ideologies supported by discourse strategies. The analysis revealed a total of four discourse strategies in the news reports: *diluting feminism*, *promoting self-help*, *constructing piety*, and *appropriating nationalism*. At least one strategy occurred in each of the 140 news reports, with many instances of co-occurrences, indicating the presence of multiple, intersecting ideologies in the texts. The representational components, functions, and socio-political salience of these strategies are described below through illustrative examples.

Diluting Feminism

While Kartini is recognised as a feminist icon of Indonesia and the Global South (Connell, 2010), both Detik.com and Kompas.com reports filtered her feminist credentials through a conservative lens via a strategy of *diluting feminism*. The strategy portrays Kartini as a static, non-threatening figure shackled to the past with limited agency. It undermines the relevance of feminism to the contemporary era, by emphasising the positive conditions of the present and the negative conditions of the past, while omitting reference to the ongoing challenges faced by

women. While seemingly celebrating women's emancipation in the present day, the strategy anchors women's participation in public life to the responsibilities of motherhood.

Kartini is regularly introduced in the lead sentence as a 'figure' (*tokoh* or *sosok*), followed by a nominalised or objectified representation of her feminist-based credentials, commonly through the ideologically salient term *emansipasi wanita* (women's emancipation). The static foreign loanword, *emansipasi* has less threatening connotations to an Indonesian readership than the term *feminis*, a term regarded with some suspicion and uncertainty in Indonesia (Blackburn, 2010; Sadli, 2002). Moreover, with roots in the New Order, *wanita* (woman/women) is the 'ladylike' alternative to the more earthy *perempuan* (woman) (Blackburn, 2004). Referring to Kartini as *tokoh emansipasi wanita* thus upheld a conservative vision of her feminist credentials.

The strategy undermines Kartini's agency and the scope of her socio-political impact by predominantly representing her in terms of mental processes relating to thoughts and feelings. While activation in mental processes can provide insight into a social actor's inner world and invite empathy, doing so limits their agency to the self (Ahlstrand, 2022, 109, 138). This form of activation contrasts with verbal or material processes which have a more concrete social impact, and indicate 'who does what to whom' (Nunez-Perucha, 2011). Excerpt 1 below illustrates the activation of Kartini in the particularly insipid mental process of *berangan-angan* (to daydream) in relation to achieving gender equality, which undermines the substantiality of her efforts:

Kartini berangan-angan perempuan bisa memiliki kesempatan yang sama dengan laki-laki untuk memiliki pendidikan serta bebas mengembangkan diri tanpa takut kungkungan tradisi.

Kartini **dreamed** that women could have the same opportunities as men to gain an education and develop themselves without the shackles of tradition (Novena, 2021, emphasis added).

This reference to the 'shackles of tradition' touches on another important component of the strategy, temporal contrast, which highlights the positive conditions of today as opposed to the misery of Kartini's era. Modernity is defined as a structured, temporal relation to the past, through which the relationship is manipulated according to different ideological interests (Smith & Bender, 2001). Using markers of temporal contrast, the strategy thus constructs a liberated and advanced portrayal of the modern day in contrast to a backward past, which ultimately undermines the need for ongoing feminist struggle.

Excerpt 2 presents an example of temporal contrast to celebrate present-day conditions when discussing Kartini's desire to achieve equal access to education. Phrases such as *di masa itu* (at that time, back then) and *tidak seperti saat ini* (unlike these days) emphasise the negative aspects of the past and progressive aspects of modern society, which has given Indonesian women equal access to education:

Di masa itu, belum banyak perempuan yang dapat mengenyam pendidikan. Tidak seperti saat ini, baik laki-laki dan perempuan memiliki kedudukan yang sama dalam memperoleh pendidikan.

At that time, not many women had access to education. **Not like the present day**, where both men and women have the same status in accessing education (Sumartiningtyas, 2021, emphasis added).

