CHAPTER 3

Suyatin Kartowiyono:
A Nationalist Leader of the
Indonesian Women’s Movement

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In Indonesian history Suyatin Kartowiyono (1907–83) is remembered, if at all, as a leader of the women’s movement from the late 1920s to the 1950s. Starting in 1928 as an organiser of the first Indonesian women’s congress, she went on to be active in the women’s federations established in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s and was a founder of the secular women’s organisation Perwari (Persatuan Wanita Republik Indonesia, Union of Women of the Indonesian Republic). She is not remembered as part of the nationalist movement. The purpose of this chapter is to show that during the struggle against Dutch colonialism, she identified herself — and indeed the women’s movement generally — as nationalist. The questions addressed in this chapter are: Why did she become a nationalist, and what did that concept mean to her? Why did she become a leader of the women’s movement rather than of the mainstream nationalist movement? What was her contribution to the nationalist movement? How did her identification with that movement influence her life? And why has Indonesian nationalist historiography omitted all reference to her?

Unlike most Indonesian women leaders, Suyatin Kartowiyono left behind some written reflections on the Indonesian women’s movement and an autobiography, Mencari Makna Hidupku [Searching for the Meaning of My Life], published in 1983. Because by the time the autobiography was written she was quite ill (she died at the end of 1983), it was produced with the help of Hanna Rambe, a well-established
journalist and author who volunteered her services because she had known and admired Suyatin from childhood. Comparing the autobiography with earlier writings by Suyatin, it seems clear that the work was very substantially in her own words. Probably Hanna Rambe recorded conversations with her and helped to structure the book with the aid of Suyatin’s notes and diaries.

It is doubtful whether, left to her own devices, Suyatin would ever have written her autobiography. Indonesians of that era, especially women, wrote little about themselves. Hers is the only such work by a female leader from the colonial period. The Indonesian publishing industry and the reading market were in their infancy, limiting the scope for publication, and traditions of modesty may have inhibited some Indonesian leaders from appearing to blow their own trumpet. Apart from her own writings, moreover, very little has been published about Suyatin Kartowiyono, although her activities in the women’s movement are quite well recorded. For insight into her own motivation, this chapter depends heavily on her own accounts.

In them, Suyatin often refers to her own emotions and opinions, although she reveals very little about her private life, reflecting her views about what was appropriate for publication. Defying the well-known Javanese traditional preference for harmony and avoidance of confrontation, and perhaps reflecting Western literature — of which she was an avid reader — Suyatin does not shy away from recounting some of the conflicts in which she was involved and defends her own position strongly. Focused on her public role, her autobiography clearly exemplifies what Watson refers to as “the sense of contributing to the definition of a nation”, which he regards as the “distinctively Indonesian consciousness” informing the 20th-century autobiographies he has examined.

**Becoming a Nationalist**

At no point in her autobiographical writings does Suyatin Kartowiyono pinpoint a moment when she became an Indonesian nationalist or why. Born in the Dutch colony of the Netherlands Indies, she grew up with the nationalist movement, moving in the 1920s, along with thousands of other educated young Indonesians, from an ethnic-based organisation to an identification with Indonesia as a nation. It was as if she absorbed the ethos of the time, what has been called “The age of movement”, the age of the pergerakan. In this her father, Mahmud
Joyodirono, was clearly very influential — not in the sense of instilling nationalist ideas, but rather in his intense involvement in organisations, in the new kind of groupings that came with modern life, and in his attitudes. As Suyatin put it, her father “formed my personality as someone who couldn’t stand to see injustice or oppression. I was always moved to defend people who were deprived of their rights.”

By contrast, her mother, R.A. Kiswari, appears to have had less influence in shaping her character.

Suyatin Kartowiyyono, a Javanese by ethnicity, was born in a village in central Java, the dominant island in the Indonesian archipelago. (See map 4 for places mentioned in this chapter.) Her father, a railway official, was a well-read man and provided a modern education for his four daughters and his only son, who was born after Suyatin. This was most unusual for the times: only a small proportion of Indonesians went to school, and girls received even less education than boys. At an early age Suyatin became an avid reader, and as she advanced into her teenage years she followed her father into organisational activities. Her father had founded a branch of Budi Utomo, a Javanese organisation started in 1908, which came to be identified as a forerunner of the nationalist parties although it was not overtly political. It was inspired, as Suyatin and her father clearly were, by the aim of improving life for Javanese.

