

UNDERSTANDING RASUNA SAID'S EMANCIPATORY LEADERSHIP: RELEVANCE FOR WOMEN TODAY

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Abstrak

Di tengah dominasi wacana kepemimpinan maskulin dalam historiografi Indonesia, Rasuna Said menghadirkan paradigma kepemimpinan alternatif yang memadukan perjuangan emansipasi, nilai-nilai Islam, dan perlawanan terhadap kolonialisme. Kepemimpinannya tidak hanya merepresentasikan suara perempuan pada masa penjajahan, tetapi juga menawarkan model kepemimpinan yang tetap relevan dalam menjawab berbagai tantangan yang dihadapi perempuan pada masa kini. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami karakteristik kepemimpinan emansipatoris Rasuna Said serta merefleksikan relevansinya dalam memperkuat peran perempuan di ruang sosial dan politik kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif historis dengan teknik hermeneutika kritis untuk menganalisis pidato, tulisan, serta arsip-arsip kolonial yang berkaitan dengan Rasuna Said. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan Rasuna Said bersifat emansipatoris dan inklusif, dengan menjadikan nilai-nilai Islam sebagai kekuatan pembebasan sekaligus sarana untuk mengartikulasikan identitas perempuan di ruang publik. Gaya retorika dan propagandanya memanfaatkan pidato serta tulisan sebagai instrumen transformasi sosial. Karakter kepemimpinannya yang bersifat konvergensi-radikal mampu menyatukan kesadaran gender, nilai-nilai keagamaan, dan perjuangan kelas dalam satu kerangka perlawanan yang utuh. Selain itu, dimensi pedagogis dan transformatif dari kepemimpinannya menekankan pentingnya pendidikan sebagai sarana membebaskan perempuan dari struktur-struktur dominasi. Kepemimpinannya juga bercorak simbolik-kultural, dengan memanfaatkan tradisi Minangkabau secara strategis untuk mendekonstruksi sistem patriarki dan kolonial. Relevansi kepemimpinan Rasuna Said pada masa kini terletak pada kemampuannya menjembatani nilai-nilai lokal dan universal dalam memperjuangkan keadilan gender. Sosoknya menjadi inspirasi bagi perempuan modern untuk memimpin dengan keberanian intelektual, kepekaan sosial, serta komitmen yang kuat terhadap pembelaan kelompok-kelompok yang tertindas.

Keywords:

*Rasuna said;
Emancipatory leadership;
Anticolonial feminism;
Gender justice;
Women historiography*

Abstract

Amidst the dominance of masculine leadership discourse in Indonesian historiography, Rasuna Said offers an alternative paradigm that combines the struggle for emancipation, Islamic values, and anti-colonial resistance. Her leadership not only represents the voice of women during the colonial era but also presents a leadership model relevant to addressing women's challenges today. This study aims to understand the characteristics of Rasuna Said's emancipatory leadership and reflect on its relevance for strengthening women's roles in contemporary socio-political spaces. The method used is a historical qualitative approach with critical hermeneutics techniques in analyzing speeches, writings, and colonial archives related to Rasuna Said. The results show that Rasuna Said's leadership was emancipatory and inclusive, embracing Islamic values as a liberating force while simultaneously articulating women's identities in the public sphere. Her rhetorical and propagandistic style utilized her speeches and writings as tools for social transformation. Her radical-convergence character united gender awareness, religion, and class struggle within a single resistance framework. Meanwhile, her pedagogical and transformative aspects emphasized the importance of education in liberating women from structures of domination. Her leadership was also symbolic-cultural, cleverly utilizing Minangkabau traditions to break down patriarchal and colonial systems. The relevance of Rasuna Said's leadership today lies in her ability to bridge local and universal values in the fight for gender justice. She inspires modern women to lead with intellectual courage, social sensitivity, and a commitment to the oppressed.