While highlighting the difference between then and now, the reports also draw a causal link between Kartini's efforts to achieve gender equality and the positive conditions of today. The use of causal coherence markers such as *berkat* (because, thanks to) and *oleh karena* (as a result) accentuates the link, but in doing so, conceals the long-term struggle for gender reform over the past century, as well as the ongoing challenges faced by women in the present day. This process of omission through causality is demonstrated in Excerpt 3:

Berkat Kartini, saat ini perempuan Indonesia sudah dapat berkontribusi dan ikut andil dalam memajukan bangsa dari segala bidang, termasuk menjadi peneliti di bidang ilmu pengetahuan dan teknologi.

Because of Kartini, women today can now contribute and participate equally, advancing the nation in all areas, including as researchers in science and technology (Ananda, 2021, emphasis added).

When presenting examples of gender equality in the present day, the strategy often focuses on the professional and educational opportunities now available to Indonesian women. These opportunities are consistently anchored to the responsibilities of motherhood. The use of causal coherence markers such as *karena* (because) justifies education for women based on their role as mothers and the need to educate their children. When highlighting women's professional and educational opportunities, contrasting coherence markers such as *namun* (however) remind women of the ongoing need to fulfil family duties while pursuing a career.

Excerpt 4 below comes from a report showcasing Indonesian women researchers on Kartini Day but reorients women from their professional lives to motherhood using contrast in the phrase *namun di sisi lain* (however, on the other hand). The excerpt also includes reference to the semi-religious term *kodrat*, or women's essential, biologically determined role as wives and nurturing mothers to justify their commitment to motherhood. Enshrined in the state policy of the New Order as part of a conservative gender regime (Robinson, 2009), the continued use of this term in the democratic era reflects a conservative turn playing out through gender ideology (Wieringa, 2015).

Berkat perjuangan RA Kartini, perempuan zaman sekarang bisa memperoleh hak yang sama dengan kaum pria. Baik dari segi pendidikan maupun karier. Namun di sisi lain, peneliti perempuan juga tidak melupakan kodratnya sebagai seorang istri dan ibu yang mengasuh dan mendidik anak mereka.

Thanks to RA Kartini's struggle, women these days can now enjoy the same rights as men. Both in education and their careers. **However, on the other hand**, women researchers also do not forget their *kodrat* as a wife and mother who cares for and educates their children (Prastiwi, 2021, emphasis added).

The examples in this section have shown that the strategy of diluting feminism constructs Kartini as a banal feminist icon, while diminishing her agency. Her actual efforts to achieve gender equality and her struggles as a woman are relegated to the distant past. In contrast, the present day appears modern and

devoid of obstacles for women, given that Kartini apparently achieved emancipation for women more than a century ago. While celebrating the opportunities available to the modern woman, the strategy regularly links them to domestic duties and the responsibilities of marriage and reproduction, thus limiting their emancipation.

Promoting Self-Help

While the strategy of diluting feminism relegates Kartini and her efforts to the past, somewhat contradictorily, the strategy of *promoting self-help* constructs her as a source of inspiration for women to improve themselves and contribute to the nation in the present day. The New Order government promoted the policy of *pembangunan* (development), which encompassed the nation, politics, economy, and culture, while demanding compliance from its citizens (Heryanto, 1995). In the Jokowi era, economic development combined with a neoliberal agenda, putting the onus on individuals to overcome obstacles, improve themselves, and ultimately contribute to the nation. The role of the state and the structural inequalities that impede social mobility are concealed in the process. The strategy of promoting self-help highlights Kartini's exceptionalism and encourages women to draw inspiration from her to better their lives. It also obscures the role of the government in supporting women, who are continuously placed in a disempowered position, contradictory to superficial discussions of personal growth and improvement.

The strategy constructs Kartini's defiance of her feudal circumstances through markers of contrast such as *di tengah* (amid), *namun* (however), and *meskipun* (despite). Naming her as a *pendobrak* (agent of change), *pelopor* (pioneer), *pejuang* (fighter), or *inspirasi* (inspiration) also enhances her exceptional, norm-breaking status. While seemingly powerful, Kartini's agency is minimised: she is referred to in static terms such as her *kata-kata inspiratif* (inspirational words) and *semangat perjuangan* (fighting spirit). Moreover, the strategy foregrounds the voice of authority figures who promote the value of self-help, while placing Indonesian women in a subordinate position as the recipients of their instructions.