When Suyatin Kartowiyyono entered a Dutch secondary school in 1922 at the age of 15 she became active in the women’s wing of Jong Java (Young Java), an organisation for educated young Javanese who felt a sense of duty towards their motherland. She took on the editorship of the organisation’s journal. By this time, she notes quite casually in her autobiography, “I had long known that the colonial system was evil”, although she admired a number of good Dutch people. In 1926, when Suyatin was 19, together with other young teachers she established and became president of Puteri Indonesia (Indonesian Girls), the women’s wing of a new overtly nationalist organisation for young educated people, Pemuda Indonesia (Indonesian Youth). She had begun to attend nationalist meetings, especially those addressed by the up-and-coming secular nationalist leader Sukarno, the founder of the PNI, the Nationalist Party of Indonesia. “I was attracted,” she noted in her autobiography, “to the idea of unifying the whole of Indonesia. Really that was the only way to fight the Dutch.” In 1928 Pemuda Indonesia held its second congress and launched what is regarded as a landmark in the Indonesian nationalist movement, the Youth Oath, whereby young Indonesians pledged
loyalty to their nation, Indonesia, and stated that its language was Bahasa Indonesia, which was based not on Javanese but on Malay.14

It is hard to appreciate now how revolutionary those ideas were. The nation of Indonesia had no precedents. The very name was new, invented by a 19th-century anthropologist. The only thing that held together this archipelago of hundreds of islands and ethnic groups was that they had been conquered, bit by bit over several centuries, by the Dutch and brought together into what was then known as the Netherlands Indies or Dutch East Indies. At that time the colony had no common language except Dutch, which Suyatin — like her educated friends in Pemuda Indonesia — spoke fluently. By the late 1920s, becoming a nationalist meant taking on a new identity, identifying with a huge archipelago rather than just one’s own ethnic group,
and learning what was for most people an entirely new language. None of these ideas came directly from the schooling they had received at the hands of the Dutch, who had no interest at all in promoting a concept of nationhood in their colony, although of course Western education familiarised its recipients with the history of nationalist struggles. Writing about it much later, when the independent Republic of Indonesia was well established, Suyatin Kartowiyono seemed to have forgotten the novelty of the nationalist movement in the 1920s. Her progress from Jong Java to Pemuda Indonesia is presented as something obvious, as indeed it may have been to many educated young Indonesians who absorbed ideas of nationalism through their reading and from hearing these ideas propagated by the privileged few—nationalist leaders such as Mohammad Hatta, who had gone to the Netherlands for higher studies, or Sukarno, who had been nurtured in home-grown political organisations such as Sarekat Islam.

Nevertheless, Suyatin Kartowiyono was aware that she had been swept up in a time of change that entailed standing out against narrow ethnic-based traditions and Dutch colonial rule. She writes of having to take Malay lessons in order to be able to follow the nationalist speeches of people like Sukarno, to read the nationalist press for herself to be part of that movement, to make her own public speeches, and to write for the nationalist media. Although a Javanese, she easily rose above her ethnicity; and although a Muslim, she identified most strongly with the secular stream in the nationalist movement. In both respects Suyatin had much in common with other Western-educated Javanese who operated with ease among people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

**Relations with the Mainstream Nationalist Movement**

Yet Suyatin did not become active in mainstream nationalist organisations led by men such as Sukarno, much as she admired him at the time. Again, this is something she does not explain in her writings: why in the late 1920s she took the decision to devote herself to the burgeoning women’s movement rather than to the organisations with which she had identified up to that time. Inspired by the nationalist fervour of the Youth Oath of October 1928, in December of the same year, at the age of 21, she was one of the three organisers of the first Indonesian women’s congress, which is regarded as the starting point of the national women’s movement. It involved inviting women’s organisations from around the archipelago to attend a conference with the
aim of promoting unity and national identity among them. Not surprisingly, the conference organisers all lived in Yogyakarta, which has long nurtured tolerant cooperation among people of different faiths. Catholic, secular and Islamic organisations were represented, and it was Suyatin's first experience of negotiating the open tensions between them on the question of marriage law, and steering them towards an agreement to work together.16

In taking up this leadership position, apparently Suyatin Kartowiyono did not consider herself to be making a choice between two different movements. To her, the women's movement went hand in hand with the nationalist movement, and her commitment was not so much to a particular women's organisation as to something more novel, to forging an Indonesian national women's movement. As she put it later, “The feminist struggle was especially stimulated by the spirit of nationalism and the sense of justice.”17 The first women's congress succeeded, as Suyatin hoped it would, in raising women's awareness of belonging to the Indonesian nation, and resulted in them forming an umbrella organisation of Indonesian women's groups.18

