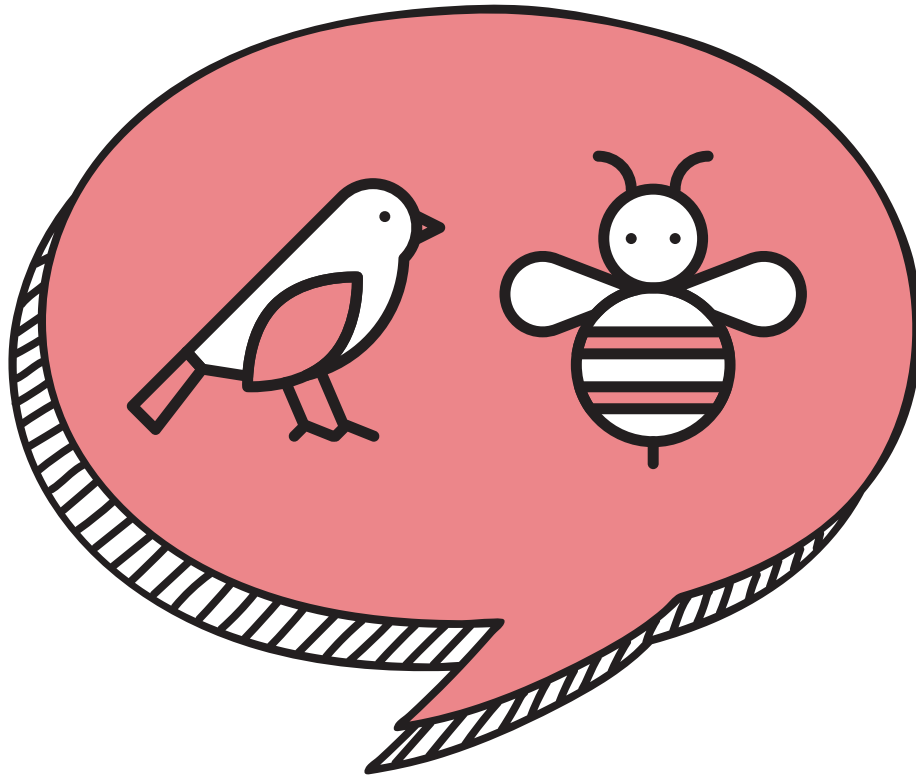


THE

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Approaching Sexuality Issues with Children in the Family

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

The topic of sexuality is often an uncomfortable one for parents to broach with their children and vice versa. Some might find it embarrassing to discuss while others may not even know how to get the conversation going. Unfortunately, this may lead to children going online or to their friends to search for answers to questions they may have. Without the intervention of parents, it would be hard to determine whether the information they receive is appropriate or even accurate. At AMP's 4th National Convention held last year, we highlighted the important role parents have in helping our children navigate issues surrounding sexuality.

In his article on *Pg 10*, Ustaz Dr Yusri shares a few steps that parents can take to do this. He emphasises the need to maintain a close relationship with one's children and to provide them a safe space to ask questions and learn so they can obtain accurate information that is aligned with our Islamic values. He also touches on topics that are relevant to sexuality that includes pre-puberty, puberty, gender identity and boy-girl relationships as well as online safety, which can shape children's knowledge and learning on sexuality.



As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child. I hope that by understanding the issues concerning sexuality among children, as well as the proper ways to approach the topic, we can raise a generation that is well-informed and well-equipped in traversing life.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several overlapping loops and lines.

DR MD BADRUN NAFIS SAION
SUPERVISING EDITOR

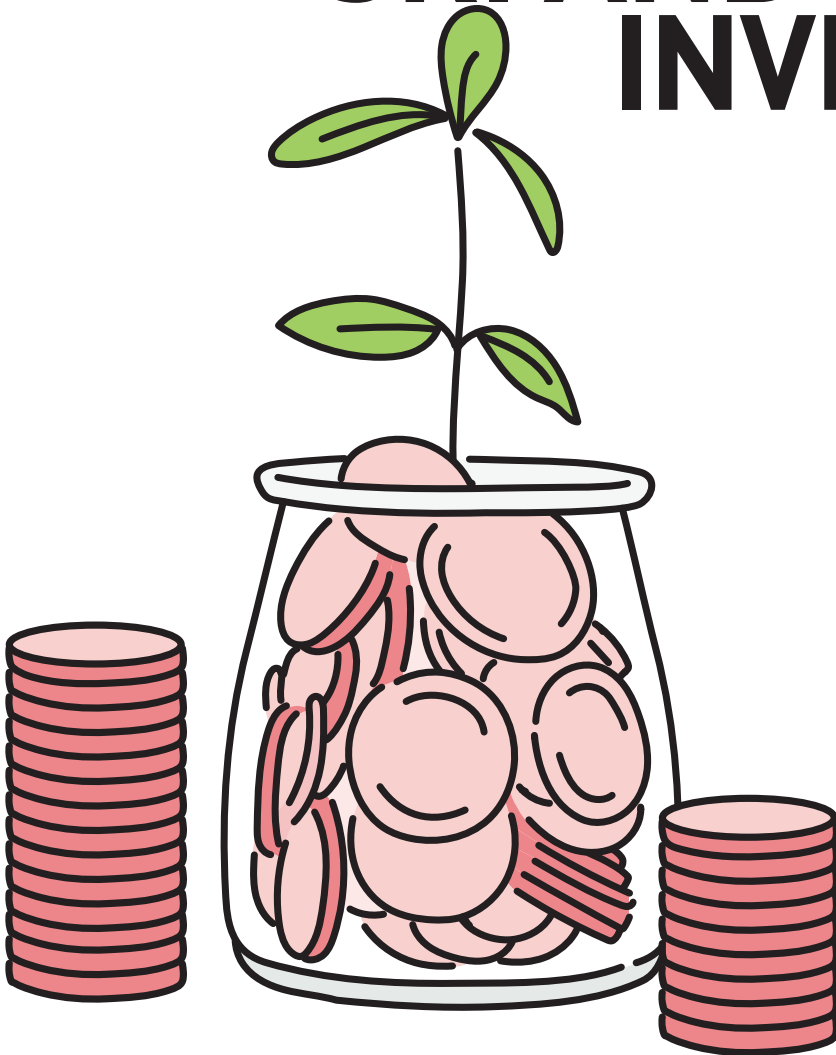
SUSTAINABLE INVESTING: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ESG, SRI AND ISLAMIC INVESTING?

BY DR HAZIK MOHAMED

Returns are no longer the only factor to consider when investing. Investors increasingly want companies that are as committed to making the world a better place as they are to making money.

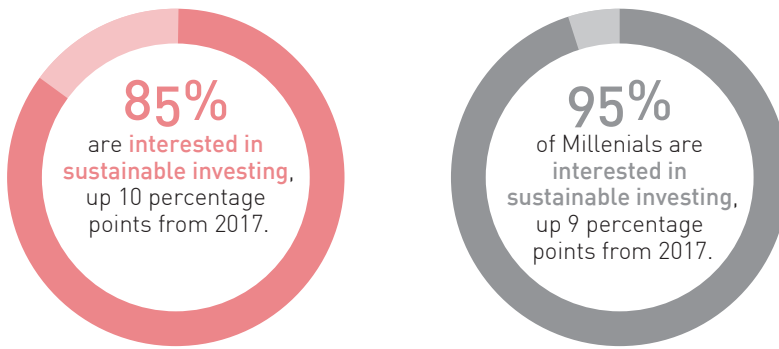
The concept of values-based investing is not new, but it has grown significantly in the past few years. Specifically, research shows that SRI, ESG, and impact investment assets have grown from US\$3 trillion to US\$12 trillion from 2010 to 2018.¹ Other research shows that 95% of all millennials today are willing to participate in socially conscious investing trends based on their own personal values, which seems to imply that this trend is here to stay.

Investment deals today are being viewed from a broader perspective. It used to be that financial performance, annual returns, and capital appreciation were the only factors used to determine the profitability of an investment, but that has changed over time. Many funds and strategies exist today to facilitate this movement as more investors want to use their money



¹ U.S. Forum for Sustainable and Responsible Investment, *The US SIF Foundation's Biennial 'Trends Report' Finds That Sustainable Investing Assets Reach US\$17.1 Trillion*. https://www.ussif.org/blog_home.asp?Display=155

FIGURE 1: GROWING TREND OF SUSTAINABLE INVESTING



Source: Morgan Stanley Institute for Sustainable Investing

positively to impact society. In this context, we find terms such as socially responsible investing (SRI), environmental, social, and governance investing (ESG investing), and impact investing.

BY DEFINITION

Funds and strategies that incorporate ethical considerations into their investment processes have risen in popularity due to the increasing demand. In the investment industry, terms such as ESG, SRI and impact investing are often used interchangeably, assuming that they all refer to the same thing. There are, however, subtle differences between these terms. It is important to understand the differences between these three investment trends in order to formulate an investment portfolio that will suit your needs.

- Corporate social responsibility (CSR) investing aims to limit a company's negative impact on society or to benefit it at the same time (or both). To better inform investors, the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) aims to standardise the ways companies report on ESG criteria based on the sector and industry in which they operate. The conversion of a data centre from fossil fuel to renewable energy is an example of an ESG investment, as it provides cost and environmental benefits at the same time.
- In SRI, investments are screened to eliminate companies whose values conflict with those of the investor. SRI was established by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, urging his followers not to invest in stocks based on sins such as alcohol, tobacco, weapons, or gambling. Nowadays, fossil fuel producers and firearms manufacturers are often excluded from SRI. An SRI approach is one of the most basic (and often least expensive) forms of values-based investing.
- Islamic finance is based on a system of standards based on moral and ethical values. Among the goals of Islamic finance are improving living conditions and well-being, promoting social equity, and preventing unfair trade practices. As a result, usury (interest or *riba*) was prohibited and replaced by a system in which profits and risks are shared. For investments to be deemed Islamic or *Shariah*-compliant, they are subjected to two screening processes:
 - › Financial Screening – certain financial ratios are examined according to certain threshold values, e.g. for debt and income from debt securities (The Accounting and Auditing Organization for Islamic Financial Institutions uses 30%; Thomson-Reuters uses 33% threshold),
 - › Sector Screening – screen out stocks of companies associated with businesses that contravene the *Shariah*, such as alcohol, casino/gambling, pork, other vices.

There is another category called impact investing which refers to private funds, while SRI and ESG investing involve publicly traded assets. Impact investing is meant for investors who want to know how their money is being used for a particular cause, and its direct impact, unlike ESG, Islamic and SRI funds which are more broadly diversified.

HOW THEY OVERLAP AND HOW THEY DIFFER

It is entirely possible for financial services to qualify as ESG, Islamic, and SRI. In developed countries, however, most SRI products do not meet Islamic criteria since they do not comply with Islamic prohibitions. There is no rule that prohibits the SRI universe from lending money at interest or trading risk. As an example, a green bank may warrant high marks as a sustainable bank but would not qualify as Islamic due to its interest-based transactions.

The offering of Islamic financial services may be relatively easy for financial institutions familiar with ESG considerations, since responsible and *Shariah* values are clearly aligned, and both approaches have a strong ethical foundation.

There are many commonalities among these companies, including a commitment to human rights and the environment as well as long-term sustainability and success. By creating a responsible screen, much of the heavy lifting had already been done for assembling a *Shariah*-compliant fund.

A research report³ on Islamic finance and ESG considerations states that ESG scores from more than 5,000 non-financial companies suggest a direct correlation between *Shariah* compliance and higher ESG scores. ESG scores for *Shariah*-compliant companies are on average 6% higher than for companies that are not subject to the *Shariah* screening process. The difference increases to 10% for non-financial companies. In terms of ESG performance, *Shariah*-compliant companies scored higher on governance issues by 3.0% and on environmental and social concerns by 7.3% and 7.0%, respectively.

² Morgan Stanley Institute for Sustainable Investing, *Sustainable Signals: Individual Investor Interest Driven by Impact, Conviction and Choice*. https://www.morganstanley.com/pub/content/dam/msdotcom/infographics/sustainable-investing/Sustainable_Signals_Individual_Investor_White_Paper_Final.pdf

³ Refinitiv and RFI Foundation, *Islamic Finance ESG Outlook 2019: Shared Values*. https://www.refinitiv.com/content/dam/marketing/en_us/documents/reports/islamic-finance-esg-outlook-2019-report.pdf

Morally motivated individuals may not wish to participate in actions that are objectionable, or they may seek to make a positive impact on society or the environment. For example, investing in tobacco may be unacceptable to an individual investor or a health-related charity, irrespective of its economics. Others may not be concerned about these issues. Investing in the tobacco industry may be economically attractive to them, and they may consider ESG factors simply to complement their conventional financial analysis.

SEARCHING FOR ECONOMIC VALUE AND MORAL VALUES IN INVESTING

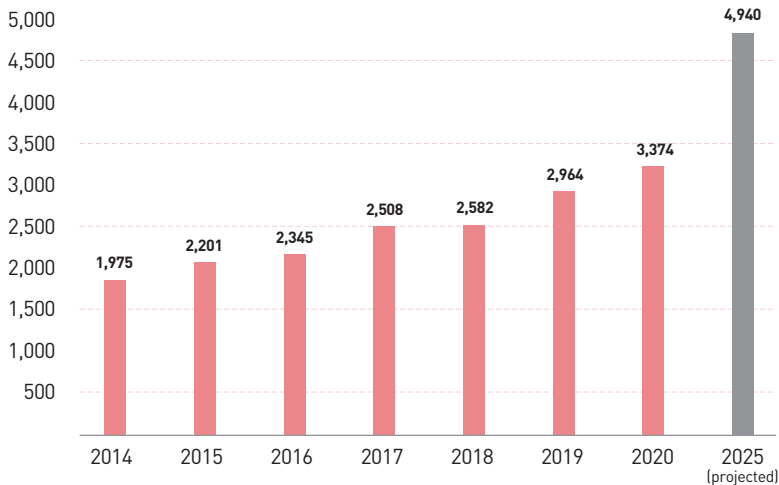
There are various reasons why investors consider ESG issues. It is possible that some people view them solely as economic opportunities and risks. Other people may view ESG issues not just as risks and opportunities, but also as moral issues. In the assessment of a values-based system, investors usually mean very similar things by economic value, but they mean very different things by moral values.

Morally motivated individuals may not wish to participate in actions that are objectionable, or they may seek to make a positive impact on society or the environment. For example, investing in tobacco may be unacceptable to an individual investor or a health-related charity, irrespective of its economics. Others may not be concerned about these issues. Investing in the tobacco industry may be economically attractive to them, and they may consider ESG factors simply to complement their conventional financial analysis.

By taking into account ESG issues, investors can help bring positive change for society and the environment, whether they are motivated primarily by economic value or moral values. A company's employees and vendors could benefit from improved health and safety practices if investors concerned about potential losses from health and safety risks engage in discussions with the company about changing its practices.

Islamic finance was born out of economic thought governed by *Shariah* principles, and largely a subset of a wider-scoped Islamic economics. It tends to criticise the free market versions of capitalism. Using an Islamic worldview, it seeks to identify ways and means to arrive at a more just economic order, one with less inequality and more stability than the present one through risk-sharing, social justice and personal accountability. Figure 2 depicts the steady growth of this demand in the last decade.

FIGURE 2: GROWTH OF ISLAMIC FINANCE ASSETS (2014-2020) AND PROJECTED 2025 SIZE (US\$ BILLION)



Source: Refinitiv as of 30 June 2022

Though SRI investing has its roots in Abrahamic faiths, it has become increasingly secular over the years. Several factors have contributed to this change, including the secularisation of Western Europe, which is the heartland of modern SRI investing. Changing social values have also contributed to the secularisation of SRI investments, which may differ greatly from the values espoused by classic SRI investments. Climate change and gender diversity are among the issues receiving more attention now than slavery, war, and apartheid. In contrast, Islamic finance remains deeply religious, focusing on exclusionary screening of "sin" industries and on just financial transactions

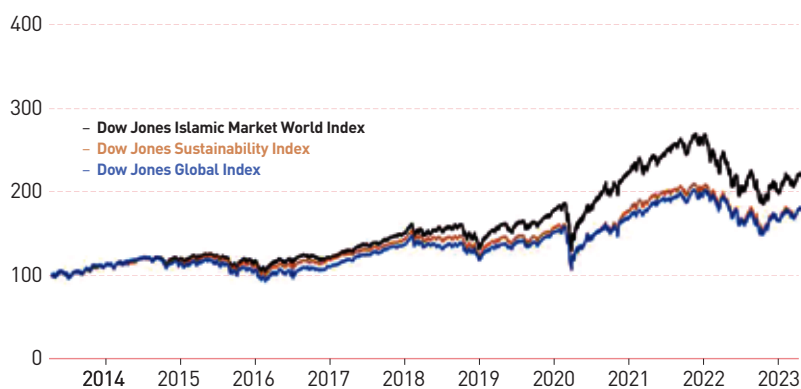
and commercial exchange as the principles of its economics. There are significant cultural differences between Islamic finance and SRI investing, as evidenced by the differing vocabularies and underlying priorities used in their respective narratives.

When compared to SRI investments, Islamic financial services exhibit a greater level of consistency across countries. Globally, Islamic equity funds employ similar exclusionary screening requirements regarding the purpose of the business and the capital structure of the company. There is a wide range of values in the SRI space, and exclusionary screening based on capital structure is not commonplace.