INTRODUCTION

Historical writing (historiography) in Indonesia, as in many other postcolonial countries, often presents a gender-biased narrative where male heroes fill the main stage. This dominance of masculine narratives has indirectly created a "historical amnesia" regarding women's significant roles and contributions in the struggle for independence and nation-building (Ahlstrand, 2021). The absence of adequate representation is not merely a matter of incomplete historical data, but a fundamental problem that affects the construction of national identity and public perception of women's leadership capabilities. This narrative void creates an urgency to deconstruct and reconstruct history, to unearth the figures of women whose work has been marginalized by the hegemony of patriarchal discourse (Kurniawan, 2023). In this context, the figure of Hajjah Rangkayo Rasuna Said (1910-1965) emerges as a provocative and enlightening anomaly. She was not merely a complement to the mosaic of the struggle, but an architect of ideas whose thinking surpassed her time.

Rasuna Said was a figure who radically broke through the domestic boundaries traditionally attached to women, even in the context of the Minangkabau society, which adheres to a matrilineal system. The Minangkabau matrilineal tradition positions women as inheritors of high ancestral property and guardians of the family lineage, theoretically providing a strong bargaining position for women (Asnan & Oktavianus, 2023). However, in practice, women's political and public space remained limited. Formal leadership (*penghulu*) remained in the hands of men (*mamak*). Rasuna Said refused to be confined to such a symbolic role. She broke into the harsh political arena, a domain considered taboo for women of her time, using oratory, writing, and organization as her weapons. She demonstrated that the strength of Minangkabau women lay not only in property ownership but also in their intellectual capacity and political courage to voice out against injustice (Fabriar, 2021).

The issue became more complex when this matrilineal tradition, which provided space for women, clashed with two dominant patriarchal forces: Dutch colonialism and the emerging modern state structure. With its bureaucracy and laws, the Dutch colonial government operated on a patriarchal logic that prioritized men as heads of households and legal subjects (Van Nederveen Meerkerk, 2019). On the other hand, the male-dominated nationalist movement also often placed "women's issues" as a secondary agenda that could be postponed until after independence was achieved. Rasuna Said was at the center of this vortex of conflict. She fought against colonialism, but at the same time, she also criticized the patriarchy within the nationalist movement itself (Pratama, 2024). Her struggle represents a crucial dilemma: how can a woman fight for her gender emancipation amidst a larger struggle for national liberation without sacrificing one for the other? The failure of

historiography to capture the complexity of Rasuna Said's struggle is the main problem. The narrative about her is often simplified to that of a "female warrior" without deeply exploring the emancipatory political dimensions of her leadership, which was born from the womb of matrilineal tradition but transcended it.

The scientific study of Hajjah Rangkeyo Rasuna Said has long been a subject of interest to researchers, resulting in a rich corpus of literature from various perspectives. Most of the existing research can be grouped into several main clusters. The first cluster focuses on her biography, the narrative of her struggle, and her contributions to Indonesian nationalism. In this category, works such as a comprehensive biography mapping her life journey and struggle strategies (Andarista, 2023), an in-depth analysis of her political defiance in 1932 (Adam, 2022), and a study that dubbed her the "Lioness of Minangkabau" for her role in uniting the spirit of emancipation and independence (Pratama, 2024), are main pillars. This study is enriched by research that extracts citizenship values (good citizen) from her actions to be used as a source for character-based history learning (Sudarto et al., 2024). The primary focus of most previous research has tended to highlight her thoughts and role in education and women's emancipation, often in a comparative framework. Various studies have consistently affirmed Rasuna Said's position as a pioneer of Islamic education and a champion of gender equality (Anggraini & Hulawa, 2025). Her educational ideas are often juxtaposed with other female figures such as R.A. Kartini, Rahmah El-Yunusiyah, and Siti Walidah (Pratiwi et al., 2024; Putri & Rohwiyono, 2024; Ritonga et al., 2025), to map the spectrum of women's educational thought in Indonesia. Furthermore, her struggle in the context of "information emancipation" has also been explored, highlighting her role in utilizing media as a tool of struggle (Putra, n.d.). The research spectrum extends even further to her physical legacy, such as a study on the rehabilitation methods for her house as a cultural heritage building, solidifying her iconic status in the nation's collective memory (Tela et al., 2022).