The reasons why she committed herself to both the nationalist and the women's movements derive from her passionate opposition to discrimination. In her autobiography she credits her parents with a strong sense of egalitarianism, of raising their children to feel comfortable mixing freely with people of different classes, races and creeds.19 For her, nationalism did not come with blinkers. At school she learned the meaning of justice, “a word that was very sweet to me: it has ever since been very important.”20 From an early age, according to her own account, she hated invidious distinctions to be made between people, herself included. Although her parents were obviously very liberal in their views, they still expected boys and girls to behave differently; and when this involved what Suyatin Kartowiyono regarded as discrimination, she objected strongly. For instance, why should she have to help her mother in the kitchen when this was not expected of her brother?21 She was particularly wounded to learn from her sisters that her father, to whom she felt very close, had been disappointed at her birth because he wanted a boy.22 Regardless of the fact that he soon was proud of her, more so than of her brother born a few years later, the very idea that parents would prefer boys to girls was objectionable to Suyatin.

Often in later life Suyatin Kartowiyono acknowledged the profound influence on her of the published letters of Radeng Ajeng
Kartini, regarded as the first modern feminist in Indonesia. Kartini’s letters to Dutch friends, published in 1911 after her death, are full of resentment against the restrictions placed on upper-class Javanese girls like herself: restrictions such as lack of access to post-primary education, early arranged marriages, forced deference to men and to those older than themselves, and the polygamous practices of aristocratic men. Although not subjected to such restrictions, Suyatin Kartowiyono was well aware of the plight of girls in the Javanese aristocracy, since her mother was related to the court of Yogyakarta. She became very critical of aristocratic life, and her autobiography relates a number of instances where she came into conflict with members of that class. For instance, in her teens she refused to bow down to the sultan of Yogyakarta, or to address high-ranking Javanese people in Javanese: she preferred to use the very egalitarian Malay language rather than the status-inflected Javanese. This “anti-feudal” behaviour caused a sensation at the time. What Suyatin also learned from Kartini’s fate (she was married off to a polygamous man and died early in childbirth) was that it was imperative for women to be able to support themselves. She made sure that she worked throughout her life to earn an income.

Her identification with Kartini from her early teenage years showed that Suyatin Kartowiyono took to feminist ideas with great ease. In her autobiography she wrote: “My years in MULO [secondary school] determined my career for life. My struggle from that time onwards, until 1960, was devoted to improving the rights and destiny of Indonesian women.” She adopted the same causes as Kartini, advocating education for girls, the abolition of early arranged marriages, and opposition to polygamy (or, more correctly, polygyny). This last cause became critical for Suyatin several times during her life. Her first encounter with polygamy is implicit, and not directly faced, in her autobiography. In her writings Suyatin Kartowiyono rarely addressed very personal matters that, one senses, may have been painful not only to her but to other members of her family. The fact was that she herself was the daughter of a polygamous father, yet she never in writing criticised her father for behaviour to which she objected in principle. She was obviously too close to him, far closer than to her mother, who, being unable to read or write, did not share many of her interests. Later encounters with polygamy were not so intimate but certainly influenced Suyatin Kartowiyono’s life. While she was in her early twenties, her public criticism of the practice of Javanese
royalty in taking multiple wives (*selir*) earned her a caution from the Dutch, who protected the privileges of the court: she was threatened with being banned from the principalities if she persisted in such subversive behaviour. Later in life she learned to negotiate diplomatically the minefield that polygamy constituted in the Indonesian women's movement: it caused great tension between Islamic women's organisations and more secular ones. A testing choice was made by her in 1937 on this issue, as described below. And finally, in the 1950s as leader of the women's federation she came into direct conflict with the powerful President Sukarno when he took a second wife.

For all these reasons, then, Suyatin threw herself into the women's movement in the late 1920s and remained a leader in it until age and ill health, and perhaps the tenor of the times, rendered her inactive by the 1960s. In all this there is an implicit question: Could Suyatin Kartowiyono have pursued her causes within the embrace of the mainstream nationalist movement? There are a number of issues here, including leadership and gender differences. It was very hard for a woman to be a leader in male-dominated nationalist parties such as Sukarno's Indonesian Nationalist Party, founded in 1927. The fact that the public meetings organised by these parties were often held at night deterred many women. Suyatin recalled that although she often attended nationalist meetings, at night she sat with Sukarno's wife of the time, Inggit Garnasih, because few women came. Women did make occasional public speeches to such audiences, but it was rare. One of the very few women nationalist leaders of the colonial period was Rasuna Said, who is the subject of the next chapter in this book. She became the leader of a radical Islamic party, Permi (Persatuan Moeslimin Indonesia, Union of Indonesian Muslims), and was imprisoned by the Dutch in the 1930s for her outspoken attacks on colonialism. It was dangerous to be a nationalist leader in the late 1920s and the 1930s: such leaders ran the risk of being arrested and exiled, although Indonesian nationalists did not experience the level of repression that the Vietnamese did, at the hands of the French, as illustrated in the case of Nguyen Thi Giang (chapter 2). Nevertheless, the dangers probably deterred many women, or at least their protective families. Suyatin Kartowiyono herself appears to have been remarkably fearless and independent-minded, despite police surveillance at times.