COMPARING PERFORMANCE

A substantial amount of attention has been paid to financial performance in research on environmental, social, and governance issues. It is essential to determine whether ESG investing, SRI, or Islamic finance compromises financial performance when compared with conventional investments. Some investors expect this compromise, pointing out that excluding assets based on moral values will reduce the investment universe, which could lead to assuming more risk or earning lower returns. They contend that anything beyond a pure economic perspective, such as a desire to make a positive difference to society and the environment, can adversely affect performance.

FIGURE 3: COMPARATIVE PERFORMANCE OF DOW JONES INDEX (CONVENTIONAL VS ESG VS ISLAMIC) FOR A 10-YEAR PERIOD BETWEEN 2014-2023 (Q1)



Source: Islamic Finance Singapore (IFSG)

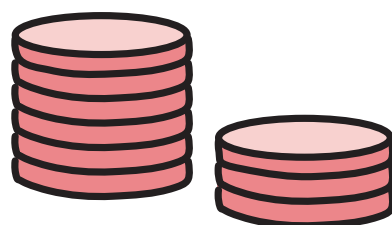
Preliminary 10-year data (Figure 3) shows that the Islamic index exhibit the best performance out of the Dow Jones Global Index (conventional), Dow Jones Sustainability Index (ESG) and Dow Jones Islamic World Market Index (*Shariah*) when compared against each other. This evidence shows that restricting “sin” industries and financialised interest-based segments improves performance for investments, not only against traditional conventional index but also over the ESG index.

Unfortunately, many Islamic funds available for retail investments do not reflect such superior performance which leaves Islamic investors abegging. Such underperformance can possibly be attributed to the lack of fund managers actually emphasising tighter *Shariah*-compliance, who can put together a profitable portfolio, read market signals well, anticipate economic cycles to rebalance portfolios and utilise pure Islamic instruments to adapt and deal with extreme events.

CONCLUSION

Investing in ESG factors, SRI and Islamic finance aims to meet the financial needs of customers, achieve financial success, as well as deliver better outcomes for society and the environment. SRI investments predate modern Islamic finance and were developed in the most advanced economies, therefore, it is not surprising that they are setting standards for ESG considerations. Islamic finance was born of Islamic economics, which seeks a more just and stable economic system, one with a financial system that supports real and sustainable economic growth. Therefore, Islamic finance providers are expected to uphold Islamic prohibitions and take into account environmental, social, and governance considerations voluntarily. Islamic finance would provide a systematic and substantive advantage to ESG considerations in order to enhance its value proposition to global investors (that includes all religions and cultures) since it is strongly linked to more sustainable investment methods with positive social and environmental outcomes. ■

Dr Hazik Mohamed is a multi-skilled professional, whose focus is on business growth strategies for start-ups, tech-related research, and various consulting projects. His past corporate clients include the ASEAN Secretariat, national finance offices, and the United Nations Capital Development Fund. He is also the author of three internationally published books: *Belief and Rule-Compliance* (Academic Press, 2018), *Blockchain, Fintech and Islamic Finance* (De Gruyter, 2019) and *Beyond Fintech* (World Scientific, 2021).



Challenges Faced by Transnational Couples in Singapore

BY NUR AMIRA JUMALI AND EZZAT MD MUSTASAR



Transnational couples, defined as partnerships involving individuals from different nationalities, have become increasingly common in our globalised world. Singapore, a vibrant and multicultural society, has witnessed a rising number of transnational couples in recent years. However, despite the advantages of cultural diversity and personal growth that these relationships bring, they also come with a host of challenges. This article explores the challenges that transnational couples face in Singapore, including nationality, employment, adjustment, language barriers, and housing stability.

NATIONALITY

Nationality plays a multifaceted and pivotal role in shaping the challenges that transnational couples encounter in Singapore. These challenges are primarily rooted in legal, bureaucratic, and societal dimensions, and they often dictate the couple's access to various opportunities and resources within Singapore.

Legal Implications

One of the most pressing challenges that transnational couples face is navigating the complex legal landscape surrounding immigration, residency, and employment rights. Citizens and permanent residents

may enjoy more favourable legal rights and benefits, while non-residents might face restrictions on employment, healthcare access, and length of stay¹. The legal disparities can lead to feelings of inequality and imbalance within the relationship.

Immigration and Residency

Non-resident partners may encounter difficulties obtaining long-term visas or residency permits, making it challenging for them to establish a stable life in Singapore. Lengthy bureaucratic processes, uncertainty about visa outcomes, and the potential for sudden

¹ Tan, S. K. (2018). Transnational love: The effects of foreign spouses on integrating foreigners in Singapore. *Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, 17(2), 206-227.

changes in immigration policies can contribute to stress and emotional strain within the relationship². This uncertainty can hinder the couple's ability to plan for their future together.

Social Benefits

Nationality can also impact access to social benefits, such as healthcare, education, and social assistance programmes. Partners from countries without reciprocal agreements with Singapore might find themselves ineligible for certain services, leading to potential gaps in their well-being and integration. The unequal distribution of social benefits based on nationality can also exacerbate feelings of exclusion and inequality within the relationship³.

Financial Stability

The role of nationality extends to financial stability as well. Non-resident partners might face challenges in securing stable employment due to restrictions on work permits or limited recognition of foreign qualifications. This can impact the couple's financial prospects and the overall quality of life they can afford in Singapore⁴.

Impact of Challenges

For foreign spouses who choose to move to Singapore to build a life with their chosen partner, the abovementioned issues may be common challenges that they would face. In the course of our work as marriage counsellors, we have come across cases of transnational marriages where the foreign spouse may be fully dependent on the Singaporean spouse for their legal status, financial support, and access to essential resources and/or services.

In such cases, the foreign spouse would report that they feel trapped while trying to assimilate into the larger society. On top of that, there are instances where they expressed that they are unable to pursue their own goals or interests as well, especially if they find blending into the society particularly difficult. On the other hand, the Singaporean spouse would present issues such as feeling pressured as

they try to manage being depended on for another person's living. More often than not, this results in them feeling resentful whenever they experience challenges, such as financial difficulties, arising from this role. Ultimately, this affects the relationship between them as they become more prone to conflict and may not be able to provide the appropriate support that they need from each other.

Employment

Employment is a crucial aspect for transnational couples as it influences their financial stability and overall integration into Singapore's society. The complexities surrounding employment encompass not only securing job opportunities, but also dealing with work permits, skills recognition, and the impact of employment on integration.

Work Permit Regulations

Transnational couples often encounter challenges related to work permit regulations, which can vary based on the partner's nationality and qualifications. The process of obtaining work permits can be convoluted, time-consuming, and subject to changing policies. Partners who arrive in Singapore with the intention of working might find themselves in a bureaucratic maze, leading to frustration and disillusionment⁵.

Skills Recognition

Even when partners manage to secure employment, their foreign qualifications might not be recognised in Singapore. This can lead to a mismatch between the partner's skills and the job they hold. Lee and Rahman (2019) highlighted that transnational partners often experience downward occupational mobility where their qualifications and skills are not fully utilised.

Job Market Integration

Transnational couples may struggle to integrate into the local job market due to their unfamiliarity with industry practices, job search techniques, and networking opportunities. Partners from different cultural backgrounds might face

difficulties in navigating Singapore's job market, which could result in prolonged periods of unemployment⁶.

Impact on Relationship Dynamics

Employment challenges can significantly impact the dynamics of the transnational couple's relationship. A partner who is unable to find suitable employment might experience feelings of inadequacy or dependency, leading to emotional strain and tension within the relationship. Financial stress stemming from unemployment can further exacerbate these challenges⁷.

Dual-Career Couples

In cases where both partners aspire to pursue their own careers, the challenges multiply. The difficulties of securing suitable employment for both partners can impact decisions such as family planning, financial planning, and overall life satisfaction. Balancing the career aspirations of both partners while navigating the intricacies of the job market can be a considerable challenge⁸.

Adjustment

Adjustment is a multifaceted challenge that transnational couples encounter when moving to Singapore. This process involves adapting to a new cultural environment, social norms, and way of life. The challenges associated with adjustment can impact various aspects of a couple's life, from individual well-being to relationship dynamics.

Cultural Adaptation

Transnational partners often face cultural differences that require them to adapt their behaviours, communication styles, and expectations. Adjusting to a new cultural context can be particularly challenging when partners come from backgrounds with starkly different cultural norms⁹. This includes aspects such as food habits, communication styles, social norms, religious practices, and even basic etiquette. Tan and Quek (2018) highlights the need for open communication and cultural sensitivity to navigate these challenges effectively.

² Lee, C., & Rahman, M. M. (2019). Labor migration and social integration: Transnational couples in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 115-133.

³ Chua, R. Y. J. (2018). Ethnic identity and intercultural communication in multicultural societies: Insights from Singapore. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 49(8), 934-942.

⁴ Tan, S. K., & Quek, S. S. (2018). Cultural differences and intercultural relationships in Singapore. In *Intercultural Relationships in a Globalized World* (pp. 79-98). Palgrave Macmillan.

⁵ Lee, C., & Rahman, M. M. (2019). Labor migration and social integration: Transnational couples in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 115-133.

⁶ Chin, C. M., & Heng, S. (2021). Housing migrants: The impact of migration and housing policies on migrants in Singapore. *Habitat International*, 118.

⁷ Tan, K. H., & Wong, D. F. K. (2019). Managing transnational ties in transnational families: Housing challenges and coping strategies. *Geoforum*, 101, 70-79.

⁸ Lee, C., & Rahman, M. M. (2019). Labor migration and social integration: Transnational couples in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 115-133.

⁹ Chua, R. Y. J. (2018). Ethnic identity and intercultural communication in multicultural societies: Insights from Singapore. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 49(8), 934-942.

Identity and Belonging

The process of adjusting to a new cultural environment can lead to a reevaluation of one's own identity and sense of belonging. Transnational partners might experience a sense of being "in-between" cultures, struggling to fully identify with either their home culture or the host culture. This identity struggle can lead to feelings of displacement and uncertainty¹⁰.

Interpersonal Dynamics

Cultural differences can give rise to misunderstandings and conflicts in interpersonal relationships. Different communication styles, norms of emotional expression, and expectations of personal space can contribute to tensions between partners. The adjustment process requires both partners to develop cross-cultural communication skills and cultivate empathy to navigate these challenges¹¹.

Dual Cultural Identities

Transnational couples often find themselves raising children with dual cultural identities. The challenge lies in ensuring that both partners' cultural values and traditions are respected and integrated into the family dynamic. The couple must navigate complex decisions related to language use, religious upbringing, and cultural practices within the household¹².

Social Integration

The absence of friends and family from their home countries may lead to feelings of isolation, especially during significant life events such as childbirth or illness. Many transnational couples report feelings of loneliness, which can negatively impact their mental well-being and relationship satisfaction¹³. Additionally, the transnational partner might face challenges in building social connections, forming friendships, and finding a support network. The lack of familiarity with local social norms and venues for social interaction can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness¹⁴.

A CASE STUDY

Consider a scenario of a Malay groom-to-be from Malaysia and a Malay bride-to-be from Singapore who attended the Marriage Preparation Programme before

their big day. The groom-to-be, influenced by his religious and cultural heritage, firmly believes in the traditional notion that he is the head of the household after marriage. Hence, this role comes with certain expectations, such as the belief that his wife should obey him. On the other hand, the bride-to-be has been raised in a different environment, having been brought up by a single mother. Therefore, her upbringing has instilled in her a sense of independence and self-reliance, shaping her perspective on gender roles and marital expectations in a manner distinct from her partner's. Their differences became evident during the counselling session, especially when they attempted to discuss topics associated with roles and responsibilities. This included the distribution of responsibility when it comes to household chores and parenting.

It was safe to assume that during this process, the groom-to-be may feel that his cultural identity and beliefs are being undermined, while the bride-to-be may struggle to conform to a model of marriage that she finds oppressive. There was also an assumption that it becomes especially challenging when the transnational couple comes from the same ethnic group, with almost similar religious and cultural beliefs, but have different upbringings.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Language barriers can present a significant hurdle for effective communication and integration into the local community. While English is widely spoken in Singapore, it might not be the first language for all transnational partners. English-speaking individuals may have an advantage in adjusting to the new environment, while those who struggle with the language might face difficulties in accessing essential services and social interactions¹⁵.

Access to Services

Language barriers can impede access to essential services, such as healthcare, legal assistance, and government agencies. Partners who are not proficient in the official languages of Singapore might face difficulties in understanding and navigating bureaucratic processes. This can lead to

Another perspective of language barrier would be that it goes beyond understanding each other based on the chosen language used to communicate. It should ideally be a familiar and comfortable interaction system that includes elements such as tones, intonations, body language, and cultural context. There are instances in a transnational marriage where these subtleties often become significant sources of misunderstanding, as the couple may interpret the same message differently due to their cultural backgrounds.

¹⁰ Tan, S. K., & Quek, S. S. (2018). Cultural differences and intercultural relationships in Singapore. In *Intercultural Relationships in a Globalized World* (pp. 79-98). Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹ Lee, C., & Rahman, M. M. (2019). Labor migration and social integration: Transnational couples in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 115-133.

¹² Tan, S. K., & Quek, S. S. (2018). Cultural differences and intercultural relationships in Singapore. In *Intercultural Relationships in a Globalized World* (pp. 79-98). Palgrave Macmillan.

¹³ Smith, J. A., & Lim, L. L. (2020). Challenges of loneliness and isolation among transnational couples: A Singaporean perspective. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 51(1), 61-79.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lee, C., & Rahman, M. M. (2019). Labor migration and social integration: Transnational couples in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 115-133.

feelings of helplessness and exclusion, impacting their overall well-being¹⁶.

Social Integration

Language proficiency also affects the couple's ability to integrate into the local community. Partners who are unable to communicate fluently in English, the predominant language in Singapore, might find it challenging to form friendships and participate in social activities. This isolation can contribute to feelings of loneliness and cultural disconnection¹⁷.

Career Opportunities

Language barriers can significantly impact career opportunities, particularly in a multicultural and multilingual city like Singapore. Non-native speakers might face limitations in certain job sectors that prioritise language skills, hindering their professional growth and financial stability¹⁸.

Education of Children

For couples with children, language barriers can influence decisions about their education. The choice between teaching children their parents' native language or the dominant local language becomes crucial. The lack of proficiency in the local language might limit educational options and impact the child's overall language development¹⁹.

A CASE STUDY

Another perspective of language barrier would be that it goes beyond understanding each other based on the chosen language used to communicate. It should ideally be a familiar and comfortable interaction system that includes elements such as tones, intonations, body language, and cultural context. There are instances in a transnational marriage where these subtleties often become significant sources of misunderstanding, as the couple may interpret the same message differently due to their cultural backgrounds.

To further illustrate this point, consider the scenario of an Indian national Muslim man who is married to a Singaporean Indian Muslim woman. The wife, who is

outspoken and tends to raise her voice when making a point, may use this familiar communication style as a matter of cultural norm or personal expression, without necessarily indicating unhappiness or anger. However, her husband, interpreting her tone and raised voice through his own cultural lens, may perceive her actions as signs of frustration or discontent. In such situations, a slight difference in communication style can inadvertently lead to misinterpretation and conflict within the relationship.

Given the importance of communication within a marriage, the consequences of such misunderstandings can be quite detrimental, considering that it could lead to unnecessary arguments frequently. Hence, repeated misinterpretations of tone and intent can build up over time, potentially harming the overall quality of the relationship by creating an emotional distance between partners.

DIFFICULTIES IN SECURING STABLE HOUSING

Securing stable housing is another significant challenge that transnational couples face in Singapore. The availability and affordability of suitable accommodation can be impacted by factors such as legal restrictions, financial constraints, and discrimination. The search for appropriate housing might also entail navigating unfamiliar rental markets, understanding lease agreements, and complying with local regulations. Tan and Wong (2019) suggest that housing instability can contribute to relationship strain, as partners might struggle with feelings of vulnerability and a lack of control over their living situation.

Legal Restrictions

Housing challenges often stem from legal restrictions and policies that prioritise citizens and permanent residents. Housing policies might favour citizens or permanent residents over non-residents, making it challenging for transnational partners to find adequate and stable living arrangements²⁰. These legal barriers can create disparities in access to suitable and affordable housing options²¹.

Affordability

Housing costs in Singapore are notoriously high, and transnational couples might face difficulties in finding affordable accommodation that meets their needs. Depending on their financial circumstances, they might have to compromise on the size, location, or quality of housing, potentially impacting their overall quality of life²².

Racial Discrimination

In some cases, transnational couples might face discrimination or bias from landlords or neighbours due to their race or nationality. This can result in difficulties securing housing or feeling unwelcome in the community. Such experiences can impact their sense of belonging and emotional well-being²³.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, transnational couples in Singapore encounter a range of challenges stemming from nationality, employment, adjustment, language barriers, and housing stability. These challenges can impact the emotional well-being of individuals and the overall stability of the relationship. Addressing these issues requires a combination of legal reforms, support services, and cultural sensitivity education. Transnational couples play a valuable role in promoting cross-cultural understanding, but acknowledging and mitigating the challenges they face is essential for their successful integration into our society. ■

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¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Smith, J. A., & Lim, L. (2020). Challenges of loneliness and isolation among transnational couples: A Singaporean perspective. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 51(1), 61-79.