Excerpt 5 contains an indirect quote from the Minister of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, I Gusti Ayu Bintang Darmawati, on the importance of women's education and Kartini's legacy. On the one hand, the message appears to uplift women, but on the other, it reproduces their subordination. The message also mystifies the role of the government in providing support despite coming from the Minister of Women's Empowerment. Indonesian women are reminded to reproduce Kartini's *semangat* (spirit, enthusiasm), while they are positioned as passive recipients of her instructions. When speaking of 'instilling an attitude for learning', the agentless passive verb *ditanamkan* (instilled) obfuscates government responsibility for supporting women's participation in education.

*Terakhir, Bintang juga **mengingatkan perempuan Indonesia meneladani semangat Kartini dalam mencari ilmu dan mengembangkan diri. Menurut Bintang, sikap sebagai pembelajar harus ditanamkan dalam diri perempuan Indonesia.***

Finally, Bintang **reminded Indonesian women to follow Kartini's spirit and pursue knowledge and develop themselves.** According to Bintang, an attitude for learning must be **instilled** in all Indonesian women (Nugraheny, 2020, emphasis added).

Naming devices in the strategy construct the ideal Indonesian woman as a modern-day Kartini: they are referred to as *Kartini masa kini* (the Kartini of today), *Kartini modern* (modern Kartini), and *Kartini muda* (young Kartini). Excerpt 6 contains a direct quote of Minister of State-Owned Enterprise, Rini Soemarno, who discusses the meaning of Kartini Day and the construction of the ideal Indonesian woman in line with a government vision of economic growth. Referred to as *Kartini-Kartini masa kini*, these modern-day 'Kartinis' are placed in a subordinate position, 'produced' by an indistinct social group signified by the inclusive first-person plural *kita* (we, us). While used by a government minister, *kita* implicitly encompasses both the government and civil society, and is a common political tool for manufacturing political consent (Hooker, 1993; Mulderrig, 2011). The Kartinis are positioned in a narrow field of economic growth, and they are classified in terms of the abstract terms of productivity and bankability, which are commonly associated with contemporary development discourse:

'Memaknai Hari Kartini saat ini adalah bagaimana kita menciptakan Kartini-Kartini masa kini, di semua ini masyarakat termasuk perempuan-perempuan produktif yang belum atau non-bankable,' kata Rini dalam keterangannya.

'Kartini Day now means how **we can create modern day Kartinis** in society, including **productive women who are not or not yet bankable,**' said Rini in her statement (Supriyatna, 2018, emphasis added).

The COVID-19 pandemic that swept through Indonesia in 2021 impacted the lives of Indonesian citizens in unprecedented ways. The confinement to the domestic realm placed severe financial and mental strain on families. Women were compelled to fulfil the additional role of educators when children were required to learn remotely from home. Increased levels of partner violence targeting women were documented. The government's neoliberal response to the pandemic was evident in the strategy of self-help. At the height of the pandemic and strict lockdowns, Kartini Day celebrations moved online, and messages targeting Indonesian women urged them to look to Kartini for inspiration and strength.

Excerpt 7 features a direct quote from the Minister of Tourism, through whom the nationalist concept of Kartini's *semangat perjuangan* (fighting spirit) is transferred to the immediate context of the pandemic. Indonesian women are positioned as the recipients of the related concepts of *semangat* (spirit, energy) and *kekuatan* (strength). Women are placed in a passive role, while the agentless passive verb *diberikan* (given) obfuscates the role of government in supporting them. Indonesian women are then contradictorily activated in the material processes of 'facing up to' the pandemic and 'achieving' a better future. The shift in agency from a passive to an active role supports a shift in the burden of responsibility to Indonesian women, and the obfuscation of the role of the government in the pandemic. Temporal reference to

a ‘brighter future’ recalibrates the focus away from the problems of the present day, thus further alleviating government responsibility:

Menteri Pariwisata Wishnutama turut mengucapkan Hari Kartini dengan postingan di akun Instagramnya. ‘Semoga dengan semangat perjuangan Ibu RA Kartini para perempuan Indonesia dapat diberikan semangat dan kekuatan dalam menghadapi pandemi COVID 19 untuk meraih masa depan yang jauh lebih baik. Aamiin YRA. Selamat Hari Kartini.’