Suyatin had a very egalitarian relationship with her husband, emphasising in her autobiography that she chose him over other young
men because he was truly supportive of her chosen work, which she described as “national independence and improvement in the status of women”. They were married in 1932, when she was 25 and already working as a teacher, as she continued to do after marriage. Having a young family in the 1930s must, however, have somewhat restricted what she could do in public life. In her autobiography she is rather defensive about the arrangements she made to combine work, activism and family duties, and it is unclear precisely what supportive roles were played by her husband and unnamed kin or domestic workers.

There is no evidence that Suyatin found it difficult to work with men. Her autobiography shows she admired and was close to a number of male nationalist leaders, including Ki Hajar Dewantara and Haji Agus Salim. They seem to have treated her as a protégé rather than as an equal, which is not surprising considering the age difference between them. Suyatin's relations with her male peers could be ambivalent, and she was firm about the need to be autonomous. Thus she emphasised many times that women should always have their own income, as she had done, and on some occasions she stood up to male leaders, especially to Sukarno in the 1950s when he took a second wife. Attending a women's congress in India in 1953, she reacted against the advice of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit that “We should always be nice to men so that we can achieve our goals quicker”. “In my heart I grumbled, 'But women can't be nice to them all the time. We demand justice!'”

However, in her own life Suyatin Kartowiyono made some concessions to differentiated gender roles. For instance, she claimed that she always put her family first, as a mother should. Moreover, although she felt she found equality in her marriage, she fell into line with Indonesian tradition so far as to insist that her husband was the head of the household. Even in this admission, however, she was unconventional: whereas the New Order regime, during which she wrote her autobiography, preached that men and women were equal because women took leadership in the home while men were leaders in public life, Suyatin reversed the order, saying, “In the office and in organisational life I became a leader. At home, my husband was the head of the household.” For her this reflected their “meeting of minds”.

Neither of these concessions seems to have cramped her style, however: she was an independent and outspoken woman.

This raises another serious point. From colonial times to the present, it seems that while the nationalist movement was regarded
as political, the women’s movement was always labelled “social”. The Dutch were inclined to regard the women’s movement quite indulgently for this very reason. Only a few individuals in it, such as Rasuna Said, were seen as too close to radical nationalists and therefore political; but women who concerned themselves with education and marriage reform were considered harmless to the regime. Yet such clear distinctions could not be drawn, as Suyatin Kartowiyono was well aware. Congresses of the women’s movement began with the singing of the nationalist anthem that had been adopted by the Youth Congress of 1928, and at the second women’s congress in 1929, held in Jakarta in the hall used by the nationalist movement, Suyatin noted that people kept calling out “Merdeka!” (Freedom), which made the police threaten to close the meeting. In 1941 the women’s federation joined the nationalist umbrella organisation Gabungan Politik Indonesia (Indonesian Political Federation), which was attempting to wrest democratic reforms from the colonial government. Immediately after the declaration of independence in 1945 a new women’s federation was set up. Suyatin was the leader of the conference that established it, and she emphasised that it was “integrated with the struggle for freedom” since its first task was to support the new republic.

The causes Suyatin championed within the women’s movement were clearly political in that they involved radical changes in society and in public policy. Some of them were too subversive for much of the male-dominated nationalist movement. Leaders such as Sukarno frequently warned the women’s movement that “women’s issues” should be put on hold until the country had gained independence, and indeed the conception of national interest expounded by the male leaders should always be given priority. There was an implicit acknowledgement that many “women’s issues”, such as marriage reform, were too divisive to contemplate and that they threatened male prerogatives.

At one point in her life Suyatin Kartowiyono was forced to make the choice that Sukarno urged upon the women’s movement. In 1937 the Dutch colonial government held out the prospect of a law that allowed Indonesians to choose a civil marriage that enforced monogamy. This was a radical departure from the religion-based marriage laws of the day, whereby one married according to the law of the religion or customary group to which one belonged. Thus the vast majority of the Indonesian population, being Muslims, were subject to Islamic family law, which permitted polygyny. The reform proposed by the Dutch was intended in part to meet the demands of many women’s
organisations for a fairer alternative for women, especially a law that would allow Muslim women to escape the threat of polygyny. But when the government sought the support of the women's movement, Suyatin Kartowiyono and most other women leaders rejected the offer. Like male nationalist leaders, Suyatin claimed the proposal was a stratagem to divide the nationalist movement, and indeed it threatened to split the Islamists from the rest. She concurred with Sukarno that marriage law reform would have to wait until the country was independent: “I was certain that it was better for Indonesia to first achieve national independence as the absolute condition for improving the lives of women.” Thus she proved her nationalist credentials. Unfortunately she was to find that after the transfer of sovereignty in 1949, the governments of independent Indonesia shied away from the divisive issue of marriage reform and it was not until 1974 that a government was strong enough to defy Islamic opposition and force through a uniform marriage code.