Although these studies have provided a solid foundation for understanding the figure, thoughts, and historical contributions of Rasuna Said, a significant gap is still clearly visible. Existing analyses tend to stop at describing her struggle and thoughts in general terms, or comparing her with other figures, but none have specifically dissected and constructed her emancipatory leadership style as a complete framework. This research takes the position to fill that gap by not only viewing Rasuna Said as a historical object but as a subject who possessed a leadership model that can be analyzed and replicated. The novelty offered lies in the effort to identify, classify, and formulate the key elements of her leadership style—from her fiery public rhetoric, mass mobilization strategies, to her method of making bold decisions amidst social and political pressure. Thus, the focus of this research shifts

from the substance of her struggle to an analysis of the leadership methods and strategies she applied. The goal is to transform the historical narrative into a relevant and functional leadership model, so that her intellectual legacy is not only remembered but can also become a source of applicable strategic inspiration for the challenges women leaders face in the contemporary era.

Based on this background, this research aims to reconstruct the narrative of Rasuna Said's leadership within the Minangkabau matrilineal tradition from an emancipatory political perspective. This reconstruction not only aims to restore Rasuna Said to her rightful position in national history but also to distill an authentic model of female leadership, rooted in local culture yet possessing universal relevance. Thus, this research is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to leadership and gender studies in Indonesia and offer practical inspiration for strengthening the role of female leadership in the contemporary era.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a historical-hermeneutic design aimed at understanding and interpreting the meaning behind Rasuna Said's political actions, writings, and thoughts within the context of her time. The historical approach allows for tracing the footsteps of Rasuna Said's life and struggle chronologically and contextually, while the hermeneutic approach is used to excavate deeper meanings (interpretation) from the discovered data (Gadamer, 2013). The data was collected through a comprehensive literature study, covering primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include colonial archives that record her political activities, such as reports from the Dutch political intelligence service (Politieke Inlichtingen Dienst), as well as analysis of Rasuna Said's writings and speech transcripts published in various mass media of her time, especially in the magazine *Menara Poeteri*, which she led (Abdullah, 1971). Secondary sources include biographies, scientific journal articles, history books on the national movement, and studies on Minangkabau culture. The data analysis technique adopts the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) popularized by Norman Fairclough to dismantle the power relations, ideology, and hegemony hidden within Rasuna Said's texts and the discourse about her (Fairclough, 2013). This analysis is combined with a contextual hermeneutic approach, where the interpretation of data is not detached from the social, political, and cultural context of Minangkabau and the Dutch East Indies in the first half of the 20th century. Thus, this research seeks to go beyond mere historical description to achieve a rich, interpretive understanding of Rasuna Said's politics of emancipation.

FINDING AND DISCUSION

1. Theoretical Foundation of Emancipation and Gendered Leadership

To dissect the complexity of Rasuna Said's leadership, a theoretical framework is required to capture the liberation dimension of her struggle. The concept of emancipation, in this case, cannot be understood merely as the achievement of formal equality. In his monumental work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that true emancipation is a process of "humanization" through praxis, which is reflecting and acting upon the world to transform it (Freire, 2020). For Freire, liberation is not a gift bestowed by the oppressors, but the result of the conscious struggle of the oppressed to reclaim their humanity. In this view, education becomes the primary tool for "conscientization" (*conscientização*), a process by which individuals begin to understand the oppressive structures that confine them and are motivated to change them. This Freirean perspective is highly relevant for reading the struggle of Rasuna Said, who placed education as the foundation of her movement.

This framework of emancipation is enriched by the thought of contemporary feminists like Nancy Fraser, who articulates a theory of social justice in three dimensions: redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political) (Fraser, 2000). Rasuna Said's struggle implicitly touched upon all three dimensions. Her demands for education and economic access for women were a struggle for redistribution. Her criticism of customs and religious interpretations that belittled women was a struggle for recognition. Meanwhile, her political activities demanding voting rights and women's participation in government were a struggle for representation. Fraser asserts that gender justice will not be achieved if the struggle focuses only on one dimension while ignoring the others (Fraser, 2020).

Furthermore, the theory of intersectional feminism, pioneered by thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw and developed by bell hooks, provides a sharper lens for understanding Rasuna Said's position (Crenshaw, 2021). Intersectionality states that various forms of oppression – such as racism, sexism, and classism – cannot be separated, as they overlap and reinforce one another. Rasuna Said lived at the intersection of various oppressions: as a colonized "native" (racism), as a woman in a patriarchal society (sexism), and as part of the ordinary people exploited economically (classism). Her struggle, therefore, cannot be reduced to merely a "women's struggle." It was a holistic resistance against a multifaceted system of domination. Bell hooks specifically emphasizes that feminism must be a movement to end all forms of oppression, not just to achieve equality with men within an already oppressive system (Elliott, 2020).