Minister of Tourism Wishnutama joined in the Hari Kartini well-wishes with a post on his Instagram account. ‘Hopefully with the **fighting spirit of Mrs RA Kartini**, Indonesian women can be **given** spirit and strength to **face** the COVID-19 pandemic to **achieve a much brighter future**. Amen. Happy Kartini Day’ (Suharyati, 2022, emphasis added).

The strategy of self-help promotes an assumption that Kartini’s exceptionalism could be replicated by all Indonesian women as a solution to their contemporary problems. While promoting self-driven empowerment, women are contradictorily positioned in a passive role at first, with subsequent representations of their agency originating from a disempowered starting point. This transition in agency helps realise a shift in burden from the government to women to overcome problems and fix themselves.

Constructing Piety

During Kartini’s lifetime, Islam was a mark of difference between the indigenous population and the Dutch, but it had yet to play a significant political role. Nor were women relevant to assertions of Islamic identity as they are today. In her letters, Kartini’s stance on Islam was somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, she voiced disapproval of Dutch mission schools and the Christianisation of the native people in her campaign for indigenous education (Muthoifin et al., 2020), while on the other, she criticised certain Islamic practices through a feminist perspective (Hawkins, 2007). She appeared to have an opened-minded, intellectually curious approach to religion, and even declared herself a child of Buddha in one of her letters (Beekman, 1984, 612). The strategy of *constructing piety* in the news reports nevertheless focuses on Kartini’s enthusiastic engagement with Islam.

Excerpt 8 highlights Kartini’s sincerity and agency when attending a Quranic recitation session held by an influential *ulama*: she engages ‘with all her heart’. Kartini is then represented in the act of ‘shedding tears’, which ‘rolled down her cheeks’. While Kartini’s tears provide evidence of her authentic engagement, the objectification of her body, or what van Leeuwen (2008) refers to as somatisation, by reference to her cheeks, transforms her into an object of surveillance and undermines the scope of her agency. Kartini thus becomes a spectacle in this encounter, which has been shown to raise visibility for a cause but also curtail women’s agency in the public realm (Ahlstrand, 2021).

Dengan sepenuh hati, Kartini mengikuti pengajian tersebut. Sese kali ia menyeka air mata yang bergulir di pipinya.

Kartini participated in the Quranic recitation **with all her heart**. Now and then she **shed tears that rolled down her cheeks** (Wahyono, 2022, emphasis added).

In portraying Kartini’s norm-breaking relationship with her mother Ngasirah, the use of coherence markers of contrast emphasises Kartini’s defiance of the feudal constraints

that governed household interactions and actively cultivated a close relationship between mother and daughter. When combined with subsequent descriptions of Ngasirah's Islamic background, Kartini appears to willingly uphold democratic ideals and support her mother as a pious commoner who was marginalised within a backward *priyayi* household. Told through the authoritative voice of a 'historical expert', Excerpt 9 illustrates how the coherence marker *namun* (however) was used to demonstrate Kartini's boldness, while the mental processes in *memilih* (chose) and *menolak* (refused) were used to show her agency when determining how to interact with her mother:

Pengamat sejarah Edy Tegoeh Joelijanto yang pernah mengenyam pendidikan di UKDW Yogyakarta dan Universitas Putra Bangsa Surabaya mengatakan bahwa Ngasirah, ibu kandung Kartini, bukan keturunan darah biru. Namun, Kartini lebih sering memilih tinggal dengan Ngasirah dan menolak memanggilnya 'Yu.'

Historical expert, Edy Tegoeh Joelijanto who was educated at UKDW Yogyakarta and Putra Bangsa University Surabaya, stated that Ngasirah, Kartini's biological mother, did not have aristocratic blood. **However**, Kartini frequently **chose** to stay with Ngarisah and **refused** to call her 'Yu' [a term of address for servants, or lower-ranked members of an aristocratic household] (Rachmawati, 2022, emphasis added).