Benedict Anderson has referred to nations as “imagined communities”, an idea that raises the question of how nationalists opposing foreign rule imagined their independent nation would form a community. Although Suyatin never spelled out her vision of the “imagined community” of Indonesia, it is possible to deduce it from her writings and activities. It was clearly based on the notions of justice and equality, and her view of Indonesia was open and inclusive. She never labelled groups as “other”, seeking to exclude them from the nation; rather, she recognised the diversity of Indonesia and revelled in it, as shown by her interest in other religions and ethnic groups. In this way her nationalism was more clearly aligned with the secular nationalists than with most Islamic nationalists. She appears to have been more inclusive than many secular nationalists in that she did not treat Chinese Indonesians as aliens, as frequently happened in Indonesia.

**Her Role in the Nationalist Movement**

As stated, Suyatin Kartowiyono saw the women’s movement as working hand in hand with the male-dominated nationalist movement to prepare the country for independence. It mobilised women, raising their awareness of the nation and of the need to create a modern state in which men and women were truly equal. The scene had been set in 1928 at the Youth Oath ceremony, where both men and women took the nationalist oath, and it culminated in the constitution of the
Republic of Indonesia in 1945, which declared that men and women were equal. As Suyatin put it in her autobiography:

As early as 1926 women’s organisations began to be political in the sense that what they were demanding was no longer just improvement in women’s situation and equality of rights in marriage and citizenship, but they began to oppose colonialism and oppression of one nation by another. By the time of the arrival of the Japanese, both the women’s movement and the nationalist movement were struggling for the independence of the nation. Then the feeling of unity among women’s organisations, and the feeling of nationalism among men and women, rose markedly between 1942 and 1949.\(^4\)

Compared with some other nationalist movements, in Indonesia few efforts were made to mobilise the masses of men and women against colonialism. Unlike in India, for example, men and women were not recruited to support huge demonstrations of opposition to colonial rule. In part this was a result of careful Dutch policies to restrain Indonesian nationalists: when the movement showed signs of becoming too radical its leaders were arrested and exiled. However, few Indonesian organisations showed any real interest in recruiting mass support, and most women’s organisations were similarly reluctant — with the exception of Islamic organisations, which recruited on the basis of religion rather than nationalism. During the colonial period Suyatin, like most other women leaders, appeared satisfied with building small organisations of largely urban, educated women. At one point in her career, in 1931, she had the opportunity to make contact with poor working women, yet she was satisfied with drawing the attention of existing women’s organisations to the plight of these women rather than seeking to involve such women themselves in organisations.\(^5\) Although, given the constraints of the time, it would indeed have been difficult for her to do so, even after independence she never seems to have contemplated such a move or regretted not being able to do so. Thus, her notions of a nationalist movement and of a women’s movement, which she saw as intertwined, were limited, as were those of most other leaders during the colonial period.

Even if one followed the prevailing trend to regard the women’s movement as social, not political, and therefore not really nationalist, there is a strong case to be made for Suyatin Kartowiyono’s direct contribution to the nationalist cause during the Indonesian Revolution of 1945–49, the period of heroic struggle by Indonesians to prevent
the Dutch from re-establishing colonial rule after the Japanese occupation. Vastly inferior to the Dutch in military terms, the Indonesian resistance movement — consisting largely of revolutionary youth and guerrilla soldiers, and employees of the new Republican government — depended on the voluntary support of the people. The nationalist movement and the women’s movement, working together, operated on a mass scale during the Revolution.

A basic requirement was to feed members of the resistance movement and their families at a time when food production and transportation were disrupted by the end of the Japanese occupation and the efforts of the Dutch to reassert control, opposed at every step by Indonesian Republican supporters. Women immediately took on the task of feeding the Republicans through the organisation known as WANI (Wanita Negara Indonesia, Women of the Indonesian State). WANI appointed Suyatin to supervise the transportation of food in Java, and she travelled widely around the island as part of this mission, reporting to the Republican government in Yogyakarta. Her autobiography dwells eloquently on the trials of this period. For instance, she describes how, even when heavily pregnant, she squeezed into and out of overcrowded trains and secreted on her person incriminating papers and objects when Dutch soldiers came on board to check people’s identities and arrest revolutionaries.