¹⁸ Lee, C., & Rahman, M. M. (2019). Labor migration and social integration: Transnational couples in Singapore. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(1), 115-133.

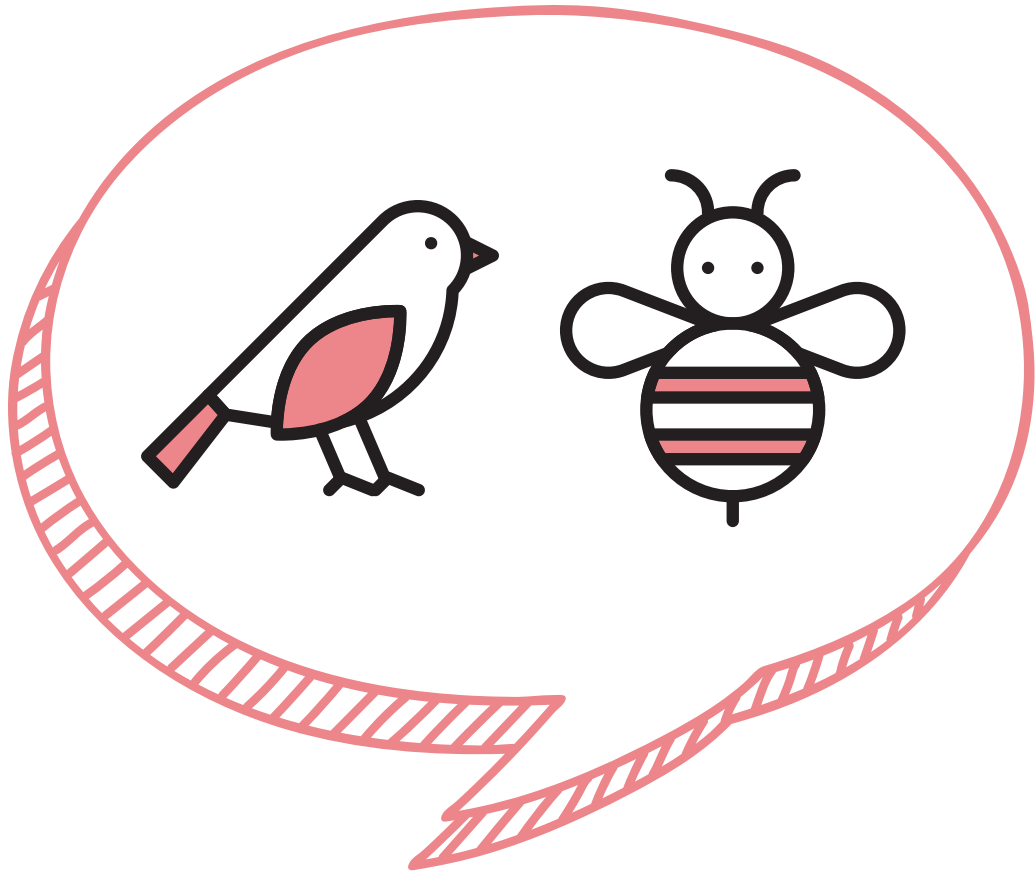
¹⁹ Tan, S. K., & Quek, S. S. (2018). Cultural differences and intercultural relationships in Singapore. In *Intercultural Relationships in a Globalized World* (pp. 79-98). Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁰ Chin, C. M., & Heng, S. (2021). Housing migrants: The impact of migration and housing policies on migrants in Singapore. *Habitat International*, 118.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Tan, K. H., & Wong, D. F. K. (2019). Managing transnational ties in transnational families: Housing challenges and coping strategies. *Geoforum*, 101, 70-79.

²³ Ibid.



Approaching Sexuality Issues with Children in the Family

BY DR MOHAMMAD YUSRI YUBHI MD YUSOFF

Dealing with sexuality issues with children is challenging for some parents because it involves sensitive matters. The approach to sexuality might also differ from one age to another. It is a continuous process starting from childhood until they become young adults.

This article will share some approaches that parents can consider using when engaging with their children on sexuality issues, including perspectives from the Islamic point of view.

CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN

Before discussing how parents can handle the subject of sexuality with their children, they should first understand that the most critical factor is to improve the bond between them and their children. Many parents become anxious or panicky when their children exhibit undesirable behaviour or engage in harmful activities. However, parents should be more worried about the lack of a close relationship with their children as it is a crucial factor in raising and educating children.

Many parents experience a growing distance in their relationship when the child grows up. This happens even though they were close to their children when they were small. Ideally, parents should become closer to their children when they become teenagers, and especially as adults. Educating and reprimanding the children would be increasingly difficult when there is no close relationship. Without this relationship, friends become the only source for children to get guidance or an explanation for all their problems.

On the other hand, with a close relationship, parents can have access to their children and convey guidance whenever needed more easily. Children know they can seek advice or refer to their parents when necessary. They also know that their parents are always there for them whenever they need them. Children will feel safe and secure with their parents because of the long-standing close relationship. Even though children have friends around, they know that their parents are the best place for them to get

guidance without worrying about ridicule or prejudice.

Having a close relationship and the exhortation to show love is not new in Islam. The Quran teaches that love comes first before conveying a message of goodness. Just look at Luqman's message to his son in the following verse:

“And, lo, Luqman spoke thus unto his son, admonishing him: “O my dear son! Do not ascribe divine powers to aught beside God: for, behold, such [a false] ascribing of divinity is indeed an awesome wrong!”¹
– The Holy Quran, Surah Luqman, verse 13

Feelings of love and affection not only need to be expressed to the children but also shown through actions. Similar actions were shown by the Prophet (*pbuh*) in the *hadith* narrated by ‘Aishah r.a.:

“I have not seen anyone closer in conduct, way, and manners to that of the Messenger of Allah in regard to standing and sitting than Fatimah, the daughter of the Messenger of Allah s.w.t.” She said, “Whenever she would enter upon the Prophet s.a.w. he would stand to her and kiss her, and he would sit her in his sitting place.”²

Through this verse, the Quran teaches parents to call on their children with gentleness before advising them never to associate God with others. The same can be said of how the Prophet interacted with much gentleness, care and love towards his daughter, Fatimah.

CORE KNOWLEDGE IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

Parenting knowledge also plays an essential role in educating children. Parents need to acquire appropriate parenting skills in this very challenging modern era. Among the crucial things parents can consider in strengthening their relationship with their children is the ability to recognise their children's behavioural personalities.

Each individual has a different love language and communication style.

Children who are treated according to their love language will feel loved and appreciated. On the other hand, if they are not filled with love, they will feel neglected and unloved, resulting in anger and frustration. It is recommended that parents interact effectively by celebrating the love language of the person they want to approach.³

Parents must also note their children's developments and all matters related to their child's interests. This allows them to provide accurate and fair information for any question raised.

Given the different life stages and generation gaps between children and parents, parents are often at a loss to find topics of conversation that could be discussed with children. As a parent, it is advantageous if we are aware of our child's interests, such as music, sports, gaming, etc. It would help the parents better understand their children's world and foster a closer relationship through these common topics of interest. Our Prophet (*pbuh*) exemplified this when he appealed to Abu Umayr's interest by asking him about his pet bird, “O Abu ‘Umayr! What did the *Nughayr* (a kind of bird) do?”⁴.

APPROACHING SEXUALITY ISSUES

A good relationship with their children would help parents interact with them more easily, engage in discussions on sensitive issues, and convey the noble values that should be instilled in children. In this regard, there are several issues related to sexuality that could be discussed between parents and children:

Understanding their body and respecting personal privacy

This is the very first stage that children need to know, especially after reaching the age of *mumaiyiz*, which refers to a certain age where children can differentiate between good and evil, right and wrong. In addition to what has been learned in school, children must be reminded of the importance of respecting their bodies and protecting their boundaries. They must be informed that no one can touch their private parts, not even their teachers or

¹ Asad, Muhammad. *The Message of the Qur'an*. Kuala Lumpur, Islamic Book Trust, 2013. p. 750.

² ibn 'Isa ibn Surah al-Tirmidhi, Muhammad. *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*. 2nd ed., 2 vol. 5, Cairo, Dar al-Ta'sil, 2016, Hadith 4179:118.

³ For more information on the love languages, see Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell, *The Five Love Languages of Your Family*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2009). Parents may want to take the love languages quiz to discover their children's primary love language, what it means, and how they can better connect with their loved ones. See, <https://5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/love-language>

⁴ ibn 'Isa ibn Surah al-Tirmidhi, Muhammad. *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*. 2nd ed., 2 vol. 3, Cairo, Dar al-Ta'sil, 2016, Hadith 2106:236.

parents. In cases of emergency or medical purposes, for example, consent must be obtained from them or their guardians. At the same time, they also need to respect the privacy and boundaries of others.

Addressing gender identity

In the era of AI and Netflix, as well as the influence of social media, children will be prone to consume materials with elements of LGBTQ+ influences either on their own or through discussions with their friends. Parents must emphasise to their children that although LGBTQ+ elements are forbidden by religion, homophobic attitudes and ostracising these parties are also something Islam forbids. That said, parents need to be knowledgeable and engage in discussing sensitive issues related to gender and identity.

Finally, parents must monitor and take note of the development of their children's sexual orientation. If they suspect same-sex attraction tendencies, for example, parents are advised to refer to experts with skills in Islamic counselling.

Handling the *pre-baligh* (puberty) period

In preparing children reaching puberty, parents need to make some preliminary preparations as early as the age of seven to educate them about the responsibilities of a Muslim, such as performing obligatory prayers, fasting and being firm with them when they reach the age of ten and they refuse to pray. The same goes for separating the beds between boys and girls at ten years old. It coincides with the recommendation of the Prophet (*pbuh*):

“Teach your children to pray when they are seven years old and hit them⁵ if they do not do so when they are ten years old, and separate them in their beds.”⁶

Although it is not mandatory at this stage, children must also be exposed to modesty in dressing. They may not be able to cover their *awrah* perfectly at this time, but at least they need to be taught an attitude of modesty in themselves, including in dressing. This is in accordance with the sayings of the Prophet (*pbuh*):

“If you do not feel ashamed, do whatever you like.”⁷

Early exposure at this stage will help children transition to dressing modestly after puberty.

Discussing puberty

As children approach puberty, parents must begin to inform them about the signs that a person has reached puberty and explain the accompanying responsibilities in terms of *syara'* (Islamic law).

In this case, the mother can tell the daughter about menstruation, while the father can explain to their son about ejaculation that occurs after a wet dream. Parents must also explain that once the child reaches puberty, they are now regarded as accountable, and God will reward and punish every good or bad deed.

The Messenger of Allah (*pbuh*). said: *“The Pen has been lifted from three: from the one who is sleeping until he wakes up, from the child until he reaches the age of puberty, and from one who is insane until he comes to his senses.”⁸*

They must also teach their children what should and should not be done following menstruation and ejaculation – the need to take a mandatory shower, how to do it and so on. Parents must also provide information about the difference between *haid* and *istihadah*, *mani* and *mazi* regarding *fiqh* and its provision.

In addition, parents must also explain the impact of puberty on their children's bodies and what to expect, such as growing breasts, body hair and others. They may also want to discuss proper dressing in line with the sudden development of physical changes.

Managing boy-girl relationship issues

In managing boy-girl relationships with their children, parents should delegate tasks. It is not necessary that a mother talks to their daughter or a father to their son and vice versa. It will depend on which parent they are closer to and more comfortable with. A good relationship will

It is crucial for parents to remain calm when addressing the issue as it may prevent the child from sharing again in the future if parents respond adversely. Parents can take the opportunity to share their concerns and provide necessary advice to their children in a relaxed and measured manner. They may want to convey that liking someone is a natural feeling for everyone. On the other hand, if their children are still teenagers, they must be reminded to focus on studying, keep the relationship without any commitment, and treat everyone as equal friends.

⁵ *1 The hadith above does not encourage child abuse, as it is deemed unlawful in Islam. However, when the child reaches the aforesaid age, it is permitted to reprimand them without hitting them violently, abusively, or causing injury and marks. The action should be the last resort and never be pursued when the parent is experiencing anger or seeking retribution.

That said, educating the child without hitting them is the most encouraging in Islam, as the Prophet himself never hit a woman, a child, or an animal.

⁶ ibn al-Ash'ath al-Sijistani, Abu Dawud Sulayman . *Sunan Abi Dawud*, edited by Shu'ayb al-Arnauf, vol. 1, Beirut, Dar al-Risalah al-'Alamiyyah, 2009, Hadith 495:367.

⁷ ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari, Muḥammad. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, edited by Abu Zahwah and Aḥmad 'Inayah, Beirut, Dar-al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 2016, Hadith 3484:711.

make it easier for them to approach one of their parents or be more open to sharing when asked.

It is crucial for parents to remain calm when addressing the issue as it may prevent the child from sharing again in the future if parents respond adversely. Parents can take the opportunity to share their concerns and provide necessary advice to their children in a relaxed and measured manner. They may want to convey that liking someone is a natural feeling for everyone. On the other hand, if their children are still teenagers, they must be reminded to focus on studying, keep the relationship without any commitment, and treat everyone as equal friends. For young adults who are presently in a relationship, parents can advise them to have boundaries and not go out together on their own. Instead, parents could ensure that every interaction between them is done in a group.

Mitigating online safety risks

Online activities, including by children, cannot be avoided today. Children need to be exposed to certain ethics in online activities, whether in the form of online gaming, social media activities or browsing websites.

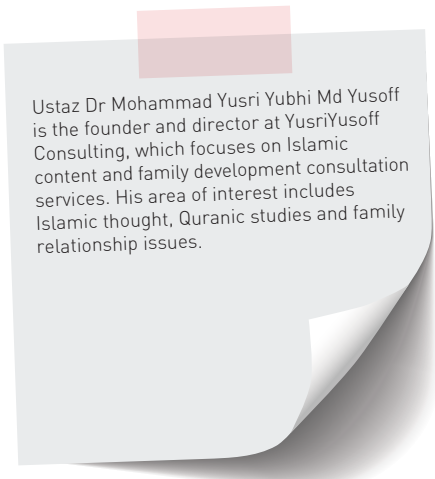
Subsequently, children must be reminded to be careful when interacting with someone they do not know online. This includes not sharing personal information even with other child users due to the presence of online paedophiles who impersonate young users to communicate with minors through chatting or direct messaging.

Parents must also monitor their children's online history and social media algorithms to identify what type of information they are exposed to. They also need to make sure that their children follow the available social media guidelines. YouTube, for example, has specific guidelines on account creation. They do not allow children under 13 to create their own accounts. As for a child between the age of 13 and 17, they will need parental permission before starting a channel.

Children might also come across explicit adult content online or through peers. In this case, parents need to advise children about the harmful effects of pornography and refer them to a counsellor if this becomes a bad habit.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, having a good relationship with them and excellent parenting skills are key to approaching our children more effectively, including in sex education. Children need a safe space, a sense of security and trust to make them comfortable sharing things and accepting our points of view. As long as parents have a close relationship with their children, communication and interaction will be more accessible, and their presence will be positively significant to their children for the rest of their lives. ■



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Distilling the Aspirations of Singapore's Muslim Women

BY SABARIAH ARIS



Singapore's Malay/Muslim women have made marked progress in many fields including education, work and politics, yet there remain social, cultural, and structural challenges impeding our women from reaching their utmost aspirations. The local Malay/Muslim women continue to find themselves subjected to socio-cultural preconceptions of gender roles and norms; a prevalent one being that of women as the primary caregiver which only serves to restrict and hold back women's potential and growth.

Such societal expectations persist despite evolving socio-economic conditions where dual-earner arrangements are the norm, resulting from women's rising educational attainment and labour force participation. The economics of marriage are changing, but women are still expected to take on more of the unpaid labour role and responsibilities.

This is reiterated in a study on local Malay dual-income households which reported that despite the small shifts in practices of sharing household and childcaring duties, perceptions pertaining to notions of 'different' or 'complementary' women's and men's work continue to define marital relations within the home. For the Malay family, the exercise of 'maternal gatekeeping' and conformity to an 'Ideal Muslim' marital couple strongly underpin the nature of gender roles within the household¹.

ASPIRATIONS OF SINGAPORE MODERN MUSLIM WOMEN RESEARCH

Hence, the challenges faced by modern Malay/Muslim women in juggling their personal and professional aspirations cannot be purposefully explored without first examining the value system and cultural themes behind women's roles.

This and the scarcity of substantive data on local Muslim women (regardless of ethnicity) or their aspirations, had prompted PPIS' Research and Engagement Department (RED) to embark on its landmark research on the '*Aspirations of Singapore Muslim Women*'². This study sought to better understand the personal, professional and family values and

aspirations of Singapore Muslim women, so as to offer meaningful recommendations on the areas of support needed to help them achieve their aspirations.

TOP THREE PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS

The quantitative aspect of the research constituted a survey on 1,001 Singapore Muslim women aged 21 to 62. When probed on their personal aspirations, the top three responses were 'to be a better Muslim woman' (52.2%), 'to be financially independent'³ (11.1%) and 'to be fit and healthy through regular exercise / better eating habits' (10.4%).

TOP THREE FAMILY ASPIRATIONS

When surveyed on their family aspirations, the three topmost responses were 'having a more Islamic family' (28.7%), 'ensuring their children grow up well' (19.7%) and 'having good work-family balance' (16.9%).