The representation of Kartini's emotional encounters with a pure form of Islam enhances its perceived legitimacy. The limitation of Kartini's agency in these encounters, however, upholds her status as a static feminine icon. These depictions thus transform her into an instrument of an Islamic agenda, legitimising the role of *ulama* in providing enlightenment much like the NU agenda discussed above. Kartini's agency, however, is highlighted in her defiance of feudal norms, pursuing intimacy with her non-aristocratic yet authentically Islamic mother, showing a personalised, grassroots connection to Islam in the domestic realm.

Appropriating Nationalism

Kartini's status as a nationalist icon has long been established in Indonesia, but the strategy of *appropriating nationalism* demonstrates the enduring relevance of the nationalist trope, as well as its integration with contemporary political discourse, particularly neoliberalism and pious Islam. Like the strategy of promoting self-help, appropriating nationalism constructs Kartini as a source of motivation to others. This strategy, however, identifies Kartini in accordance with her nationalist credentials, while directing top-down messages at the general population, rather than at women specifically. The strategy engages nationalist-era keywords (see Robinson, 2015; van Langenburg, 1986), identifying Kartini as *pahlawan nasional* (national hero), *pemberani* (brave hero), *pelopor* (pioneer, leader), or *pejuang* (fighter). When referring to the indigenous population, the strategy engages other nationalist keywords such as *bangsa* (nation, united people of the nation), *rakyat* (people, commoners), *rakyat jelata* (common folk), *bumiputra* (lit. sons of the earth, indigenous inhabitants), *pribumi* (indigenous), and *ibu pertiwi* (lit. motherland). The voice of authority remains pertinent to the delivery of these nationalist-infused messages.

Excerpt 9 demonstrates the intersection of nationalism and self-help in an indirect quote from Minister of Human Development and Cultural Affairs, Puan Maharani, about government literacy programmes.¹ It follows a strikingly similar pattern to

Excerpt 7 in the strategy of promoting self-help, complete with reference to the future. Referring to Kartini's much-appropriated quote, 'out of darkness comes light', which became the title of the *Abendanon* publication, Puan Maharani marks the necessity of the phrase 'inspiring the people of Indonesia'. Here, 'the people' are referred to as *bangsa*, channelling the nationalist spirit of the past. The Minister's message itself, however, is less than revolutionary. The *bangsa* are positioned as the mandatory recipients of the inspiration, as indicated by the modal *harus* (must), consigning them to a subordinate role while demanding compliance. From this subordinate position, they are contradictorily activated in the relational process of 'becoming' independent and optimistic, and the behavioural process of 'looking to' the future. As in Excerpt 7, the temporal orientation to the future directs attention away from current problems, and in accordance with the shift in burden to the people, eliminates the need for direct government intervention:

*Baginya, **habis gelap terbitlah terang** merupakan kalimat penuh makna dari Kartini yang harus menginspirasi bangsa Indonesia untuk menjadi bangsa yang mandiri, bangsa yang optimis dalam memandang masa depannya.*

For her, out of the dark comes light is a sentence full of meaning from Kartini, which **must inspire the Indonesian people** to become **independent, optimistic** as they **look to their future** (Sukmana, 2018, emphasis added).

Excerpt 10 is contained in a report published during Ramadhan in 2021, discussing Kartini's response to social inequality and her rejection of an aristocratic identity, which is justified based on her Islamic beliefs. This intersects with the strategy of constructing piety. Referring to the everyday people as *rakyat jelata* and describing them as victims (*korban*), the causal coherence markers *oleh karena itu* (as a result) and *karena* (because) justify Kartini's revolutionary act of 'shedding her aristocratic clothing' and 'assimilating with the everyday people'. Activation in the mental process *ingin* (to want) shows Kartini's agency behind this desire. When read in isolation, Excerpt 10 appears to reproduce the anti-feudal values of Soekarno-era Kartini, but the report later connects these values to her Islamic beliefs (see Excerpt 11):

*Yang menjadi korban, lagi-lagi adalah **rakyat jelata**. Oleh karena itu, karena tidak kuat melihat **penderitaan yang dialami rakyatnya** atas kezaliman penjajah dan juga budaya feodal, Kartini **ingin melepaskan pakaian kebangsawannya dan melebur dengan rakyat.***

Time and time again, **the common folk** became victims. As a result, unable to stand seeing **the suffering of her people** caused by the tyranny of colonisers and feudal culture, Kartini **wished to shed her aristocratic clothing and assimilate with the commoners** (Rahmayanti, 2021, emphasis added).