In the context of leadership, conventional theories focusing on "masculine" traits like assertiveness and control become inadequate. Transformational leadership, which

emphasizes vision, inspiration, and follower empowerment, offers a more suitable model (Usman, 2020). However, Rasuna Said's leadership went even beyond that. Her leadership can be categorized as "emancipatory leadership," a model that aims to achieve organizational goals and liberate its followers from structural and psychological shackles. The emancipatory leader is a facilitator of consciousness, a driver of social change, and a symbol of resistance (Aromaa et al., 2019).

2. Background of Rasuna Said's Life: Intellectual and Political Forging

Hajjah Rangkayo Rasuna Said was born in Maninjau, West Sumatra, on September 14, 1910, into a respected religious noble family. This background gave her early access to education, a luxury rare for girls of her time. Her education at the Diniyyah School led by Zainuddin Labay El Yunusy and at Sumatera Thawalib in Padang Panjang became crucial in forming her character and thought (Poeze et al., 2008). In these institutions, she learned religious sciences and was exposed to the burgeoning ideas of Islamic modernism and nationalism. Sumatera Thawalib, in particular, was a crucible for radical activists who sharply criticized Dutch colonialism and adat (customary law) conservatism (Kahin, 1999).

This dynamic intellectual environment honed Rasuna Said's debate, oratory, and writing skills. She grew into a masterful orator capable of captivating and igniting the spirit of the masses. Both friends and foes recognized her courage in voicing her opinions. From a young age, she showed a deep interest in political and social issues, especially those related to the fate of women. She saw that women's backwardness was not destiny, but the result of flawed social structures and religious interpretations. This conviction drove her into the world of activism.

Her political career began with her involvement in the Sarekat Rakyat (SR) and later the Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia (PERMI), a political party with a radical Islam-nationalist ideology (Hasyim, 2021). In PERMI, her talent as a propagandist and organizer shone brightly. She became among the few women to enter the party's elite ranks. However, her vocal and uncompromising views often brought her into conflict with the colonial government and her male colleagues within the party, whom she considered less progressive on women's issues. The peak of her radicalism was when she openly criticized the colonial government's policies in a fiery speech, which led to her arrest and imprisonment in 1932. The colonial government nicknamed her the "Dangerous Lioness," a label that ironically affirmed her toughness and influence (Agnesti & Sanjaya, 2021). The prison experience did not extinguish her spirit; it further forged her political consciousness and strengthened her commitment to the struggle for emancipation. After her release, she founded a school and the magazine *Menara Poeteri* to continue her struggle through education and journalism (Amini, 2021).

3. Rasuna Said's Emancipatory Leadership Style

A deep analysis of Rasuna Said's struggle reveals a multifaceted and sophisticated leadership model, which can be broken down into five interconnected key characteristics.

Emancipatory-Inclusive: A Synthesis of Islam and Feminism

The most prominent characteristic of Rasuna Said's leadership was her ability to blend the struggle for women's emancipation within a framework of Islamic and national values. Unlike some female activists of her time who might have seen religion as an obstacle, Rasuna Said saw Islam as a source of inspiration and legitimacy for her movement (Badran, 1996). She was a product of the Islamic modernism movement that developed in Minangkabau, which encouraged reinterpretation (ijtihad) of religious teachings to suit the demands of the times. For her, faithful Islam was one that liberates, not one that oppresses. She argued that the Qur'an and Sunnah, if interpreted correctly, actually elevated the status of women. In her writings in *Menara Poeteri*, she often quoted verses from the Qur'an to support her ideas about the importance of education for women and their right to participate in the public sphere (Putri & Rohwiyono, 2024).