The top three challenges faced by these women in achieving their family aspirations were the 'lack of time / inability to manage time well / work commitments' (36.3%), 'family responsibilities' (29.8%) and 'financial issues' (26.0%).

The top three areas of support needed were family support (56.2%), financial support (36.9%) and government support (32.7%).

All of the respondents had also indicated that parents were key to their family life, and nearly all had indicated that their siblings (99.3%), children (98.3%), spouse (96.8%) and extended family (91.9%) were important components of family life. The emphasis and prominence accorded to the extended family (beyond immediate family members) seems to be distinctively unique to the Muslim community. An equally substantial proportion i.e. around 9 in 10, had also concurred that adult children have the duty to provide long-term care for their parents.

These are indeed revealing of the family values embodied by our local Muslim women and by extrapolation, the general

Muslim community, and even offer a sense of their dispositions towards caregiving responsibilities.

TOP THREE WORK ASPIRATIONS

When queried on their career aspirations, the respondents cited 'attaining work-life balance / flexible work arrangement' (18.1%), as their top aspiration; which the women had associated with being able to juggle between working and caring for the household, and at the same time, having the flexibility or freedom of choice on where and when to work. This was followed by 'having higher salary / promotion / climbing up career ladder' (9.4%) and 'finding a full-time job / new job' (8.1%).

Conversely, these women cited the top three challenges to achieving their work aspirations as 'family responsibilities' (29.5%), 'difficulty finding a job / the right job' (22.2%) and having 'no work-life balance / job flexibility' (21.5%).

The top three areas of support needed were employer support (47.6%), government support (36.9%) and family support (36%).

The women were also asked about their priorities in job seeking, and specified that the three most important job-related factors were 'being able to take time off for family or childcare needs', 'having job security' and 'having a job that offers good benefits'.

Other interesting statistics related to duties as providers or caregivers include:

- 84% opined 'both the man and woman should contribute to the household income'
- 78% felt 'a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work'
- 64.2% agreed that 'being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay'
- 37.7% agreed 'a man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home'

¹ Suratman, S., and Mohamed, M. Dual-Income Households Among Singapore Malay Families: Changing Economy, Unchanging Gender Roles. In *Family and Population Changes in Singapore: A Unique Case in the Global Family Change*, edited by Yeung, W. J. and Hu, S. Routledge, 2018

² PPIS. *Aspirations of Singapore Muslim Women*. 2022. Available at: <https://ppis.sg/amwr.pdf>

³ Unmarried Muslim women define it as being able to enjoy freedom of choice when spending. Married Muslim women believe it gives them options when making decisions and enhance their power and confidence within the family. Those 50 years old and above define being financially independent as not having to rely on their husband and feeling secure to spend during retirement.

The root of women's struggles appears to stem from women attempting to separate their private and public/professional spheres (be it consciously or not). When in reality, both domains are intertwined. Viewing them as mutually exclusive categories ignores the fluid nature of the multiple roles played by women at work and at home. In tackling gender issues impacting the local Muslim women community, it is thus important to address the dichotomy between their public and private spheres and harmonise the two spheres to facilitate women's advancements.

In attempting to strike a balance between work and family, 91.5% of respondents agreed they want to put in effort to build a nice family. On the other hand, 79.3% highlighted they would like to continue working while managing family life. 66.9% also agreed they desired to continue working even if there was no pressing financial need to do so.

HARMONISING BETWEEN PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SPHERES

From these research insights, there appears to be a strong correlation between work and family aspirations for our local Muslim women, and as a result, the considerations and motivating factors are interlinked. The findings also reflect the values and priorities of our local Muslim women as they attempt to balance their personal and professional roles.

The root of women's struggles appears to stem from women attempting to separate their private and public/professional spheres (be it consciously or not). When in reality, both domains are intertwined. Viewing them as mutually exclusive categories ignores the fluid nature of the multiple roles played by women at work and at home. In tackling gender issues impacting the local Muslim women

community, it is thus important to address the dichotomy between their public and private spheres and harmonise the two spheres to facilitate women's advancements.

Women's development itself is never linear and will move in multiple directions as women take diverse pathways and go through various phases in life. There may also be progress as well as regression. We need to take into account that women's issues are complex and multi-faceted and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

FOUR ARCHETYPES OF SINGAPORE MUSLIM WOMEN

Insights from the qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed how Muslim women value their physical well-being, financial independence, self-reliance, children's upbringing, community service and discipline in religious practice. From the FGDs, four typologies were identified based on the respondents' different life stages, level of education and social exposure, as well as family upbringing.

The first archetype is the Traditional Conformist, who is well beyond her 50s and follows closely traditional Muslim values and practice. She is inclined to

refocus time on herself by picking up new hobbies and skills, as her children have all grown up and left home. Her aspiration is to enjoy a happy life while abiding by Muslim values and principles. Her key challenge is keeping up with society, and she tries her best to avoid being left behind.

The second archetype is the Balanced Striver, who sees herself first and foremost as a mother since her children are still young and depend heavily on her. Her family's needs and interests often come before her own, and she often attempts to juggle family and work responsibilities. Her aspiration is to become a super mom by performing well in all aspects of life, be it work, family, social life or religion. Her key challenge is the lack of time and space to focus on her own individual needs.

Third is the Driven Achiever who still has some time before reaching middle age and is currently at her peak professionally. She has received higher education and exposure beyond the local Malay/Muslim community. Being focused on her career with clear personal goals and milestones, she usually engages help (e.g. domestic helpers) to take care of domestic duties. Her aspiration is to improve quality of life for herself, her family and the Muslim community. Her key challenge is straddling between differing Muslim principles and the modern business world.

The final archetype is the Purpose Seeker, who is in her 20s-30s, educated and focused on pursuing personal goals whilst family remains important. She has a tendency not to follow rules and principles blindly, without first contemplating their significance and relevance to her own life. Her aspiration is to seek a meaningful connection between Muslim knowledge and personal growth. Her key challenge is to gain a more adequate understanding of Islamic knowledge.

From these typologies, we could potentially explore identifying women's needs and challenges at various career stages or life phases and adopt a life-course approach to systematically create high impact, holistic solutions to address underlying needs or concerns.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

In summary, it is evident that helping Muslim women advance their family, work, and personal aspirations requires a multi-pronged approach. An ecosystem of support is fundamental to catalyse women's development and ultimately, acquire a more equitable and inclusive society. Galvanising resources, deepening trust and expanding strategic partnerships will go a long way in addressing needs and resource gaps within the community, and in offering more targeted and comprehensive interventions.

Another key recommendation from the research insights is to expand the narratives of success of local Muslim women, as well as to cultivate a stronger and more cohesive community spirit by encouraging peer-to-peer support. Celebrating local women achievers and offering role models will enable the future pipeline of women to unlock and discover their potential and strengths, as well as better visualise and navigate opportunities.

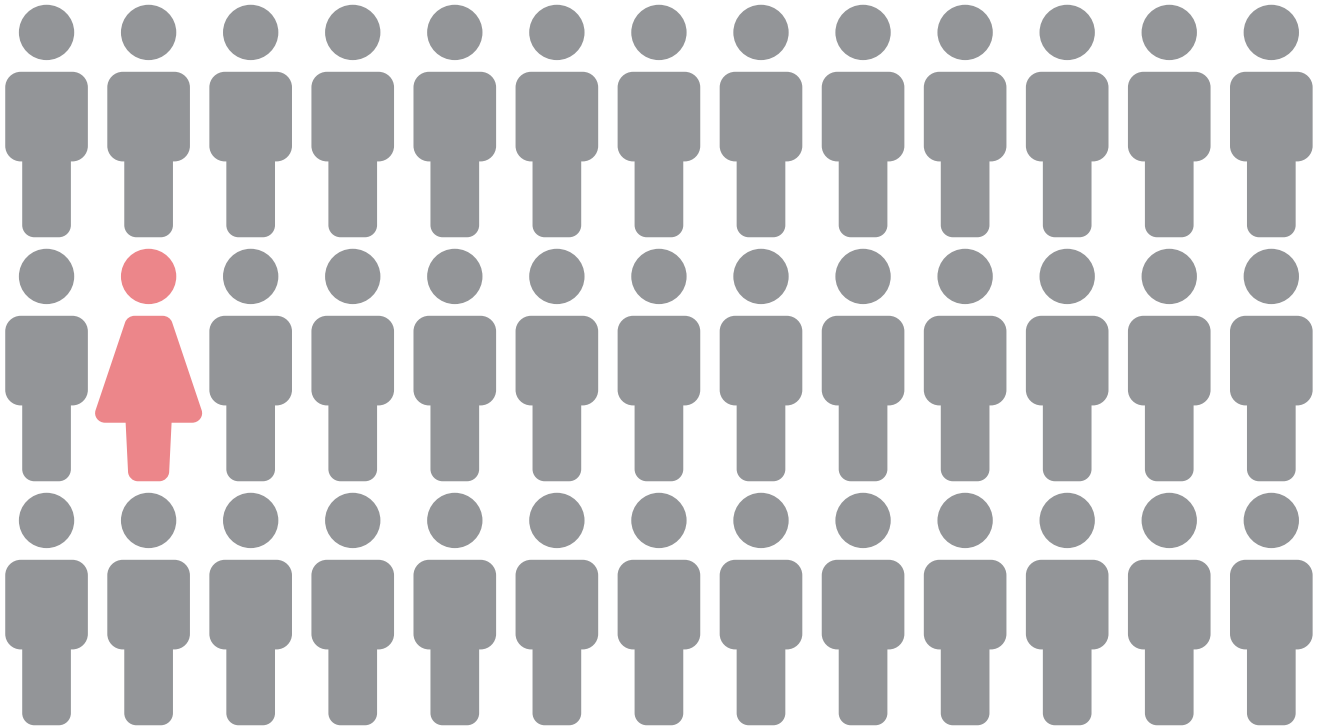
There is also a need to shift the needle and facilitate positive mindset change by challenging stereotypical narratives and reframing perceptions that are barriers to women's progress. This will involve a whole-of-society effort involving multiple stakeholders, as well as continuous and consistent promotion of awareness and advocacy from thought leaders within the community such as RED. Men are also important allies in this journey towards equitable access to education and opportunities for women and men to enable both to pursue their aspirations freely and to the fullest. ■

Women's development itself is never linear and will move in multiple directions as women take diverse pathways and go through various phases in life. There may also be progress as well as regression. We need to take into account that women's issues are complex and multi-faceted and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Ms Sabariah Aris is the Assistant Director of the Research and Engagement Department (RED) of Singapore Muslim Women's Association (PPIS), which was set up in 2016 to represent Muslim Women's voice and advance aspirations. Aside from leveraging empirical data to calibrate existing initiatives, safe and inclusive spaces for nurturing social capital and meaningful engagements are important to acquire deeper insights into lived realities. As such, RED will be launching its very own 'Women Space' in October as a one-stop support for women's career, legal and wellness needs, as well as a resource platform for women to gain access to information, assistance and referrals. You can subscribe to RED's channels on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp for the latest updates.

Tokenism: What's in a Label?

BY RIFHAN NOOR MILLER



In 1977, Rosabeth Kanter published her book, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, introducing the concept of “tokenism” as she covered women’s general negative experiences working ‘non-traditionally female’ jobs and, particularly, their inability to achieve equality in the workplace, despite their capabilities due to their attributed token status, i.e. their low proportion in a workplace dominated by men. Over the years, the term has expanded to also incorporate workplace policies with voluntary or mandated quotas, especially towards minority groups and/or women, in ways that will not change (gender or ethnic) majority-dominated power within an organisation, allowing them mere partial participation. Even so, such practices are, arguably, typically used as ‘proof’ that

the organisation does not discriminate against such minorities.

The acknowledgement that tokenism exists allows us to unpack how leadership and representation of minorities are enacted in our everyday professional lives. However, for minority individuals who got to the top through their own merits, an unhealthy obsession over any minority leaders being mere token representatives serves to instead, discredit their capabilities to lead. Disgruntled voices spread like wildfire in our current world of inter-connectedness and on platforms where anyone can post biased and poorly informed opinions as ‘truth’ such as social media, it is so easy to create and grow negativity bandwagons to question an individual’s legitimacy to

leadership as token representation, despite attaining the position through merit.

TOKENISM VERSUS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Tokenism refers to policies or practices of making only a symbolic effort to include participation by individuals from under-represented groups to give the appearance of equality or inclusivity. Affirmative action, on the other hand, refers to policies designed to redress inequalities created by historical legacies e.g. group discrimination and disadvantage experienced by under-represented groups.

When Mdm Halimah Yacob was sworn in as the 8th president of Singapore on 14 September 2017, she was Singapore’s first Malay president in 47 years, and the

first woman president in the country's history. She also joined the list of other Muslim-female heads of state worldwide like Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, Tansu Çiller of Turkey, Mame Madior Boye and Aminata Touré of Senegal, Megawati Sukarnoputri of Indonesia, Roza Otunbayeva of Kyrgyzstan, Atifete Jahjaga and Vjosa Osmani of Kosovo, Cissé Mariam Kaïdama Sidibé of Mali, Sibel Siber of Northern Cyprus, Ameenah Gurib-Fakim of Mauritius, Samia Suluhu of Tanzania, and Najla Bouden of Tunisia. From the list above, most are Muslim-majority countries.

Singaporeans then did, however, and understandably, have mixed feelings as they couldn't exercise their right to vote for the winning candidate who would go on to play the largely ceremonial role. Even so, she handled the criticisms with grace and calmly told reporters outside the Elections Department on 11 September 2017, "I promise to do the best that I can to serve the people of Singapore, and that doesn't change whether there is an election or no election...my passion and commitment to serve the people of Singapore remains the same."

Mdm Halimah was a strong advocate for social issues long before she was elected and championed various social causes, from mental health issues to help for disadvantaged groups. During her term, she continued to support charities and initiatives for various groups, and she leaves the unique legacy of having steered the country through COVID-19, a global pandemic that led to more than 1.8 million official deaths globally by the end of 2020 alone (World Health Organization), giving her assent to the government to draw on past reserves for COVID-19 public health expenditure.

She also spoke up on behalf of Singapore Muslims amid announcements by the Internal Security Department (ISD) regarding the detention of self-radicalised youths, asserting that their aspirations neither represent Islam, nor the Singapore Muslim community at the interfaith group, Roses of Peace's 10th anniversary celebration in 2023. She

spoke up in encouragement of the Malay community's significant progress in education and household income in 2023 when much public discourse persists in highlighting achievement gaps between the community and the national average. She also spoke up in support of the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development in 2022 as well as increasing participation by women in the economy and leadership positions at the Women's Forum Asia in 2019.

The point here is, it has become clear, 6 years on, that using the term 'token' in the same line as her name when she became President is grossly unfair.

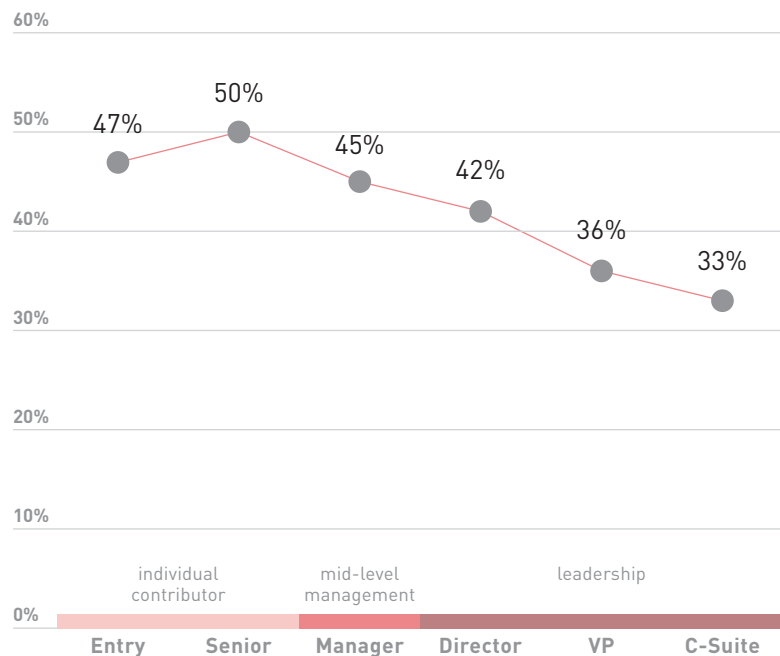
Furthermore, representation matters and it matters further that a Muslim and a female is the one championing the causes of her own community. For me, seeing a fellow Muslim female in a headscarf, in a position of power who remained focused on her responsibilities and delivered despite initial raised eyebrows

is something I am proud of as a fellow Muslim woman. Beyond Singapore, let's also not forget that much of the secular world views Islam as an intolerant religion that oppresses women, and it is always refreshing to see strong female Muslim leaders holding their ground in a political sea of men.

WHEN YOU THINK YOU'RE 'ONE OF THE GUYS' AND 'NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS'

Beyond Singapore politics and politics in general, the percentage of women in leadership positions has only risen slowly and the statistical representation of women in top management and executive positions continues to change at a very slow rate, despite generally increased emancipation and access to education among women worldwide. Women generally enter the workforce in almost equal proportion to men but the share of women in managerial and leadership positions progressively drops higher up the seniority ladder (see Figures 1 and 2).

