



Amerta Movement and Women's Empowerment Through The Lens of Indigenous Psychology

by Martha Hesty Susilowati

THE IMPACT of colonization on indigenous peoples is a global phenomenon, often resulting in the suppression of traditional beliefs, cultural practices, and economic stability (Enriquez, 1995; Kingfisher, 2007). Indonesia is one of the developing countries that experienced that suppression and the impact is continuing today. In psychology, indigenous issues or phenomena are often studied under the discipline of cultural psychology, which seems to be influenced significantly by western knowledge. Coloniality in psychology has led to the rejection of indigenous knowledge, as mental health and psychological well-being continue to be evaluated and standardized through western frameworks. Thus, it is important that psychology emphasizes decolonizing knowledge by challenging the dominance of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) samples and frameworks in studying indigenous psychology (Henrich et al., 2010).

Indigenous psychology emphasizes the importance in addressing indigenous knowledge and practices as part of psychological knowledge, which contributes to human life and its wellbeing (Henrich et al., 2010). Indonesia is rich with indigenous knowledge and practices especially in relation to psychological wellbeing, even though it is still challenging to be accepted because of the stigmatization of indigeneity, in the context of modern life.

In this article, I address one source of knowledge and practice coming from Java, which is also popular globally: Amerta Movement. In the realm of psychology and movement therapy, I suggest that Amerta Movement offers a unique approach that intertwines mindful movement, self-expression, and personal transformation. Developed and expanded by movement artist Javanese teacher Suprpto Suryodarmo, Amerta Movement is deeply rooted in the principles of authentic movement, presence, and embodiment (Cohen, 2016). Amerta Movement provides an avenue for self-discovery and healing, and I focus particularly on how this is valuable for women seeking empowerment. Women's empowerment in psychology especially in psychotherapy deals with trauma, depression, and anxiety (Hameed, et al., 2020).

Amerta Movement offers a holistic approach that enables women to reclaim their bodies, emotions, and identities from societal constraints. This article explores the synergy between Amerta Movement and women's empowerment, emphasizing its psychological significance and transformative potential.

Understanding Amerta Movement and Its Relationship with Women's Empowerment

Amerta Movement is a non-stylized or non-formalized movement practice that encourages individuals to explore their natural bodily expressions. Through this free form of movement, Amerta does not rely on rigid techniques but instead focuses on spontaneity, and deep listening to the body's impulses (Bloom et al., 2018). Amerta Movement emphasizes personal experience and sensory-motor awareness in response to gravity and the environment. With attentive play, embodied awareness, and intuitive movement, the practitioners engage in the ever-changing present and discover meaning in their relationship with space, nature, and surroundings environment. The movements are free, decentralized, and create dialogue or relationship with the self,

environment, and the others (Cohen, 2016; Dean, 2011). Through Amerta Movement, practitioners gain better awareness and consciousness about themselves; about their body and the reaction within the body (Dean, 2011). Amerta Movement is also known as kind of spiritual practice through movement.

In the realm of psychotherapy, movement including dance is sometimes used as a method in pursuing psychological wellbeing and developing the personality. Dance therapy has been shown to have significant impact on self-esteem, self-confidence, and the expression of deepest emotion. It also enriches emotional intelligence and social bonds (Szafraniec 2003 in Adamski, 2024). Similarly, artistic practices that intertwine various creative elements such as music, movement, and visual arts could enhance emotional and psychological growth (Fres, 1990 in Adamski, 2024). Steiner's eurhythmics theory further emphasizes that rhythm and movement serve as natural expressions of one's personality, integrating

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thoughts, emotions, and identity (Adamski, 2024). Somatic practices allow individuals to calibrate their inner and outer experiences, fostering self-awareness while engaging with the world socially, culturally, and politically (Reeve 2011, Weber 2021). Thus, movement-based therapies offer a holistic approach to personal growth, enabling individuals to connect with themselves and their surroundings in meaningful ways.

This approach can be effective in addressing women's empowerment particularly in societies where traditional gender roles dominate in ways that highlight power disparities (Freire, 1974; Chattopadhyay, 2005). Women's empowerment requires social, economic, and political power, such as access to higher education, and significant roles of influence in economics and politics (Sushama, 1998; Pam Rajput, 2001; Tiwari, 2001; Chattopadhyay, 2005; Aspy and Sandhu, 1999; Patricia et al, 2003). In personal matters, women's empowerment also needs to be contextualized in relation to individual and psychological needs (Pam Rajput, 2001; Tiwari, 2001; Cornwall & Brock, 2005). If there is empowerment within an individual or a group, this might also lead to the disempowerment of others. Thus, when addressing empowerment,

there is a need to be cautious about these paradoxical tendencies, and it should be practiced in a dialectical and diverse way (Rappaport, 1987).

In discussion and workshops with Widya Ayu Kusumawardani (also known as Ayu), one of the practitioners of Amerta Movement in Indonesia, women's empowerment plays an interesting part in it. During a workshop, we discussed how Amerta Movement contributes to our intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Women are frequently conditioned to conform to rigid gender roles and societal expectations. Amerta Movement disrupts these constraints by encouraging spontaneity and self-authenticity. In movement sessions, there are no predefined roles, allowing women to explore ways to break free from limiting narratives and redefine their identities on their own terms. According to Reeve (2016) and Weber (2021), Amerta Movement

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encourages practitioners to unfold their full potential. We can also play with gender to find our potential, or we can move beyond a focus on our limited gender roles. With Ayu and some other friends, we practiced the movement together which led us into the deeper connection within and with surrounding environment. This way of connecting to the environment can support movers to go beyond how they usually behave in daily life, and provide new ways of expressing themselves through and beyond gender. This process is significant as Amerta Movement provides important perspectives in developing our psychophysical experience (Bloom, 2006). Thus, I suggest that Amerta Movement could be good alternative in a women's empowerment program. This approach not only redefines empowerment by enabling women to move freely, express authentically, and live courageously through Amerta Movement, but also supports decolonizing therapeutic knowledge in psychology.

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