As her autobiography sums up:

For independence I did my utmost, even while pregnant. I rode trains at night, perched on the coupling between carriages, with the soot from the engine flying over my head; I rode bicycles with flat tyres while heavily pregnant; I walked far into the night when called to meetings in Yogyakarta and elsewhere; and I did all this wholeheartedly.

There was no doubt in her own mind that she was a very active participant in the nationalist movement.

How Being in the Nationalist Movement Influenced Her Life

As a result of her nationalist convictions, before the Japanese occupation Suyatin Kartowiyono suffered some harassment and police surveillance at the hands of the Dutch colonial government, which was implacably opposed to the notion of independence. During the
colonial period, Suyatin's being a nationalist meant that both she and her husband refused to be employed by the colonial government. Trained as a teacher, she taught in private schools even though the pay was far less than she would have received in the state system. Interestingly, she had no objection to working for the Japanese during the occupation even though she recognised they were far more brutal than the Dutch. Presumably, like Sukarno, she anticipated that Indonesia would win its independence under the Japanese.

After independence Suyatin Kartowiyono was in a good position to benefit from her nationalist credentials and get a well-paid position in the new government bureaucracy. For several years she was able to pursue one of her life goals through a government position promoting literacy. She was delighted to be able to travel around much of the vast archipelago in this capacity, visiting places she had barely heard of before. In the process she was also able to help build the network of her organisation, Perwari, a secular women's organisation spread throughout Indonesia — as its president from 1953 to 1960, Suyatin helped it establish schools and literacy courses, mother-and-child health clinics and a women's legal centre — as well as to participate in campaigns for women's causes. In 1957 she finally resigned her high-ranking government job in protest against governments that refused to oppose polygamy and against President Sukarno when he embarked upon a polygamous marriage.

From her autobiography and other writings, one gains the impression that Suyatin Kartowiyono devoted her life to the nationalist movement and the women's movement, conceiving of them as inextricably intertwined insofar as their common goals were to seek an independent nation with an egalitarian society. Her husband and six children, although obviously vital to her private life and the source of great satisfaction, did not impinge on the public persona and received very little attention in her autobiography. Another short account of her life pays tribute to her humanity, her generosity in sharing her knowledge and helping women, and her courage, honesty and sincerity in thought and action.

Did Suyatin Kartowiyono benefit from her involvement in the nationalist movement? Her autobiography leads one to believe that it enriched her life immeasurably. She was grateful for the opportunity to serve her country and in the process get to know it better. From time to time the autobiography waxes rhapsodical as she admires the Indonesian regions she visited and the remarkable people she met,
mostly ordinary people who overcame great odds. The opportunity to benefit materially or personally is not mentioned; Suyatin appears to have lived frugally without feeling deprived, and she sought no honours although she did pick up three national awards along the way for her social work and service to the women’s movement.  

Any regrets Suyatin mentions concern not herself personally but the causes she espoused. President Sukarno disappointed her: from having admired him when young, she turned against him in the 1950s when he embarked on his first polygamous marriage. The battle for marriage law reform was dispiritingly long, but she was grateful when a law was finally passed in 1974, although she felt it still had weaknesses.  

There are indications that she was disturbed during her final years by trends in the women’s movement under the New Order. The emergence of “wives’ organizations” (i.e., organisations comprising wives of state employees) weakened her organisation, Perwari, and led to a lack of leadership in the women’s federation, Kongres Wanita Indonesia (Indonesian Women’s Congress). However, she chose to dwell on the progress she had perceived through her lifetime:

The position of our women, with such good opportunities to gain an education since independence, is far different from what it was during Kartini’s life. Our struggle to gain a national marriage law has been achieved, twenty years after Indonesia’s independence.

What remained, she thought, was to ensure that single women were treated as equals, allowed to live their own lives.

How History Has Treated Her

Suyatin Kartowiyono has been sadly neglected in the writing of Indonesian history. Long dominated by the state’s version of nationalism, Indonesian historiography presents a story of triumphant struggle for independence, but only a limited number of individuals are given recognition as having played important roles. The country has a National Heroes Board, which oversees the selection and promotion of an official list of National Heroes, carefully developed over the years to ensure each region has its own names and to reflect the ideology of the regime in power. The list consists mainly of selected individuals who resisted the imposition of colonial rule before there was any conception of an Indonesian nation, of leaders of nationalist parties, and of military leaders, especially from the period of the Revolution. Very
few women are mentioned, and the few that are are an incongruous bunch. Kartini features prominently, although she did not oppose Dutch rule or identify as an Indonesian. Founders of early modern schools for girls are mentioned: Dewi Sartika in West Java, Walanda Maramis in Sulawesi, and Rahmah El Yunusiah in Sumatra. None of these women were part of the male-dominated nationalist movement more narrowly conceived: their contributions were seen as social rather than political. Leaders of the women’s movement, including Suyatin Kartowiyono, do not feature in the pantheon of National Heroes. The only woman who is occasionally mentioned as belonging to the “political” nationalist movement is Rasuna Said, because she was a leader of a male-dominated party in the 1930s (see the next chapter in this book).