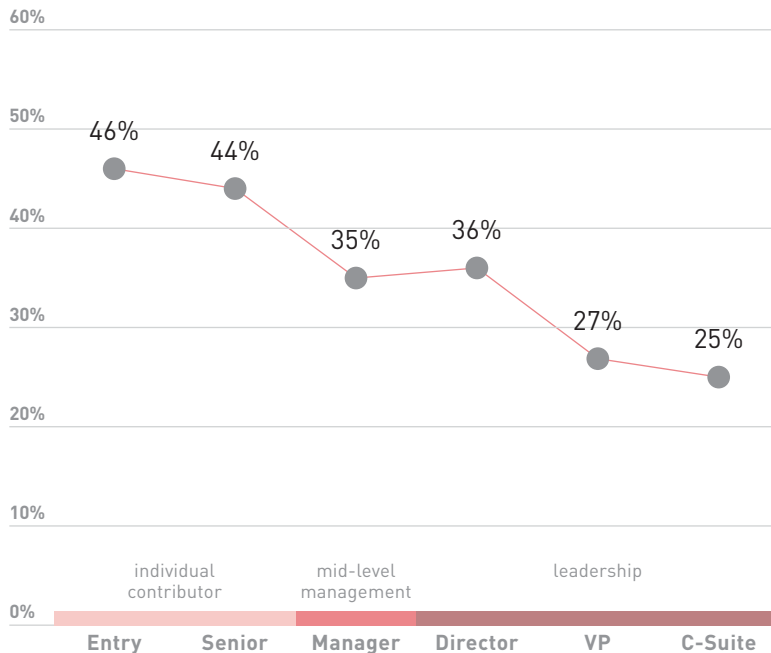
FIGURE 1: GLOBAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN BY SENIORITY (%)



Source: LinkedIn¹

¹ LinkedIn. "Gender Equity in the Workplace." LinkedIn, linkedin.github.io/gender-equity-2022/. Accessed 29 Sept. 2023.

FIGURE 2: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN BY SENIORITY (%) IN SINGAPORE



Source: LinkedIn²

In other words, it gets increasingly lonely for women higher up the seniority ladder. This has multiple implications but most importantly, this signifies an increasing under-investment in social capital. Social capital that is usually built through socialising with colleagues and building professional networks. This is made especially difficult when as a gender minority, the influential networks are made up of mostly men who partake in more ‘masculine’ activities or topics of conversation and you face the awkwardness of being the only woman in a boardroom. In addition, as Muslim women trying to make it in more secular workplace settings, there may be activities that may not necessarily align with their faith, like a working lunch at the team’s favourite non-halal restaurant. These may seem trivial but present real, practical challenges to women. In addition to this, working mothers are even more pressed to juggle work and family.

In a study conducted in the United States (Hewlett, 2002), it was found that 33% of women with successful careers (in reference to business executives, doctors, lawyers, academics, etc.) in the 41 to 55 age bracket are childless and that figure rises to 42% in corporate America. Yet, most of these women yearn for children but were unsuccessful in conceiving later on as they had crowded out the possibility of having children in their earlier years meeting the brutal demands of their ambitious careers. High-achieving men on the other hand, do not experience such a difficult trade-off. 79% of the men surveyed reported wanting children and 75% have them. I suspect this trend is close to the realities in other communities too, including our own.

Having said this though, I am not proposing a gender war but rather I am looking inward into what it means to be an educated and career-focused Muslim woman of today, navigating male-

dominated professional hierarchies without downplaying my femininity, to be taken more seriously. Beyond my community, to be accepted in more secular professional circles which may or may not have formed opinions on the rights of Muslim women from biased reporting without downplaying my faith. Unfortunately, internalised misogyny is also present within us women, and as mentioned above, it is already increasingly lonely for women striving to reach the top of their careers. It is especially lonelier to be judged by other women with varying ideas of what it means to be a woman and a good Muslim woman on top of it.

TEAM MUSLIMAH

At the end of the day, we are all trying to be the best versions of ourselves regardless of what our aspirations may be, and we can indeed be kinder to ourselves as well as our peers from a place of compassion and female camaraderie. By the time this piece is published, Mdm Halimah would have already stepped down and I will miss seeing her portrait around our institutions, what it represents and proudly proclaiming to my non-Muslim family members overseas that we have a Muslim woman in power so no, we Muslim women are not oppressed. As a headscarf-wearing Muslim woman, I also want meaningful representation, not tokenism. Perhaps, sometime soon, we will again have another Malay elected head of state whom the public voted for, and we can finally burn that token to the ground. ■

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² Ibid.

WOMEN IN SCIENCE:

My Wish List as an Early-Career Researcher and Mother

BY DR DINAH AZIZ



There are many areas of science, and for each area, the demands would differ. One simple example would be the stark difference between a bioinformatician and a microbiologist. Aside from the difference in core knowledge needed to perform the job, it could be argued that the former would allow greater flexibility in terms of place of work, as well as time of work. This is because a bioinformatician's experiments would mainly be computational and this could potentially be done from anywhere with Internet access and a computer, as compared to a microbiologist whose work would often require special containment equipment like a biological safety cabinet which would be found only in laboratories. From this comparison, it is clear when discussing the type of support we could provide to women in science, it would vary depending on the type and nature of work required in their area of science. For this opinion piece, I will draw on my personal experience, so this article will focus only on suggestions on how to support women in science who are involved in conducting research that can only be done with equipment in laboratories.

Over the years, we have seen many programmes geared at raising awareness and interest in science. These have focused mainly on students across a wide age range, starting from as early as kindergarten. These programmes tend to come in the form of supplementary short-term programmes to spark interest in the area. In terms of long-term sustained exposure to science, it would come in the form of the syllabus in schools. From my personal experience, one area that the Malay/Muslim community could consider improving would be to support the science infrastructure in the local full-time madrasahs, especially those not under the Joint Madrasah System (JMS). This is related to Malay/Muslim women in science because there are more girls than boys enrolled in local full-time madrasahs. At the primary school level, we have 2 all-girls madrasahs while the other 2 are co-ed madrasahs that enroll girls too. The first item on my wish list is the creation of a fund that the madrasahs are able to tap on or apply to so that they would be able to easily keep their facilities and equipment up-to-date, thus

contributing to maintaining the quality of science education that they can make available to their students in the long run.

While there are numerous programmes to spark the interest of students at the schooling level even up till their first degree, I believe that to sustain the impact of these programmes especially for women after they finish tertiary education, more needs to be done. One issue would be the age-old question of whether a woman should focus on her career or on starting a family once done with basic tertiary education. I believe that if we could have more initiatives to support women at this crossroads, more might be keen to follow their interests and attempt the third path – to try and have both a career as well as start a family at the same time.

In the area of science research, one form of training would be to continue with graduate studies, especially a PhD. Here, the idea of spending at least another 4 years studying intensively might seem incompatible with the idea of starting a family and motherhood. And rightly so, because both are very demanding things that require long-term commitment from a woman. For a PhD, there would be modules to attend in school, research to be conducted in the lab with the expectation that one must find something to meaningfully add to the body of knowledge of that field, seminars and conferences to attend, and papers to write and publish. And of course, papers to read. Lots and lots of papers to pore through to understand what is already done and known, to identify the gaps, to form the basis of new ideas to test, and then to troubleshoot when the experiments (as they too often do) fail. A career as a research assistant, or a research fellow after a PhD would follow a similar pattern of experiments and lots of paper reading and writing. For motherhood, it is a totally new experience and one that tends to be unique to each individual. It begins with pregnancy and giving birth, where for some, it is easy, while for others, it is one of the biggest tests on their body and health. The same too for recovery from childbirth and the first few months of many polyclinic appointments, feedings throughout the night and day which come together with a lack of sleep, and the changing of many diapers. Then, comes

the long-term challenge of figuring out how to nurture, develop, and educate the child with the necessary life skills like reading, as well as imbibing Islamic values and modeling for them an Islamic lifestyle.

From the brief descriptions above, it is clear that both are not easy things to do. I would even argue that motherhood and raising children full-time is definitely the more challenging task. However, some women might still be interested in attempting both simultaneously. Knowing the challenges they might face as they try to balance both, this brings me to the second item on my wish list: for the Malay/Muslim community to set up more childcare or childminding options located nearby or even within the academic centres of research. One barrier to women attempting to have a lab research career while also navigating motherhood is the lack of childcare options that would teach Islamic values and the Islamic creed. This is because, in my opinion, many Malay/Muslim families still highly value an Islamic environment for their children and a place that models an Islamic lifestyle, especially when the children are still very young and impressionable. While there are some Islamic childcare centres, the waitlist tends to be long, and they are located far away from the usual lab research areas like NUS, Biopolis, and NTU. Another barrier is the perceived rigidity of lab research, where it is thought that working from home is impossible and that if one is not in the lab, then it is a sign of a lack of devotion and passion for one's research. In reality, the lab research environment has the potential to be flexible, depending on the supervisor as well as the nature of the research being done. If the Malay/Muslim community could invest in setting up good quality Islamic childcare centres within or very near to the academic research institutions, this could support the balance for Malay/Muslim women lab researchers who may need full-day childcare services, or perhaps some who are lucky enough to need only flexible (whether half-day or perhaps just a few hours a few times a week) childcare services.

The concept of embracing or exploring flexibility in lab research brings me to the third item on my wish list: for a mindset change among employers and supervisors of lab research groups to allow more

One barrier to women attempting to have a lab research career while also navigating motherhood is the lack of childcare options that would teach Islamic values and the Islamic creed. This is because, in my opinion, many Malay/Muslim families still highly value an Islamic environment for their children and a place that models an Islamic lifestyle, especially when the children are still very young and impressionable. While there are some Islamic childcare centres, the waitlist tends to be long, and they are located far away from the usual lab research areas like NUS, Biopolis, and NTU. Another barrier is the perceived rigidity of lab research, where it is thought that working from home is impossible and that if one is not in the lab, then it is a sign of a lack of devotion and passion for one's research.

flexibility for pregnant women and women with young children. There are some tasks, for example, paper reading, paper and grant writing, that do not need to be done in the lab, and this opens up some space for women researchers to do it from home too. This allows women researchers to still be around their young children more than in the past, and this could attract more women to stay in the field too. In my opinion, it isn't just about having children, but as a mother, I value being able to be around my children more often to witness their milestones and spend quality time raising them simply by being there.

Another way to support this flexibility brings me to the fourth item on my wish list: to have special grants that early-career women researchers are able to apply for when they are pregnant or have very young children. These grants

would allow them to hire a research assistant for a short-term period of 1 to 3 years. This would allow them to continue their research work through supervising the work done, and at the same time, they are able to be at home more with their young children as they adjust to motherhood.

Now, aside from doing both lab research and motherhood simultaneously, another option for women would be to attempt both, but in a staggered-start fashion. So this means, they start one first, and after a period of time, they start the next. There are many different variations for this. A woman could perhaps complete her PhD first before taking a 'motherhood starter gap' where she would take maybe 3 to 5 years away from lab research to focus on having kids and being around for them while they are very young. After that period, she could then rejoin the lab

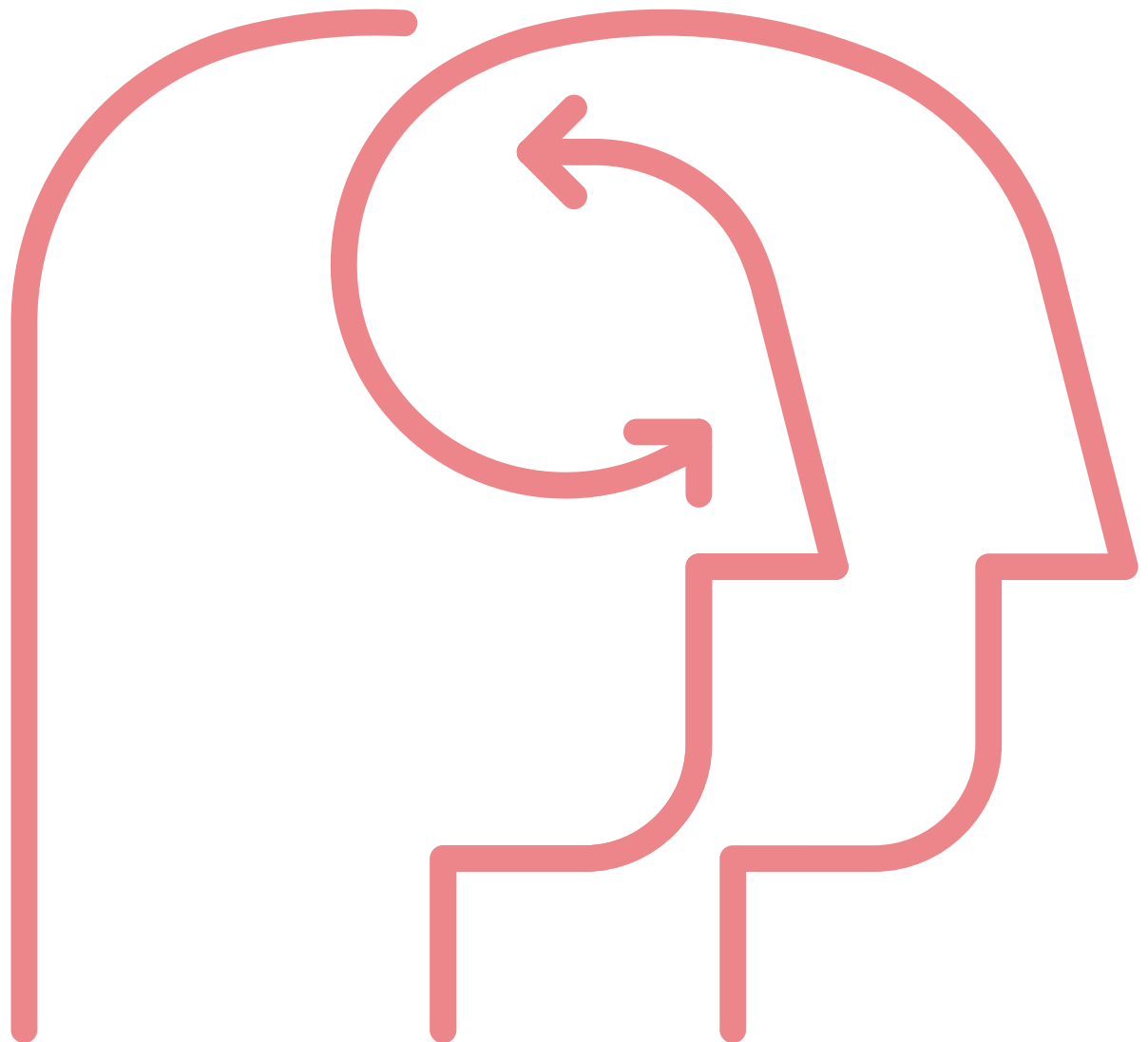
research career track. Another variation would be to start on motherhood first, and then after that, ease back into a lab research career either by going for further studies or by applying for a position as a research assistant. For this to work, once again, there would need to be a change in mindset by employers and supervisors of lab research groups, in terms of expectations of continuous related work experience from a woman science researcher. To promote that change, the fifth and last item on my wish list is: to have small 1- to 2-year grants that women returning from their 'motherhood starter gap' can apply for to kickstart their research projects, as well as to make them more attractive hiring options to lab research groups.

When I share these ideas with people, most times, the immediate response is that it is not economically sustainable. However, motherhood and having children are not, and will never be, about the short-term economic benefits they could bring. I believe that these ideas are workable if the community decides that it is worth investing in our Malay/Muslim women researchers. Oftentimes, people say it takes a village to raise a child. While in the past, that village would have consisted mainly of grandparents helping with caring for grandchildren, in today's context, many grandparents are still working and unable to play that role anymore. Our Malay/Muslim women researchers, just like the women before them, need a village too in their motherhood journey. And perhaps, one way in the current Singapore context would be for their village to come in the form of the greater Muslim community in general, through the investment in the ideas outlined above. ■

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Prophet Muhammad and Emotional Intelligence: Lessons for Interfaith Relations

BY DR MOHAMED ALI



Goodwill and cooperation between different faith communities are hallmarks of successful plural societies. Towards this end, strong leadership plays a crucial role in directing and guiding communities towards building bridges of mutual trust and respect for others. In a world of rapid change and unpredictability, interpersonal skills as embodied by emotional intelligence are a cornerstone of robust interfaith relations. This article highlights the importance of emotional intelligence in interfaith relations. It discusses the value of emotional intelligence as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*) through his interactions with the Christians of his time.

In particular, the article looks at Prophet Muhammad's encounter with the Christians of Najran in 631 which makes a compelling case for true religious pluralism as advocated by Islam. Through this story of the Prophet, it is affirmed that emotional intelligence is foundational for successful interfaith relationships to effectively bring religiously diverse people together amidst the ongoing challenges and conflicts.

THE CHRISTIANS OF NAJRAN

During his lifetime, Prophet Muhammad would send official letters to different countries and their rulers, inviting them to Islam. Among these were two different invitations that had been sent to Najran with Khaled ibn al-Walid and Ali ibn Abi Talib. At that time, the Najran Christians had a highly organised religious life. Prophet Muhammad sent a representative to them, Mughira ibn Shu'ba, who was sent to explain the invitations and the religion of Islam. After discussions with Mughira, the Christians of Najran decided to send a group of people to visit Prophet Muhammad and the Muslims in Medina.