This approach was inclusive. She did not isolate herself from the broader Muslim community but fought from within to reform patriarchal understandings. She showed that being a devout Muslim woman and a fighter for women's rights were not contradictory but were two sides of the same coin. Thus, she managed to reach a wider audience, especially among santri (religious students) women who might have felt alienated by Western-flavored feminist discourse (White, 2013). She built an authentic "Islamic feminism," rooted in liberation theology and local cultural context, long before the term became popular among academics. This leadership style allowed her to unite religious, national, and gender equality agendas in one coherent breath of struggle.

Rhetorical-Propagandistic: Words as Weapons of Change

Rasuna Said was a maestro of political communication. She understood the power of spoken and written words as a tool for mass mobilization and social transformation. Her oratory style was "fiery," sharp, and filled with logical arguments delivered with overflowing emotion. Her ability to speak in public, rarely performed by women then, made her a phenomenon (Aspinall, 2009). Her speeches were not just conveyances of information but political performances designed to awaken consciousness, provoke anger against oppression, and instill hope for a better future. She used the podium as a stage of resistance, turning public space into an arena of political education for the ordinary people.

Her rhetorical power was also reflected in her writings. As the editor-in-chief of *Menara Poeteri*, she turned the magazine into a propaganda mouthpiece for her ideas.

Through articles, essays, and letters to the editor, she consistently voiced criticism against colonialism, patriarchy, and ignorance (Anggraini & Hulawa, 2025). She used straightforward language, easily understood by the general public, yet filled with sharp analysis. The magazine became a medium for building an "imagined community" among its readers, a community of politically conscious women connected by progressive ideas. For Rasuna Said, journalism was not a profession but a calling of struggle. She practiced what is today called "advocacy journalism," where news and opinion are consciously used to drive social change (Panjaitan, 2025).

Radical-Convergent: Uniting Class, Gender, and Religious Resistance

Rasuna Said's leadership was marked by a radical consciousness that was convergent, namely her ability to see and unite various fronts of struggle that were often considered separate. She was not trapped in sectarian thinking. For her, the fight against Dutch colonialism could not be separated from the battle against patriarchy that oppressed women, and both could not be detached from the fight against poverty and economic exploitation experienced by the people (Robinson, 2018). She understood that these three systems of oppression—colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism—were interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

In her speeches, she often linked the suffering of a woman in the domestic sphere to the colonial government's economic policies that impoverished her family. She criticized male leaders who ranted about national independence but left their wives and daughters illiterate and powerless (Lestari & Kurniawan, 2025). This intersectional approach made her a very advanced thinker for her time. She refused to prioritize one struggle over another. Instead, she argued that true independence would only be achieved if all forms of oppression were fought simultaneously. It was this radical stance that often brought her into conflict not only with the Dutch but also with the more moderate nationalist elite. She sought no compromise with oppression in any form, an attitude that demonstrated her integrity and ideological consistency.

Pedagogical-Transformative: Education as the Path to Liberation

For Rasuna Said, education was the alpha and omega of the emancipation struggle. Her leadership vision was pedagogical-transformative, where she saw education not merely as a transfer of knowledge, but as a process of structural and mental liberation. Echoing Freire's thought, she believed that education was a tool to awaken critical consciousness (conscientization) among the oppressed, especially women (Ritonga et al., 2025). By establishing schools for girls, as she did after her release from prison, she aimed not just to

eradicate illiteracy. Her goal was far more fundamental: to create independent female subjects who dared to think and could question the unjust social order.

The curriculum in her schools not only taught reading, writing, and arithmetic but also instilled an awareness of women's rights, the history of the nation's struggle, and progressive Islamic values. The school became an incubator for female fighter cadres. This pedagogical approach shows that Rasuna Said understood that lasting social change could not be achieved solely through political agitation on grand stages. That change had to start from the foundation, from shaping the mindset of a new generation. Her leadership, therefore, was a long-term investment in human resources, an effort to build the intellectual foundation for a free and equal society (Alisjahbana, 1966).

Symbolic-Cultural: Breaking Domination with Cultural Weapons

Rasuna Said's intelligence also lay in her ability to manipulate Minangkabau cultural symbols to challenge the systems of colonial and patriarchal domination. She accepted tradition unquestioningly but utilized it strategically. As a Minang woman holding the title "Rangkayo," she possessed social status and cultural legitimacy (Krier, 1995). She used this status not to maintain the status quo, but precisely to dismantle it. She inverted patriarchal logic by showing that a respectable Minang woman (according to tradition) was precisely one who dared to speak in public and fight against injustice (a radical modern act).