Taken from the same report, Excerpt 11 shows the use of the causal phrase *tidak terlepas dari* (closely linked) to create a causal relationship between Kartini's anti-feudal stance and Islam. Kartini's agency in practising her faith is explicated in the affective mental process of *mengimani* (to believe, have faith) followed by an explicit description of her belief in Allah and commitment to helping other Muslims:

*Apa yang telah Kartini torehkan dalam sejarah tersebut, **tidak terlepas dari nilai-nilai spiritualnya**. Bagaimana ia **mengimani** bahwa ada dua perkara yang tiada sesuatu apa*

pun yang lebih utama dari keduanya, yakni iman kepada Allah dan bermanfaat bagi sesama Muslim (baik dengan ucapan, kekuasaan, harta, maupun tenaga).

Everything that Kartini wrote about **could not be separated from her spiritual values**. She **believed** that there were two things that mattered more than anything, namely, faith in Allah and helping fellow Muslims (Rahmayanti, 2021, emphasis added).²

The use of influential keywords to identify Kartini and the Indonesian people triggers nationalist sentiment, which typically constructs Kartini as a heroic figure of the struggling masses. Kartini is imbued with agency when describing her values, but the agency of the Indonesian people is limited and conditional on their acceptance of a subordinate role as victims. Using coherence markers, her actions are at times justified based on her Islamic faith.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of Kompas.com and Detik.com reports during Jokowi's second term as President shows that Kartini's legacy was discursively constructed to suit a contemporary political agenda. It expressed intersecting and at times self-defeating ideologies. Our contextually embedded linguistic analysis has explored below the surface of the news texts to reveal the latent connections, contradictions, and dilemmas contained in the discourse. We have shown a mix of conservative feminism, neoliberalism, Islam, and nationalism in the language of the mainstream online news. Kartini was consistently positioned in a prominent role, which gives a superficial impression of her power and authority, but her image was conveniently manipulated to suit an underlying political agenda favourable to the status quo. Below we discuss the ideological representations of Kartini and their implications for structures of power in the Jokowi era.

On the surface, the strategy of diluting feminism promoted Kartini as a champion of women's emancipation, but her feminist actions were muted and relegated to a distant, feudal past. Through temporal contrast, the strategy presented a black and white representation of Kartini's era and the present, which emphasised the positive experiences of women in modern Indonesia and undermined the need for ongoing feminist struggle. It also omitted any discussion of the history of the Indonesian women's movement, creating a permanent sense of modernity while silencing potentially subversive ideas, similar to the New Order's conceptualisation of its unchanging power (Pemberton, 1994). Although Kartini's turn-of-the-century campaign merely signalled the inception of feminist thought in the archipelago, the reports positioned her as the sole source of women's equality today, skipping more than a century of women's activism, including prominent women's groups such as Gerwani in the Old Order and SIP in the reformasi era.

Kartini's originally combative form of equality feminism, which focused on individual rights and a critique of patriarchal institutions, was overshadowed by conservative representations of womanhood, which reflected the conservative turn in the democratic era which has played out in gender ideology (Wieringa, 2015). While constructing modernity by highlighting women's educational and professional achievements, the analysis revealed a fixation on the enduring responsibilities of motherhood. The consistent reorientation to motherhood aligned with both residual New Order beliefs and

emergent Islamist ideology that govern the scope of women's social participation and regulate their engagement with patriarchal institutions.

The concept of national development feminism, with roots in nationalist movements, also permeated the discourse. This form of feminism rejects foreign influence, and emphasises women's value through their adherence to traditional gender mainstays such as motherhood, and their capacity to contribute to national economic development (Blackburn, 2010; Bulbeck, 2009). In the 'promoting self-help' strategy, Indonesian women were compelled to look to Kartini for inspiration and strength in an ongoing project of self-improvement, which would ultimately contribute to the nation. While constructing Kartini as an exceptional, norm-breaking role model, the discourse constrained her agency, which undermined the substantive goals of empowerment. Moreover, when guided to seek inspiration from Kartini, Indonesian women were consistently placed in a subordinate position yet expected to demonstrate agency and drive, indicative of the inherent contradictions of self-help discourse. In accordance with a neoliberal agenda, the role of the government in supporting women to overcome challenges and better themselves was conveniently backgrounded: the government's only involvement was in issuing directives, thus reinforcing its authority.