The delegation was made up of about 60 Christians: a bishop, 45 scholars, and 15 men. It is said to have been led by three men: the leader, Abd al-Masih, who served as the delegation's governmental affairs official, Al-Aiham al-Sayyid, believed to have served as the delegation's educational and political officer and Abu Harithah ibn 'Alqamah, the only bishop who is believed to be the delegation's top scholar. Their

intention was to learn about the nature of the revelations Muhammad was receiving and to have a theological dialogue with him.

When the Najran delegation reached Medina, they engaged Prophet Muhammad in a theological dialogue on Christology for three days in the Prophet's Mosque known as al-Masjid al-Nabawi. At the audiences that they had with him during their stay, many points of doctrinal issues were discussed. However, the main part of their discussion was centred on interfaith issues. There were some disagreements between Muhammad and the Christians on Jesus and the Concept of the Trinity.

A Quranic revelation was then revealed to Muhammad. It says: "*Verily the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then said to him 'Be!', and he was. This is the truth from thy Lord, so be not of the doubters. And whoso contend with thee and say: Come ye, and let us summon our sons and your sons and our women and your women and ourselves and yourselves. Then we will imprecate, putting God's curse on those who lie*".¹ Prophet Muhammad then recited these verses to his Christian guests and invited them to meet with him and his family and to settle their disagreement.

Prophet Muhammad then allowed the Najran Christians to pray in his mosque where the Muslims prayed. The whole incident was an occurrence of peaceful dialogue between Christians and Muslims; it was the first time that Christians prayed in a mosque. Prophet Muhammad had warmly welcomed the Najran delegation and provided them with a place to stay in Medina, in a secure place close to his mosque. He even ordered that their tent be pitched for them by the Muslims. However, the Najran delegation and Muhammad were not able to reach a consensus in theological terms. At the end of these exchanges, the Najran Christians told Muhammad: *O, Abu al-Qasim, we decided to leave you as you are and you leave us as we are. But send with us a man who can adjudicate things on our properties, because we accept you.*

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Emotional intelligence is understood as the ability to manage our emotions and the emotions of those around us. It is also

the ability to understand, use, and manage our emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathise with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict. Psychologist Daniel Goleman popularised the concept of emotional intelligence in 1995 through his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, and developed a framework of five key components that make up emotional intelligence. They are emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.

Goleman's framework of emotional intelligence includes the values of empathy and social skills. Both are values and qualities deemed important to be embodied by interfaith leaders for genuine and meaningful interfaith relations. Empathy is the ability to "put oneself in another person's shoes" – to understand the other's situations, perceptions, and feelings from their point of view and to be able to communicate that understanding back to the other person. It is a critical skill for leadership including interfaith leadership. Empathy influences the thinking process and nurtures one's mind to think deeply and positively. In interfaith relations, it can ensure mutual understanding, acceptance, and respect of different faiths and cultures. Empathy is both a cognitive and moral virtue. It involves a desire to learn intellectually about other religions and their followers, as well as a willingness and ability to penetrate the religious mindset of others and understand them from within.²

Emotional intelligence is both an art and a skill. Prophet Muhammad was a master of this skill. His life is full of examples of how he embodied emotional intelligence intensely in his daily affairs and dealings with people, regardless of their background through the values of care, love, compassion and empathy. According to Mikaeel Ahmed Smith, sharp emotional intelligence is built upon the development of both intra and interpersonal intelligence. These intelligences are the backbone of emotional intelligence because they provide a person with emotional awareness and understanding of his or her own self, an empathic understanding of others, and the ability needed to communicate effectively and cause change.³

¹ Quran, Surah Al-Imran, verses 59-61

² Cornille, C. *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. New York: Herder and Herder, 2008, p. 153

³ Smith, M. *With the Heart in Mind*. Qasim Publication, 2021, p. 61

It is a critical skill for leadership including interfaith leadership. Empathy influences the thinking process and nurtures one's mind to think deeply and positively. In interfaith relations, it can ensure mutual understanding, acceptance, and respect of different faiths and cultures. Empathy is both a cognitive and moral virtue. It involves a desire to learn intellectually about other religions and their followers, as well as a willingness and ability to penetrate the religious mindset of others and understand them from within.

ANALYSIS

The experience of Prophet Muhammad with the delegation of Christians from Najran is a seminal example of the Muslim-Christian relationship. This incident is one of the most significant and eminent interactions between the Muslims and Christians in the history of both religions. At least three values important for an interfaith relationship can be observed from it. First is the way the dialogue between the two faith communities was conducted. Prophet Muhammad and the Christian leaders had an open and respectful theological discussion. This interfaith interaction they experienced was indeed a serious engagement in theological discussions about Islam and Christianity.

Second, Prophet Muhammad had allowed the Najran Christians to perform their prayers at his mosque. After the theological dialogue in the mosque, the Najranis asked to leave to conduct their prayer. They had intended to leave the mosque to pray on the streets of Medina. Muhammad asked them to remain in his mosque. He said that they were already in the house of God and that they were welcome to perform their prayers inside the mosque. The Najran Christians accepted his invitation.

Allowing his Christian guests to perform their prayer in his mosque demonstrates Muhammad's embodiment of emotional intelligence. The profound sense of empathy, which is a big part of the emotional intelligence quotient, is clearly seen when the Prophet allowed his guests to perform their prayers in his mosque. He made his guests feel welcomed with his hospitable act. He eased their affairs and made them feel highly respected as guests. By allowing the non-Muslims to pray in a mosque, Prophet Muhammad had a higher vision of prioritising interfaith relations over possible traditional conventions in the religion. This attitude falls within Goleman's framework of emotional intelligence, where social skills demand proper management of both one's and others' emotions to effectively connect, interact and work with others.

Third, through this incident, Prophet Muhammad portrayed a pluralist attitude and inclusivist mentality. His appreciation of religious pluralism and embracement of

inclusivism can be clearly seen from the manner he interacted and engaged with his Christian guests. Peaceful co-existence which is embodied through an authentic understanding of inclusivism and religious plurality is fundamental to ensure interreligious stability and harmonious living. This pluralist attitude and internalisation of inclusivity are attuned to Goleman's emotional intelligence framework where social skills founded upon values and emotions are essential in the management of relationships and diversity. Inclusivism is indeed one of the most important teachings of Islam. The endeavour for harmony has been expounded clearly throughout Prophet Muhammad's interaction with the Christians and other non-Muslims. Appreciating differences and solidifying interfaith relationships are among the values exemplified by Prophet Muhammad during his lifetime.

Assuring the safety of Christian persons and their religion is an act of mindful realisation of the needs of minority communities, that is the preservation of their faith and their physical well-being, free from persecution or discrimination. By assuring protection, Prophet Muhammad sought to allay fear and suspicion while encouraging goodwill and cooperation between different faith communities. Having such realisation of the needs of others is an important trait of emotional intelligence. With it, Prophet Muhammad not only established a cordial relationship with his non-Muslim friends but importantly enhanced the quality of relationships with the people around him. From a psychological perspective, what Prophet Muhammad did in this incident was to use awareness of his own emotions and those of his guests to manage interaction successfully. Such an attitude (awareness and realisation of the conditions and needs of others) falls within Coleman's emotional intelligence framework, which is self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management.

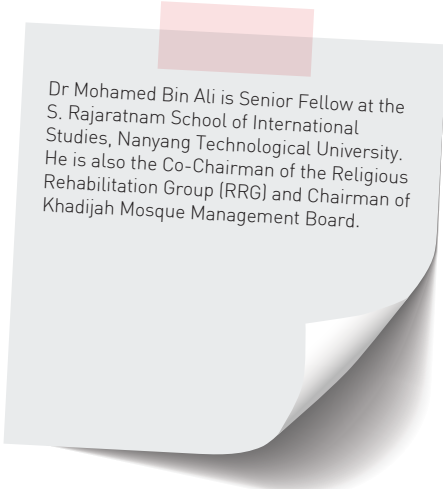
CONCLUSION

In the discourse on religion and interfaith relations, inclusivism can be understood as the appreciation of religious plurality. It can help to comprehend the relationship between religions. While believing that his religious belief is true, a religious inclusivist accepts the existence of other

The foundation for all religious communities worldwide is based upon common morality principles that have universal appeal and humanistic values. As such, Prophet Muhammad recognised the value of enhancing interfaith relations, as this would mean strengthening the morality base in the world. This becomes pertinent in a world that is becoming more secular and divisive and has largely lost its morality grounds.

beliefs. Such understanding of inclusivism and living within a religiously plural context is not alien to Islam.⁴ Rather, many parts of the Quran speak about it and extoll its virtues.

As the article has demonstrated, the value of emotional intelligence in interfaith interaction and engagement cannot be understated. The foundation for all religious communities worldwide is based upon common morality principles that have universal appeal and humanistic values. As such, Prophet Muhammad recognised the value of enhancing interfaith relations, as this would mean strengthening the morality base in the world. This becomes pertinent in a world that is becoming more secular and divisive and has largely lost its morality grounds. Prophet Muhammad becomes an excellent model of interfaith interaction that fulfils Diana Eck's religious pluralism criterion.⁵ When he opened the doors of his place of worship to the Christians to pray, he was creating a vision for his *ummah* to embrace and welcome religious diversity. His hospitality and care extended to all strangers and guests portray the value of emotional intelligence as a priority in all human interaction including interfaith relations. Prophet Muhammad has proven that reaching a pluralistic state or mindset in an interfaith relationship is built upon genuine social interactions and the building of an authentic relationship. ■



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⁴ See: Saeed, A. *Inclusivism and Exclusivism among Muslims Today between Theological and Social Dimensions*. *Interreligious Relations*, vol. 21, 2020, pp. 1-15

⁵ See: Eck, D. L. *What is Pluralism*. The Pluralism Project – Harvard University. Accessed on 2021, December 26. Available at: <https://pluralism.org/about>. See also: Eck, D. L. *Prospects for pluralism: Voice and vision in the study of religion*. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 75, no. 4, 2007, pp. 743-776

Bridging the Cultural Divide and Promoting Intra-Faith Unity Between Muslim Ethnicities

BY FAHEEM AHAMAD



Islam has witnessed an ever-growing plurality in ethnicity and culture since its beginnings. History has taught us that wherever there are differences present, a dark doorway to divide is conjured. In Singapore, we have allowed the cultural differences present between Muslim ethnicities to play a primary role in the prevalence of intrafaith division between Muslims, and hostility towards one another is slowly being etched deep within the veins of our Muslim community. The primary question that requires addressing is: “How do we close this doorway and walk in the pathway of unity?”. The answer to this question lies in Allah’s *swt* decree in the Quran: “*And we made you into (varying) peoples and tribes so that you may get to know each other*”¹. This verse is an exemplary illustration of the approach one should observe when it comes to ethnic and cultural diversity.

Allah *swt* decrees that the reason why He made us into a people with differing ethnicities and cultures is to ‘get to know each other’. The act of getting to know one another as aforementioned is multi-dimensional; comprising various layers that orbit around the nucleus of harmony and unity. It includes understanding one another – in terms of their culture and traditions – and accepting them regardless of their differences. Al-Alusi, an esteemed exegete, states that it also consists of forging ties with our kith from different ethnicities and cultures, and in turn, strengthening these very bonds²; fostering a harmonious community with no room for ethnic and cultural divergence.

“The Prophet Muhammad and his Companions were not at war with the world’s cultures and ethnicities but entertained an honest, accommodating, and generally positive view of the broad social endowments of other peoples and places. The Prophet and his Companions did not look upon human culture in terms of black and white, nor did they drastically divide human societies into spheres of absolute good and absolute evil. Islam did not impose itself – neither among Arabs nor non-Arabs – as an alien, culturally

*predatory worldview. Rather, the Prophetic message was, from the outset, based on the distinction between what was good, beneficial, and authentically human in other cultures, while seeking to alter only what was clearly detrimental. Prophetic law did not burn and obliterate what was distinctive about other peoples but sought instead to prune, nurture, and nourish, creating a positive Islamic synthesis.”*³

EDUCATING OURSELVES ON CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Before we question ourselves on how many of us actually put in the effort to forge and strengthen ties with our kith from varying ethnicities and cultures, I believe that a more appropriate question to ponder upon is: “How many of us truly comprehend the different cultures present in our Muslim society?”. Comprehension aside, how many amongst us at least know of the different cultures present in our Muslim society today? I firmly believe that herein lies the primary cause of the ethnic and cultural divide we currently observe; a lack of knowledge and comprehension of one another’s cultures and intra-religious orientations. The moment this shortfall is addressed – through educating ourselves on the cultures of others – is the moment we would have taken a step towards bridging the cultural divide between Muslim ethnicities.

This lack of exposure and knowledge about the cultural nuances of others hinders effective communication between the people of our community. When we understand the cultural nuances of our Muslim brothers and sisters, we will definitely observe positive changes in our communication. We will interact with them in a more understanding and compassionate manner, avoid upsetting them, and avoid misinterpretations altogether.

One way we can educate ourselves is to regularly engage in dialogues with our Muslim brothers and sisters. In consequence, apart from the cultural differences we have, we will discover

a common ground shared between these very people from different ethnicities and cultures. These commonalities will definitely create a sense of camaraderie and function as a catalyst in building relationships and fostering a sense of acceptance and togetherness. By taking the time to converse and learn about other people’s traditions and values, we can also challenge any preconceived notions we might have had and dismantle stereotypical and prejudicial barriers that hinder harmony in our society.

ACCEPTING AND RESPECTING DIFFERENCES WHILE EMBRACING THE ABSOLUTE COMMON GROUND

Dr Umar Faruq Abdullah strings words in a beautiful symphony mentioning that accepting and in turn respecting the cultures of others is a supreme Prophetic Sunnah:

*The story of the “sons of Arfida” – a familiar Arabian linguistic reference to Ethiopians – provides a telling illustration of the place of culture (here, of course, Black African culture) within the Prophetic dispensation. In celebration of an annual Islamic religious festival, a group of Black African converts began to beat leather drums and dance with spears in the Prophet’s mosque. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab – one of the chief Companions – felt compelled to interfere and stop them, but the Prophet intervened on their behalf, directing ‘Umar to leave them alone and noting to him that they were “the sons of Arfida,” that is, not his people. The Prophet invited his wife ‘Aisha to watch the dance, took her into the crowd, and lifted her over his back, so that she could watch them clearly as she eagerly leaned forward, her cheek pressing against his. The Prophet made it a point to dispel the Ethiopians’ misgivings about ‘Umar’s intrusion and encouraged them to dance well and, in one account of this authentic story, reassured them to keep up their drumming and dancing, saying: “Play your games, sons of Arfida, so the Jews and Christians know there is latitude in our religion.”*⁴

After educating ourselves on the cultural differences present in our society, we must

¹ Quran, Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13

² Al-Aalusi, M. *Tafsir Ruh al-Ma’aniy*, vol. 13, p. 313

³ Abd-Allah, U. F. *Islam and the Cultural Imperative*. ICR Journal, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, p. 4. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.52282/icr.v1i1.10>

⁴ Ibid

The assertion of the respective versions of truth, the lack of professionalism, and their intellectual incompetency are the three components that lead to failure in emulating decorum when discussing intra-religious matters. This failure then leads to the inexorable disrespect towards the religious orientations and opinions of one another; enforcing their religious beliefs and opinions on another, falsifying the religious orientations of one another, or both.

then acknowledge, accept, and respect the different cultures of the people around us. It is imperative that I add here – relevant to the context of Singapore – that the different orientations and approaches that a people choose to uptake when it comes to certain Islamic practices namely but not limited to, celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (*peace be upon him*), must also be accepted and respected. It should not be a factor that leads to a divide between Muslims as we have seen and still see up until this very day.

In order to effectively address this divide, we must first understand where this division stems from. This division arises from the actions of individuals who are focused on asserting to all others that the only orientation which is right and valid is the one that they are steadfastly holding on to and that the numerous others aren't. In addition, they display inadequacy in possessing the prerequisites to engage in an intra-faith discourse. This inadequacy is mainly attributable to two matters; the first being the inability to uphold the required levels of properness

and professionalism in an intra-faith discourse, and the second being the inability to demonstrate intellectual competency in matters vis-à-vis engaging in a religious discourse.

The assertion of the respective versions of truth, the lack of professionalism, and their intellectual incompetency are the three components that lead to failure in emulating decorum when discussing intra-religious matters. This failure then leads to the inexorable disrespect towards the religious orientations and opinions of one another; enforcing their religious beliefs and opinions on another, falsifying the religious orientations of one another, or both. The people who aren't well educated on such matters should refrain from engaging in discourses on such matters yet inadvertently do so. As a by-product, they function as catalysts bringing detriment to the intra-faith harmony amongst Muslims in Singapore.

We fail to comprehend the ramifications of enforcing our orientations on others, and falsifying the orientations of others when it comes to discussing the

permissibility of engaging in certain Islamic practices. We also lack wisdom in comprehending why everyone perceives their respective orientations to be the one closest to the truth. How can we then enforce our religious orientation – which we perceive to be correct – to someone who also perceives his religious orientation to be correct? No matter which orientation one chooses to adhere to, we should not perceive the people who do not follow the same orientations as us, as being lesser than us. Nor should we fall prey to the detrimental ideology of thinking that we are on the truth and all those who aren't on the same page as us have been misguided.