Literature about the nationalist movement, at home and abroad, mentions almost no women outside the official pantheon. A.K. Pringgodigdo, whose early approach to chronicling the history of what he called the “Indonesian people’s movement” was unusually pluralistic, distinguished different strands within the nationalist movement, including religious, youth and women’s streams; but in writing about the women’s stream he mentions almost no individuals except his wife of the time, Suwarni Pringgodigdo. Other historians have an even narrower view.

Those who have documented the history of the Indonesian women’s movement have been kinder to Suyatin Kartowiyono. Although there is no full biography of her (and indeed few have been published of any of her female contemporaries), there are tributes to her in a number of records of the growth of the women’s movement and its consolidation after the Japanese occupation. But this merely confirms the line drawn between the nationalist and women’s movements: they are seen to be quite separate — at best parallel but not overlapping.

Just as there were advantages to women in joining the women’s movement rather than the male-dominated nationalist movement, one can argue that the memory of a woman like Suyatin Kartowiyono perhaps benefits from being ignored by official nationalist propaganda. As a number of critics have shown, the “approved” versions of the lives of National Heroes reduced them to “cardboard cutouts” and contributed to the decline of interest in history in Indonesia under the New Order. With the revival of more independent historical and biographical writing in the post-Suharto era, it is to be hoped that
Indonesians will recognise that their nationalist movement was pluralistic and that different streams within it, such as the women's movement under the leadership of nationalists like Suyatin Kartowiyono, projected inspiring alternative visions for Indonesia.\(^{66}\)

**Notes**


2. I shall often refer to Suyatin Kartowiyono by her first name, which is common practice in Indonesia, where many people (such as Sukarno) have only one name and family names are often not used. In any case, Kartowiyono was Suyatin's husband's family name, and before they were married she was usually known just as Suyatin.

3. The autobiography contains, for example, an extensive account of Suyatin's overseas trips in the 1950s, which was probably based on her own records and photos of the time.


5. Most of Suyatin's writings were published before the spelling of Indonesian had been standardised. In this chapter I have modernised the spellings of names. Under the old system, based on Dutch pronunciation, her name was Sujatin Kartowijono. Apart from her autobiography, her main writings concerning her life are “The Awakening of the Women's Movement of Indonesia”, in *Indonesian Women: Some Past and Current Perspectives*, ed. B.B. Hering (Bruxelles: Centre d'étude du Sud-Est asiatique et de l'Extreme Orient, 1976); *Perkembangan Pergerakan Wanita*...


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., p. 31.

12. Ibid., p. 40.


14. Although the Javanese comprise the largest ethnic group, there is no majority ethnic group in Indonesia. Malay was chosen as the basis for the national language partly because it had been the lingua franca of traders in the archipelago, partly because newspapers had developed it for modern usage, and partly because, unlike the very hierarchical Javanese language (which has different levels according to the person addressed), it was egalitarian in nature and therefore considered more suitable for a modern nation.

15. Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, pp. 37, 68.


18. Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, p. 41.

19. See, for example, Ibid., p. 30. In her autobiography, Suyatin makes a point of recounting the family friendships with Eurasians and Chinese and notes her early interest in other religions besides her own Islam: she sought out information about Buddhism, Christianity and theosophy, in all of which she clearly found something sympathetic.