The ambivalent representation of individual and government responsibility for advancement reflects the tensions between democratic inclusion and neoliberalism that often permeate contemporary models of developmentalism (Razavi, 2002). In the analysis, a shift in the burden from the government to the individual became particularly apparent in reports published at the height of the pandemic. These findings not only provide discursive evidence to support the observation that neoliberalism was central to the Jokowi government's response to COVID-19 (see e.g., Mietzner, 2021; Setijati, 2022), but also highlight the positioning of women. The multiple negative impacts of the pandemic on Indonesian society are testimony to the ineffectiveness of the neoliberal response. Ultimately, a superficial focus on empowerment and the covert backgrounding of government responsibility can only exacerbate social inequality and undermine Indonesia's democracy.

The representation of Kartini's relationship with Islam was a minor feature of the news discourse. Through a focus on Kartini's emotions and scrutinising her physical response, the strategy of promoting Islamic piety presented the religion through a personal lens. While highlighting her personal response, this aspect of the strategy limited Kartini's agency, using her as a spectacle to uphold a particular Islamic value. More broadly, the strategy subtly promoted the Jokowi government's NU allegiance and emphasised the congruity of Islam and democracy. In portrayals of Kartini's defiant yet democratic stance as she engaged with her non-aristocratic, pious mother in the household, she was imbued with agency and autonomy. This rare glimpse of Kartini's unbridled agency alludes to the possibility of grassroots Islam (see e.g., Budianta, 2002; Choi, 2019; Dewi, 2015; Jauhola, 2012) as a pathway to power for women in the democratic era.

The co-option of nationalist discourse somewhat resembled the discourse strategies of promoting self-help and Islamic piety but produced slightly different outcomes. When neoliberalism intersected with nationalism, it encompassed the general population rather than women. It nonetheless realised the goal of shifting the burden of development to individuals, while backgrounding the role of the government. The analysis also revealed

the convenient convergence of nationalism and Islamic values, justifying Kartini's concern for those suffering under colonialism based on her apparent deep-seated Islamic conviction. This historical reimagining of Kartini's nationalist stance in line with contemporary Islamic values demonstrates the ease with which the monolithic discourse of nationalism can be manipulated to solidify a political agenda, as seen in various political campaigns in the democratic era (Bourchier, 2019). The strategy of appropriating nationalism underscores the hollowness of the nationalist trope in Indonesia, following more than a century of political exploitation, much like Kartini's image. Given her longstanding status as a national hero, Kartini's image has perhaps become synonymous with nationalism, thus making the two practically interchangeable as floating signifiers.

The analysis has revealed the continued pertinence of Kartini as a political vector more than a century after her letters were first published. Through the systematic, contextually based linguistic analysis of online news media reports, we have revealed a set of discourse strategies that form a bridge between language, ideologies, and structures of power in Jokowi's second term as President. For women, an ironic aversion to rights-based feminism in the representation of a renowned feminist activist reflects the conservatism of the era, and unfavourable conditions for rights-based feminist dissent. A neoliberal focus on self-improvement paradoxically perpetuated the oppression of the public and absolved the government of responsibility, which reflects the tensions of contemporary developmentalism. The reimagining of a pious Kartini, moved by *ulama* and the suffering of fellow Muslims, echoes the 'Islamic washing' of political life in Indonesia. Our findings highlight the continued symbolic potency of nationalism, but also its exploitability for political ends, which, like Kartini, intersected seamlessly with neoliberal and Islamic ideology.

Notes

1. Puan Maharani herself is the granddaughter of the nationalist leader Soekarno, and was a key political figure in the Jokowi era: she served as Minister of Human Development and Cultural Affairs from 2014 to 2019, and Speaker of the People's Representative Council from 2019.
2. This assertion appears to be a subjective interpretation by the journalist, as Kartini's published letters contain no record of expressing a desire to help others based on their religion.

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