As ironic and paradoxical as it may sound, I observe that as we are in pursuit of getting closer to the truth – trying to determine which religious orientation is closer to the truth – we simultaneously stray further from the truth; consciously contributing to intra-faith divisions by blatantly condemning, criticising, falsifying and disrespecting the people who do not share the same religious orientations as us in certain matters, insofar sowing seeds of rancour and bitterness between one another.

We should endeavour to adopt a respectful and compassionate approach when it comes to dealing with cultural and intra-faith differences. We have allowed our minimal differences to prevail over the vast oceans of commonalities we Muslims share with one another. It is apparent that we have yet to observe the desired degree of cultural synthesis and intra-faith harmony in our society today. And we will remain so for as long as we are too engrossed and focused on our differences instead of our absolute commonality: Islam.

REFRAINING FROM TAKING EXCESSIVE PRIDE IN ETHNICITY, CULTURE, AND LINEAGE

Having educated ourselves on the cultural nuances of others, and in turn, accepting the cultural diversity present in our community, we then have to reflect on ourselves. In the continuation of the previously mentioned verse, Allah *swt* decrees in the very same chapter: “*The*

We should endeavour to adopt a respectful and compassionate approach when it comes to dealing with cultural and intra-faith differences. We have allowed our minimal differences to prevail over the vast oceans of commonalities we Muslims share with one another. It is apparent that we have yet to observe the desired degree of cultural synthesis and intra-faith harmony in our society today.

*most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.”*⁵ Allah knows that mankind is intrinsically inclined to take pride in their ethnicities, culture, and lineage. Therefore, He puts down a firm decree stating that these matters are of no value to Him, and that the sole criterion for nobility in His sight is piety, righteousness and God-consciousness.

The acclaimed exegete Fakhr al-Deen al-Razi mentions in his book: *“How can you find it right to take pride in that which has been given to you and not been attained by you, and in that which you have no say and right to determine?”*⁶ No person has or ever will be regarded as being noble in Allah’s sight purely based on ethnicity, culture and lineage. Consequently, we should not be harbourers of pride and superiority complexes based on ethnicity, culture, and lineage. The Prophet (*pbuh*) emphasises this in a narration: *“Verily Allah does not look at your faces and your wealth, but He looks at your heart and your deeds.”*⁷

Indeed, ethnic pride is a natural reaction when one strives to preserve his unique cultural identity in the face of historical struggles and ethnic accomplishments. Moreover, in Singapore, the Muslim community’s pride in their ethnic backgrounds has deep roots in their history and heritage. However, an excessive focus on these differences will inexorably lead to feelings of exclusivity and separation, and if we as a people are able to rid ourselves of taking excessive pride in the aforementioned matters, then surely another brick would be laid towards bridging the cultural divide between Muslim ethnicities in Singapore.

IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES, CULTIVATING SELF-AWARENESS, AND EMBRACING CULTURAL RESPONSIBILITY

By educating ourselves on the cultural differences present in our society and accepting these differences, we will also be able to notice and differentiate between cultural differences and individual differences⁸. Individual differences are a set of behaviours

non-attributable to culture, which can easily be misconstrued as cultural differences. In the past, there might have been certain practices that fall far from the scope of pleasantries, which we might have attributed to the culture of certain ethnicities hitherto. After widening our scope of knowledge on the cultural nuances of others, we will come to a realisation that the unpleasant behaviours and customs we observed are actually individual differences, not representations of a culture.

It is quintessential that we cultivate self-awareness and observe cultural responsibility. Each individual carries the weight of their ethnic background and cultural heritage, and with that comes a responsibility to present oneself in a respectful and modest manner. This awareness is rooted in the understanding that our actions and behaviours can influence how others perceive not only us but also the larger group we are associated with. By being mindful of our conduct, we can avoid inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes or misconceptions about our cultural groups.

There exists an inherent responsibility to portray ourselves in a respectable and modest light. This stems from the awareness that our actions, behaviours, and interactions can often be interpreted as the cultural norms and behaviours of the broader group we identify with. This will aid in breaking down these preconceived notions through positive representation.

WORKING TOWARDS INTRA-FAITH UNITY: A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

We live in a multi-religious society which preaches racially and religiously harmonised ideals, yet how are we to observe inter-racial and religious unity if we fail to practice intra-religious unity? The Companions of the Prophet (*pbuh*) had their fair share of differences in opinions in certain Islamic matters, yet we observe that the differences present were never a dividing factor

⁵ Quran, Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 13

⁶ Ar-Razi, F. *Tafsir Mafateeh al-Ghayb*, vol. 28, p. 113

⁷ Sahih Muslim 2564c, Book 45, Hadith 42

⁸ Ruiz, J. *10 ways to bridge cultural diversity*. Alder Koten. Retrieved at: <https://alderkoten.com/10-ways-to-bridge-cultural-diversity/>

Developing a robust sense of cultural and intra-faith unity through exposure and education is a multifaceted task that requires the involvement and contribution of various parties. There are several parties that owe a responsibility in educating varying demographics of the Muslim community on cross-cultural and intra-religious understanding, empathy, and appreciation for diversity. This responsibility rests with religious councils serving the Muslim populace, educational institutions focused on religious teachings, mosques catering to congregants, and parents guiding their children

amongst them. They still demonstrated the zenith of brotherly endearment and care regardless.

We need to learn from the likes of the Prophet (*pbuh*) and his Companions and strive to rekindle the embers of compassionate camaraderie as well as strive to emulate the brotherhood displayed by them. It is a matter of absolute splendour and magnificence that Allah *swt* mentions in the very same chapter that we have been deriving lessons from: “*Verily the believers are a brotherhood, so observe peace with your brothers.*”⁹ The gravitas of the word brotherhood is phenomenal. The Prophet (*pbuh*) emphasises the quintessence of harmony amongst Muslims and enlightens us with the definition of brotherhood and the remarkably strong

ties that Muslims should observe between one another in an array of various narrations:

*“None of you believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”*¹⁰

*“You see the believers with regard to their being merciful among themselves and showing love among themselves and being kind, resembling one body, such that, if any part of the body is not well then the whole body shares the sleeplessness and fever with it.”*¹¹

“A Muslim is a brother of another Muslim. So he should not oppress him nor should he hand him over to (his satan or to his self which is inclined to evil). Whoever fulfils the needs of his brother, Allah will fulfil his needs; whoever removes the troubles

*of his brother, Allah will remove one of his troubles on the Day of Resurrection; and whoever covers up the fault of a Muslim, Allah will cover up his fault on the Day of Resurrection.”*¹²

*“A faithful believer to a faithful believer is like the bricks of a wall, enforcing each other.”*¹³

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Despite our differences; be it cultural or religious, we are all Muslim brothers and sisters who share faith in Allah *swt*, Muhammad (*pbuh*) as being the final blessed Messenger of Allah, the Quran as being the divine scripture of Allah, and Islam as being the perfect religion of Allah. And the moment we implement all these steps is the very moment we can say that we have heeded the divine guidance provided to us with regard to this matter and the moment we would have created a positive Islamic synthesis between different ethnicities and cultures. ■

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⁹ Quran. Surah Al-Hujurat, verse 10

¹⁰ Jami' at-Tirmidhi 2515, Book 37, Hadith 101

¹¹ Sahih al-Bukhari 6011, Book 78, Hadith 42

¹² Riyad as-Salihin 233, Introduction, Hadith 233

¹³ Sahih al-Bukhari 481, Book 8, Hadith 128

Getting to Know the Late Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Via His Sermons

BY DR MUHAMMAD HANIFF HASSAN

This article seeks to provide brief insights into the late Ustaz Sonhadji's religious thinking and personality through the compilation of his Friday sermons published in a three-volume publication by Pergas in March 2023, titled *Meninjau Pemikiran Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu: Daripada Khutbah-Khutbah Karangannya*. This author is one of the three editors who worked on the project.¹

112 handwritten manuscripts of sermons of different topics dated from 1971 to 1980 are among the many intellectual legacies left behind by Ustaz Sonhadji. They were donated by his family to the National Library Board (NLB) to be properly archived.

With permission from the NLB, the sermons, which were originally in Jawi text, were transliterated to Roman letters and published in three volumes by Pergas. The public can now, for the first time, read Ustaz Sonhadji's sermons and benefit from his knowledge. More researchers can access them for various study purposes because they are now available to the public.

Not only do the sermons contain religious guidance for Muslims, but they also provide information about Ustaz Sonhadji's personality. Knowing Ustaz Sonhadji and other local religious figures such as Ustaz Syed Abdillah Aljufri, Sheikh Omar Al-Khatib, Ustaz Abu Bakar Hashim and Ustaz Osman Jantan is important and research about their lives, thoughts and ideas should be encouraged. They are respected religious figures who have helped the Singapore Muslim community contextualise their religious understanding and practice in the form of *fatwas* in their capacity as members of the MUIS Fatwa Committee, answering religious queries, delivering sermons, conducting religious classes and publishing reading materials such as books and articles in local newspapers. If not for these initiatives, the knowledge and wisdom of these figures would remain hidden in manuscripts and recording devices kept by the national archives, libraries, and family members. Over time, future generations of Singaporean Muslims would lose them.



¹ Mohamed Qusairy Thaha, Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mustazah Bahari (eds.) (2023), *Meninjau Pemikiran Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Dari Khutbah-khutbah Karangannya (A Look into Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji's Ideas From Collections of His Sermon)*, Singapore: Pergas, vol. 1-3.

Admittedly, Pergas in the past years has taken the initiative to ensure the preservation of local scholars by publishing a book series entitled *Obor Ummah* (The Beacon of the *Ummah*) that contains short biographies of local religious figures as well as a book that compiles bibliographies of articles and books published by the same figures for the past 100 years. However, a deeper appreciation of these figures is achieved not only through their life history and works. It must also incorporate attempts to discover, study and present their intellectual legacies and wisdom to the masses. This article is a humble attempt to address the lack of such initiatives today, as observed by this author, with the hope that it will catalyse more research efforts in the future.

A TRADITIONALIST

It could be discerned from the sermons that Ustaz Sonhadji is a traditionalist in his understanding and practice of Islam. Here, a traditionalist refers to a person whose understanding and practice of Islam represents the dominant *mazhab* professed by Malays throughout the Nusantara region – Shafiite (*Shafiiyah*) in matters of *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and Asharite (*Ash'ariyah*) in matters of *aqidah* (creed) – and committed to the way of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars) from the larger *Ahl Al-Sunnah Wa Al-Jamaah* (Sunni) tradition. Ustaz Sonhadji, as can be seen from some of his thoughts and ideas, may have personal choices that hint at his personality and also showcase the depth and vastness of his knowledge. However, these personal variations are exceptions and they do not put Ustaz Sonhadji out from the dominant *mazhab* here.

To understand this further, Ustaz Sonhadji's Islamic understanding and practices should not be put in the category of reformists like the one popularly associated with Kyai Ahmad Dahlan and

the Muhammadiyah organisation which he founded in Indonesia, which is also manifested through the thoughts and ideas of Pak Hamka, the author of the widely read and studied Quranic exegesis entitled *Tafsir Al-Azhar*. Ustaz Sonhadji also ought not be regarded to represent an alignment with the *haraki* movements – a trend influenced by Hasan Al-Banna and the Ikhwan Muslimin (Muslim Brothers) movement which he founded in Egypt in 1928 and has since spread globally. Ustaz Sonhadji is not a Salafi-Wahabi in thought and practice – the latter referring to the teachings of Sheikh Muhammad bin Abdul Wahhab in the 18th century in Najd, Saudi Arabia, and was later adopted as the official *mazhab* of the Saudi government.

This could be seen from the following points found in his sermons:

- equating *taqwa* to the fear of Allah in all his sermons – a meaning widely held by the *asatizah* community and religious establishments in this region, although the actual meaning of the word in Arabic relates to one's commitment to do what is commanded and avoid what is prohibited by Allah and this could be done out of love, not necessarily by fear²
- standpoint on Islamic rulings on fasting and *fidyah* payment³
- standpoint on Islamic rulings pertaining to *zakat*⁴
- ruling that marriage between male non-Muslim and female Muslim is forbidden (*haram*)⁵
- ruling on those who do not fast during Ramadan⁶
- permissibility of 'beating' *nusyuz* (disobedient) wife by husband as a means to correct her⁷
- permissibility and virtue of celebrating Maulid (Prophet's birthday)⁸
- permissibility of commemorating the new Hijrah year⁹

- strong rejection towards those who view the obsolescence of cutting off one's hand as criminal punishment for thief¹⁰
- upholding traditional punishment on *hirabah* (crime involving armed transgression of life and property)¹¹
- comments on Good Friday¹², the Trinity faith held by Christians and celebrating Christmas¹³
- rulings pertaining to divorce and *iddah* (waiting period before re-marriage) for divorced women and widow.¹⁴

PROGRESSIVE ELEMENTS

Although Ustaz Sonhadji is a traditionalist, he was not strict in following the dominant tradition and was open-minded towards changes in religious practices and understanding when situations call for it. This is especially so when the change would align him with the mainstream *asatizah* community.

The progressive elements could be seen in the following standpoints found in the sermons;

- gave more attention to internalising Islamic values and beautiful manners on a personal level when promoting Quranic concepts such as Muslims' life guidance instead of the implementation of *hudud* law (Islamic criminal law) as promoted by some *da'wah* activists¹⁵
- allowed for the use of money as payment for *zakat fitrah* following the view held by the Hanafite *mazhab*, in place of rice held by the Shafiite *ulama*, in line with the *fatwa* issued by the Mufti of Singapore¹⁶
- incorporated opium and marijuana under forbidden items for consumption to concur with contemporary context, although both were not mentioned in traditional book of *fiqh*¹⁷
- incorporated opium, intoxicants, and drugs under *al-fahsya'* (abominations) mentioned in the Quran¹⁸

² See sermon titled *Perintah Mengerjakan Puasa*, in Mohamed Qusairy Thaha, Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mustazah Bahari (2023), *Meningjau Pemikiran Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Dari Khutbah-khutbah Karangannya* [A Look Into Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji's Ideas From Collections of His Sermon], Singapore: Pergas, vol. 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See sermon titled *Menunaikan Zakat Fitrah*, vol. 1.

⁵ See sermon titled *Larangan Berkahwin Dengan Orang-orang Musyrik*.

⁶ See sermon titled *Puasa Menghilangkan Bencana Syahwat Perut*, vol. 1.

⁷ See sermon titled *Pengajaran Bagi Suami Terhadap Isteri Yang Nusyuz*, vol. 3.

⁸ See sermon titled *Memperingati Maulid Al-Nabi s.a.w.*, vol. 1; *Memperingati Kelahiran Nabi s.a.w.*, vol. 1.

⁹ See sermon titled *Menyambut Tahun Baru Hijrah dan Masihi*, vol. 3.

¹⁰ See sermon titled *Hukum Pencuri Dengan Kerat Tangan*, vol. 2.

¹¹ See sermon titled *Balasan Orang Yang Memerangi Allah dan RasulNya*, vol. 2.

¹² See sermon titled *Nabi Isa a.s Tidak Dibunuh*, vol. 2.

¹³ See sermon titled *Nabi Isa a.s Bukanlah Tuhan*, vol. 1.

¹⁴ See sermon titled *Perempuan Yang Bercerai Hendaklah Beriddah*, vol. 3.

¹⁵ See sermon titled *Perhatikanlah Isi Al-Quran*, vol. 1.

¹⁶ See sermon titled *Menunaikan Zakat Fitrah*, vol. 1.

¹⁷ See sermon titled *Bermohonlah Kepada Allah Dengan Merendahkan Diri*, vol. 1.

¹⁸ See sermon titled *Perintah Allah dan TegahanNya*, vol. 2.

- drawing the correlation between the use of modern measurement through technological advancements and the manner in which Angels record Man's deeds in this world¹⁹
- recognised modern scientific findings on the lack of oxygen at high altitude and space when commenting on verse 125 of *Surah Al-An'am*²⁰
- regarded corruption as *haram* and worse than marijuana dan drugs, in line with the position held by the Singapore government²¹
- held that obedience to the Singapore government is obligatory in matters that do not contradict with the religion, even though it is ruled by non-Muslims.²²

Ustaz Sonhadji did not only speak on traditional religious topics in his sermons. He also spoke on and offered religious guidance on contemporary life issues, such as;

- encouraging saving and prudence in financial matters and forbidding wastefulness and extravagance²³
- promoting conscientiousness among Muslims and asserting that Islam recognises the important role played by labour to achieve progress²⁴
- encouraging Muslims to resume work and not wasting time with a long rest after performing Friday prayers in line with the fact that Friday is a working day in Singapore, unlike Muslims in neighbouring Johor where Friday is a public holiday.²⁵

The existence of a contextualised Islamic understanding and practices in Ustaz Sonhadji's sermons is not uncommon. Often, such matters could be found among many traditionalists, in the past and present. The opposite could also be found among progressive and modernist figures: some of them would have conservative viewpoints on certain issues. In fact, this represents human nature where one is not easily boxed into a category in an absolute manner. An attribute given to a person is

usually based on his dominant character and this therefore warns anyone who seeks to study a person's ideas to assess him holistically, rather than nitpicking on certain strands of thought that may represent an exception or a small part of him.