She cleverly exploited the image of the strong and independent Minangkabau woman, rooted in the matrilineal system, to justify her political role. It was as if she was saying to the world, "If my own culture grants an honorable position to women, why should the colonial political system and the state sideline us?" (Febriani & Salleh, 2024) In this way, she transformed her cultural identity from a mere heritage into a political weapon. She was the personification of the dialectic between tradition and modernity. She took progressive elements from Minangkabau tradition (like the central position of women) and used them to push a modernizing agenda (like women's political participation). This symbolic-cultural leadership demonstrates an extraordinary level of political sophistication, where resistance is conducted through rational arguments and the mobilization of cultural meaning and identity.

DISCUSSION

Relevance and Contribution for Women's Leadership Today

Re-examining the thought and leadership style of Rasuna Said, more than half a century after her passing, is not merely historical nostalgia. Her struggle offers lessons and inspiration that are highly relevant to the challenges faced by women leaders in

contemporary Indonesia. First, Rasuna Said presents a leadership model based on local and spiritual values. Amidst the currents of globalization that often homogenize feminist discourse, she reminds us that the struggle for gender justice can and must be rooted in the community's local cultural context and beliefs. Her model challenges the binary view that often pits "tradition" against "modernity," or "religion" against "feminism." She proved that a synthesis between them is possible and can also be a source of tremendous strength (Putra, n.d.). This provides an alternative for contemporary women activists who may feel alienated by the dominant liberal-secular feminist discourse.

Second, her life journey provides essential lessons for the contemporary Indonesian feminist movement. The intersectional approach she practiced intuitively—connecting issues of gender, class, and colonialism—is a reminder that the women's struggle must not become an elitist movement isolated from broader social issues. The battle for gender equality must go hand in hand with the fight for social justice, democracy, and human rights for all. Rasuna Said's legacy encourages the women's movement to build strategic alliances with other pro-democracy movements and to always side with the most marginalized groups.

Third, actualizing Rasuna Said's values in the postcolonial context demands intellectual courage and political integrity. Rasuna Said was an "organic intellectual" who thought and acted and bore the risks of her convictions. In an era where politics is often reduced to image-making and short-term pragmatism, her uncompromising spirit against injustice is an exemplar. To actualize her values means to dare to speak truth to power, whether it be the power of the state, corporations, or market and religious fundamentalism. It means continuing her struggle to ensure that development leaves no one behind, and that women's voices are heard and become decisive in the direction of public policy (Budianta, 2006). Rasuna Said's leadership, in the end, is a call never to stop fighting for a more just and humane world order.

CONCLUSION

The reconstruction of Rasuna Said's leadership narrative from an emancipatory political perspective has revealed a model of female leadership that is far more complex and radical than what has been presented in mainstream historiography. Her leadership was not merely the participation of women in male politics, but a conscious effort to deconstruct an oppressive order through a unique synthesis of progressive Islamic values, anti-colonial nationalism, and a deep gender consciousness. Her leadership characteristics—emancipatory-inclusive, rhetorical-propagandistic, radical-convergent, pedagogical-transformative, and symbolic-cultural—demonstrate a holistic and sophisticated strategy of

struggle. She not only demanded rights but also built consciousness; not only fought an external enemy (colonialism), but also an internal one (patriarchy).

The importance of this work lies in its ability to offer an alternative leadership paradigm firmly rooted in the Indonesian local context, yet it has universal resonance. The figure of Rasuna Said refutes the myth that feminism is a Western import and proves that the spirit of women's liberation can flourish from the womb of local tradition and spirituality. Furthermore, this research underscores the urgency to continue unearthing and elevating the narratives of other female fighters buried in historical archives, as part of an effort to build a more inclusive and gender-just historical consciousness. For future application, Rasuna Said's leadership model can be integrated into leadership and citizenship education materials and serve as a blueprint for civil society organizations in formulating effective and rooted advocacy strategies. Further research could be directed towards a comparative study between Rasuna Said and her female contemporaries in Southeast Asia to map women's transnational intellectual and struggle networks in the era of decolonization.

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