20. Ibid., p. 31.


22. Ibid., p. 25.
23. Ibid., pp. 25–6.
24. Ibid., p. 28.
25. Ibid., p. 37.
26. Suyatin stressed this point several times in her autobiography. In particular she recorded a conversation with others in the women’s movement when, discussing polygamy, she pointed out that it was essential for wives to earn their own living so that they were not dependent on husbands who might decide to take another wife (Ibid., pp. 218–9).
27. Ibid., p. 29.
29. Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, p. 44.
30. Ibid., p. 37.
31. Ibid., p. 43.
32. Ibid., pp. 144–5.
33. Ibid., p. 94.
34. Ibid., pp. 49–50.
35. Ibid., p. 234.
36. This attitude of the Dutch is clear from their official reporting on Indonesian activities in intelligence documents such as the survey of the “native” press (Overzicht van den Inlandsche en Maleisch-Chineesch Pers [Survey of the Native and Chinese Malay Press] [Batavia: Landsdrukkerij]); confidential official reports as found in R.C. Kwantes, De Ontwikkeling van de Nationalistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indie: Bronnenpublikatie: Derde stuk 1928–1933 [The Development of the Nationalist Movement in the Netherlands Indies: Sourcebook, Vol. 3: 1928–1033] [Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1981]); and their report on the women’s movement published in the 1930s (De Inheemsche Vrouwenbeweging in Nederlandsch-Indie en het aandeel daarin van het Inheemsche Meisje [The Native Women’s Movement in the Netherlands Indies and the Role in It of the Native Girl] [Batavia: Landsdrukkerij, 1932]).
37. Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, p. 41.
39. Ibid., p. 7.
41. Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, p. 221.
42. See Blackburn, Women and the State, chapter 5.
44. Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, p. 68.
45. I refer here to Suyatin’s participation in 1931 in an investigation into the situation of exploited women batik workers in Lasem, central Java. She discusses this issue briefly in her autobiography (Mencari Makna Hidupku, pp. 43–4), and I deal in more detail with the relationship between the Indonesian women’s movement and poor working women in Women and the State in Modern Indonesia, chapter 7.


47. Ibid., p. 221.

48. Ibid., pp. 43–4.

49. Ibid., p. 46.

50. Ibid., p. 50.


52. Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, p. 228.

53. It is striking that in her autobiography — written during the New Order, when women were supposed to be predominantly mothers — Suyatin makes almost no mention of her children: not only does she never give their names, but she even refrains from saying how many children she had.

54. Sutjianingsih, Biografi Tokoh Kongres Perempuan Indonesia Pertama, p. 72.

55. In 1961 Suyatin received the Satya Lencana Kebaktian Sosial from the Ministry for Education and Culture for her social work, and in 1968 the Ministry for Social Affairs awarded her the Satya Lencana Pembangunan for her 40 years of devotion to the women’s movement. In 1978 President Suharto awarded her the gold medal for Perintis Pendidikan Wanita (pioneer of women’s education) (Kartowijono, Mencari Makna Hidupku, pp. 231–2).

56. Ibid., p. 233.

57. Kartowijono, “Awakening of the Women’s Movement”, pp. 16–8. It is notable that an obituary to Suyatin was headed “Leaving with a Feeling of Anxiety about the Quality of the Leadership of the Women’s Movement” (Kompas, 4 Dec. 1983).


60. In her 1976 work (p. 3), Suyatin lists the official National Heroines as Martha Christina Tijahahu, Tjut Nyak Dien, Tjut Nyak Meutia, Nyi Ageng Serang (all involved in anti-colonial resistance before the rise of Indonesian nationalism), Maria Walanda Maramis, Kartini, Dewi Sartika, Nyi A. Dahlan and Rasuna Said. She goes on to note that there were many more women activists.


63. The only book-length biographies relating to the organised women’s movement in Indonesia concern Maria Ulfah Santoso/Subadio (Gadis Rasid, Maria Ulfah Subadio: Pembela Kaumnya [Maria Ulfah Subadio: The Defender of Her Race] [Jakarta: Bulan Bintang, 1982]) and S.K. Trimurti (Soebagio, S.K. Trimurti: Wanita Pengabdi Bangsa [S.K. Trimurti: A Woman Devoted to Her Nation] [Jakarta: Gunung Agung, 1982], and Agus Salim, S.K. Trimurti [Bandung: Jembar, 2007]). It may be significant that both these women were the first female ministers in Republican cabinets, which probably indicates that becoming part of the male-dominated political system has been the only way to make women’s political contribution visible in Indonesia.


66. It is heartening to see that school textbooks are now beginning to recognize the Indonesian women’s movement as part of the nationalist movement. The secondary school history textbook by Nana Nurliana Soeyono and Sudarini Suhartono Sejarah untuk SMP dan MTS [History for Secondary Schools] (Jakarta: Grasindo, 2006) has a section on the women’s
movement as part of the chapter on the nationalist movement. Suyatin Kartowiyono receives a mention on p. 85. On the other hand, the historian Siti Fatimah wrote in 2008 that of the more than 1,700 books on Indonesian history published in the previous decade, only 2 per cent discussed women (“Perspektif Jender Dalam Historiografi Indonesia” [Gender Perspective in Indonesian Historiography], in Titik Balik: Historiografi di Indonesia [Turning Point: Historiography in Indonesia], ed. Doko Marihandono [Jakarta: Wedatama Widya Sastra, 2008], p. 387).