Like many traditionalists, Ustaz Sonhadji faced difficulty in reconciling traditional ideas when facing with contemporary challenges and modern ideas. For example, in one of his sermons, he held that man is created with natural traits that give him advantages over a woman. However, in another sermon, he pronounced that God has created man and woman equals in His eyes.²⁶ To this, he held a progressive view that education should be encouraged equally for both men and women.²⁷

USTAZ SONHADJI AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

There are a few ideas and standpoints which Ustaz Sonhadji delivered in the sermons that could be misconstrued as radical and problematic as it is apparently not promoting social harmony as professed by national political leaders such as:

- his views and theological standpoint on Good Friday, Christmas and Trinity.

This could be regarded as problematic when seen from the ban imposed on Mufti Menk, a popular foreign Muslim scholar, from entering and delivering talks in Singapore for the view he held that it is forbidden for Muslims to wish "Merry Christmas" to Christians²⁸ and the cancellation of work pass and repatriation of an Indian nationality *imam* of a local mosque who prayed emotionally during a Friday sermon that God grants victory to Muslims above all Christians and Jews.²⁹

- his views on punishment of crimes that fall under the Islamic *hudud* law such as stealing, *hirabah* and imposition of *takzir* (discretionary criminal punishment) on those who do not fast in Ramadan without a valid excuse.

This could be regarded as contravening the secular nature of Singapore and, thus, unconstitutional. Also, it could be misconstrued as a tacit recognition, support and sympathy towards the implementation of the *Shariah* across the border by movements such as PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia) and Hizbut Tahrir of Indonesia.

With regard to the above, the author wishes to make a few notes for the benefit of readers. Firstly, it must be noted that the sermons by Ustaz Sonhadji were delivered in the last four to five decades. Ustaz Sonhadji passed on in 2010 and is not able to provide an explanation for his views such as the context and the background through which the views were expressed in the abovementioned sermons. Thus, caution and prudence are necessary before one could fault him for them.

Furthermore, Ustaz Sonhadji's latest views on the issues could not be ascertained because it is common for a person's views to evolve or change over time and it is not impossible, if he were still alive, to hold to a different viewpoint.

Although the expressed views could be regarded as problematic in today's context, no one who knows him would agree that Ustaz Sonhadji was a radical and an unhealthy element for social harmony in Singapore throughout his life. In fact, he was recognised both as a religious and community leader that kept social harmony between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities close to his heart. In addition, he actively contributed to its upholding in his lifetime.³⁰ The most relevant testimony is the fact that he was appointed as one of the advisors and resource persons for the RRG (Religious Rehabilitation Group) – an organisation entrusted by the Singapore government to rehabilitate those who are detained under the Internal Security Act for terrorism and national security cases and to speak on the deviant nature of Al-Qaeda and IS ideology

¹⁹ See sermon titled *Setiap Manusia Mempunyai Pengiring*, vol. 3.

²⁰ See sermon titled *Siapa Yang Dikehendaki Allah Supaya Terpimpin*, vol. 1.

²¹ See sermon titled *Makanlah Dari Jenis Yang Baik*, vol. 2.

²² See sermon titled *Kemansian Iman*, vol. 1.

²³ See sermon titled *Kebajikan Berjimat dan Keburukan Orang Yang Boros*, vol. 2.

²⁴ See sermon titled *Bekerjalah Mencari Mata Pencarian*, vol. 2.

²⁵ See sermon titled *Sembahyang Jemaah dan Jumaat*, vol. 1.

²⁶ See sermon titled *Janglah Menjadi Orang Yang Memecah Belahkan Agamanya*.

²⁷ See sermon titled *Lelaki dan Perempuan Sama Darjatnya*, vol. 3.

²⁸ Tham Yuen-C (2017), "2 foreign Islamic preachers barred from entering Singapore for religious cruise", The Straits Times, 30 October.

²⁹ Today (2017), Imam who made offensive remarks to be repatriated; stern warnings for two others: MHA, 4 April.

³⁰ See short biography of the late Ustaz in Pergas (2014), *Beacons of the Ummah: Tracing the Footsteps of Singapore Religious Leaders*, Singapore: Pergas, p. 103-10; See his contribution to community and recognition received at national level in Nurhaizatul Jamila Jamil, "Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu", *SingaporeInfopedia*, di http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1468_2010-08-13.html (19 May 2023).

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and promote *wasatiyah* (justly-balanced) among Singaporean Muslims.³¹

The author testifies that, during his study at Madrasah AlJunied in the 1980s, Ustaz Sonhadji was a teacher in the madrasah who encouraged the students to organise the madrasah's inaugural National Day celebrations. The event was commemorated with a flag raising ceremony during the morning assembly and the singing of the national anthem. He also reprimanded students who did not take their participation seriously.

With regard to Ustaz Sonhadji's views on Islamic punishment of crimes, the author also testifies that he, as a member of Pergas Masyayikh Council, regularly attended and actively participated in discussion sessions on the draft of three working papers before they were presented in the Ulama (Scholars') Convention organised by Pergas in 2003. These papers were later adopted as Pergas' official stand on moderation in Islam and published in a book titled *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Malay Muslim Community in Singapore*. The book contains Pergas' official stand on the issue of *hudud* law in the Singapore context. Ustaz Sonhadji expressed strong support and agreement to the stand which is as follows:

Hudud in the Singapore Context
Implementing *hudud* is but one of the various religious obligations required of the Muslim *ummah*.

Therefore, we need to observe its place in the sequence of priorities that have to be fulfilled, according to the place and time. In line with this context, the Muslim community living as a minority group in Singapore views hudud as such: while we believe in it, we recognise the reality, and our priorities differ from that of the Muslim ummah elsewhere.

As mentioned in the discussion on secularism, in the Singapore context, our priority is to safeguard the free and peaceful environment which allows us to practise the basic obligations of the religion in the spirit of democracy, and to promote a civil society.

Although it is obligatory for us to observe hudud, our inability to do so does not mean that our Islam, or our status in the eyes of Allah, is lower than that of other Muslims; for it is also obligatory for us to work within constraints.

Allah Almighty says;
"On no soul does Allah place a burden greater than it can bear."
(The Holy Quran 2: 286)

We reject the perception that defines someone as being extremist or inclined towards extremism, just because he is convinced of, and believes in the sanctity of hudud. We are of the opinion that it is necessary to differentiate between iman (belief in God) and conviction with experience. In this respect, we acknowledge the importance of contextualising conviction with reality."³²

CLOSING REMARKS

Many other findings may be deduced about Ustaz Sonhadji from the sermons. It is up to the intellectual ability of a researcher now that the sermons are easily available in the public domain.

It must be highlighted here that the above findings should not be construed as the absolute representation of Ustaz Sonhadji because they are based on his sermons, which represent a small portion of his intellectual legacy. Nevertheless, the findings are useful references for those who wish to research more about Ustaz Sonhadji and his contributions.

The last two decades after the 9/11 incident witnessed active efforts on the part of Singapore's religious leaders to promote Islamic understanding and practices that are contextualised to contemporary times and more importantly to unique Singapore realities as exemplified in books published by Pergas already mentioned above and by Muis entitled *Risalah Membangun Masyarakat Islam Cemerlang*³³ and *Thriving in Plural World: Principles and Values of Singapore Muslim Community*.³⁴ This intellectual discourse should continue, but to further entrench the community's contextual Islamic understanding and

³¹ RRG (n.d.), *Our People, The Late Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad*, at <https://www.rrg.sg/our-people/#lightbox/gallery-2/119> (19 May 2023).

³² Pergas (2004), *Moderation in Islam in the Context of Muslim Community in Singapore*, Singapore: Pergas, pp. 129-30.

³³ Muis (2006), *Risalah Membangun Masyarakat Islam Cemerlang Singapura*, Singapore: Muis.

³⁴ Muis (2018), *Thriving in Plural World: Principles and Values of Singapore Muslim Community*, Singapore: Muis.

practice calls for the pertinent need to develop a strong sense of attachment to local religious figures, past and present, through a systematic study and dissemination of their ideas as exemplified by the compilation of Ustaz Sonhadji's Friday sermons book. With a strong attachment to local figures, dependence on foreign figures and their ideas which may not suit the Singapore context could be reduced.

This article is based on and improved from Muhammad Haniff Hassan (2023), "Kenali Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Dari Khutbah-Khutbahnya (Getting to Know Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji's Ideas From His Sermons)", in Meninjau Pemikiran Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu Daripada Khutbah-khutbah Karangannya (A Look Into Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji's Ideas From Collections of His Sermon), edited by Mohamed Qusyairy Thaha, Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mustazah Bahari, Singapore: Pergas. ■

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KEY TIMELINES OF THE LATE USTAZ'S LIFE

(Extracted from Mohamed Qusyairy Thaha [2003], "Biografi Ringkas Al-Marhum Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu (Short Biography of the late Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu)", in *Meninjau Pemikiran Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji Mohamad Milatu Daripada Khutbah-Khutbah Karangannya (A Look into Ustaz Ahmad Sonhadji's Ideas from Collections of His Sermons)*, edited by Mohamed Qusyairy Thaha, Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mustazah Bahari, Singapore: Pergas)

1922	Born in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia
1927	Migrated to Singapore with parents
1930-1936	Early formal religious education at public school until Class V at Riau
1937-1944	Continued religious education at Madrasah Aljunied until Class 6
1945	Started teaching as trainee <i>ustaz</i> at Madrasah Aljunied
1945	Founded Madrasah Bustanul Arifin dan Madrasah Al-Diniyah in Singapore
1945	Worked with Radio Japan as a translator due to the Japanese occupation of Singapore
1946-1950	Involved in trade and business after World War II
1951	Teaching again at Madrasah Aljunied
1957	Founded Pergas with fellow <i>asatizahs</i>
1958-1960	Represented Pergas in Islamic education committee under Ministry of Education, developed the curriculum and wrote 10 textbooks
1959-1984	Began delivery of <i>Tafsir</i> on radio
1960-1962	Appointed as member of Islamic advisory committee for Ministry of Social Affairs
1966-1970	Served as head of teachers at Hasanah Bolkiah Arabic Secondary School in Brunei
1973-1980	Appointed as <i>Mudir</i> for Madrasah Aljunied and published 7 text books
1974-1986	Appointed as member of MUIS Syarah Appeal Board
1974-1992	Appointed as member of MUIS Fatwa Committee
1980-1992	Appointed as member of MUIS Council
1980	Appointed as permanent <i>imam</i> of Muhajirin Mosque
1983	Awarded Pingat Bakti Masyarakat
1991	Published complete edition of <i>Tafsir 'Abr Al-Athir</i> based on his <i>tafsir</i> via radio after 25 years
1992	Appointed as Chairman of Madrasah Al-Irsyad and Quranic Education Council
1992	Awarded MUIS Anugerah Jasa Cemerlang
2010	Died on 12 August 2010 in Singapore

Nurturing a Nursing Career and Family Abroad with Muhammad Fadhil

BY NUR FIQRIYA MUHAMMAD ESA



According to a 2016 study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), nearly one in five Singaporeans aged 19 to 30 wish to emigrate, with the same study showing nearly 60 per cent of respondents agreeing that an increase in emigration is inevitable as Singapore becomes more stressful and competitive¹. A number of reasons have contributed to this trend, including Singaporeans being well-equipped by our education system which has enabled them to seek better opportunities overseas for professional or personal reasons. There is also a greater inclination towards working and living abroad among younger people, however, it may not necessarily be with the aim of migrating permanently².

The 2016 IPS study also unveiled Australia as the preferred emigration destination for Singaporeans. For Singaporean Malay Muslims in particular, emigrating to Australia is appealing as it meets their criteria to have a balanced Muslim life: social security; familial happiness and faith time³. The state agencies in Australia provide extensive social security to migrants upon their arrival and in the first few years of their stay. Australia is also known to have relatively better work-life balance, which allows more time to be spent on leisure with family and friends. Additionally, there are opportunities to spend more time seeking religious knowledge and being involved in mosque-related activities.

To Muhammad Fadhil, a Registered Nurse based in Melbourne, there is something intriguing about healthcare systems in other countries. Thus, when his wife was offered a scholarship to study in Australia this year, he saw the golden opportunity to move there and pursue his dream of exploring healthcare systems outside of Singapore. Fadhil shares his story of living in Australia with the *Karyawan* team.

Q: Can you tell us about yourself and your family?

Fadhil: I am a Registered Nurse, specialising in Cardiology and Emergency Department in a public hospital here in Melbourne. My wife is a full-time PhD student at Monash University. We have a 2-year-old son who has been with us since we moved here.

Q: Could you describe the responsibilities and tasks that your job involves?

Fadhil: My job involves handling medical emergencies on a daily basis, where I collaborate closely with doctors to work out the best treatment plans. I serve all ages, from children to the elderly.

Q: What inspired your decision to pursue a nursing career in Australia?

Fadhil: Prior to this, I have had offers to work in cities like Jeddah and Abu Dhabi. Though I have always wanted to explore different healthcare systems across the world, the timing was unfortunately unfavourable. Ultimately, my wife inspired and encouraged me to pursue my dreams when this opportunity came at the right time.

Q: Is there a big difference between a nursing career in Singapore and one in Australia?

Fadhil: There is a huge difference in terms of opportunities at work. Back when I was working in Singapore, I had difficulty moving laterally across different departments as it was all subject to the approval or recommendation from my Head of Department. Unfortunately, my Head of Department then was reluctant to let me go because she wanted me to continue serving in our department. Here in Australia, I am given more opportunities at work.

Q: What was one thing that surprised you about working in Australia?

Fadhil: People in my industry are very diverse. We have people from Africa to the

Middle East working here. That surprised me because I had always thought that Singapore was already quite diverse, but I never imagined seeing this much diversity in Australia.

Q: What factors should other professionals take into account when considering work overseas?

Fadhil: Moving into a new country is a huge event in one's life. A new start requires a significant amount of funds to be invested and sometimes it is uncertain whether the investment will bring you returns. And if you have children, you should always consider what is best for them.

Q: What are some challenges you have faced?

Fadhil: I get homesick from time to time. The level of efficiency here is not as great as it is back home and I miss that. Safety is another issue. I have a colleague who had her house robbed in broad daylight while she was at home with her kids. Hence, I am always cautious.

Q: What do you find most rewarding about your nursing career in Australia?

Fadhil: The healthcare workers' union here is very active in advocating for nurses' rights in terms of working conditions and working hours. As a person who loves his job, I realised that there has been a lack of support and structure that prevented me from doing my job well. Hence, I am appreciative of such efforts by the union.

Q: Can you share the cultural and lifestyle differences between Australia and Singapore from your perspective?

Fadhil: In Australia, work-life balance is not a given per se, but it is a choice. For every job, you are required to indicate your level of commitment in terms of the number of days that you intend to work in a fortnight. Most people choose to work two to three days a week. Given that salaries are paid by the hour, people here accept that earning money is not a priority. That is the main difference.

¹ Hussain, A. (2018, September 28). *Nearly 1 in 5 young Singaporeans want to emigrate: survey*. Yahoo! News. <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/nearly-1-5-young-singaporeans-want-emigrate-survey-090830259.html>

² Leong, CH. (2017, September 2). *More Singaporeans going abroad, but are no less Singaporean for it*. Channel NewsAsia. https://kypsp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/cna_more-singaporeans-going-abroad-but-are-no-less-singaporean-for-it_020917-pdf

³ Aljunied, K., and Khan, A. *Psycho-Pious Motivations and Muslim Migration to the West: The Case of Singaporean Malay-Muslims in Melbourne, Australia*. *Akademika* (Kuala Lumpur), 2022, 92(1). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17576/akad-2022-9201-16>

In Australia, work-life balance is not a given per se, but it is a choice. For every job, you are required to indicate your level of commitment in terms of the number of days that you intend to work in a fortnight. Most people choose to work two to three days a week. Given that salaries are paid by the hour, people here accept that earning money is not a priority. That is the main difference.

Q: Is there a large Muslim community in Melbourne?

Fadhil: We have a huge Muslim community here. We also have Malay community bodies like *Kampung Utara Melbourne (KUM)*, *Khairat Melayu Islam Victoria (KMIV)* and *Australian Malay Foundation (AMF)*, all of which include Malays from Malaysia and Singapore. There is a significant Indonesian community here as well.

Q: We have heard stories in the media of Islamophobia in Australia. Did you have any particular challenges with that?

Fadhil: I believe that people tend to fear things that they have little knowledge of. However, I feel that we must be courageous like our Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) and educate people about Islam. We should also behave in accordance with the teachings of our religion.

I do not have any issues with Islamophobia at work. Everyone respects and understands each other. I have a significant number of colleagues who have worked in the Middle East so they know about Islam too.

Q: What are your aspirations and goals for your personal and professional life?

Fadhil: I really miss mentoring in the Youth Enrichment Programme (YEP) in



Fadhil & his family

AMP, which I was a part of between 2005 and 2021. I hope to come back to Singapore after my wife has completed her studies and continue to contribute to the Malay community in the near future.

Career-wise, I am currently working on a platform called *Nursesoncallsg*, which is an initiative that provides support to fellow nurses in Singapore. I hope to continue to expand it and help more nurses by advocating for positive well-being.

Q: What would your advice be to youths who are considering carving a career overseas?

Fadhil: Do your research. Have a proper plan. Move only if you have something better that awaits overseas. But if you do not mind exploring, just go for it! ■



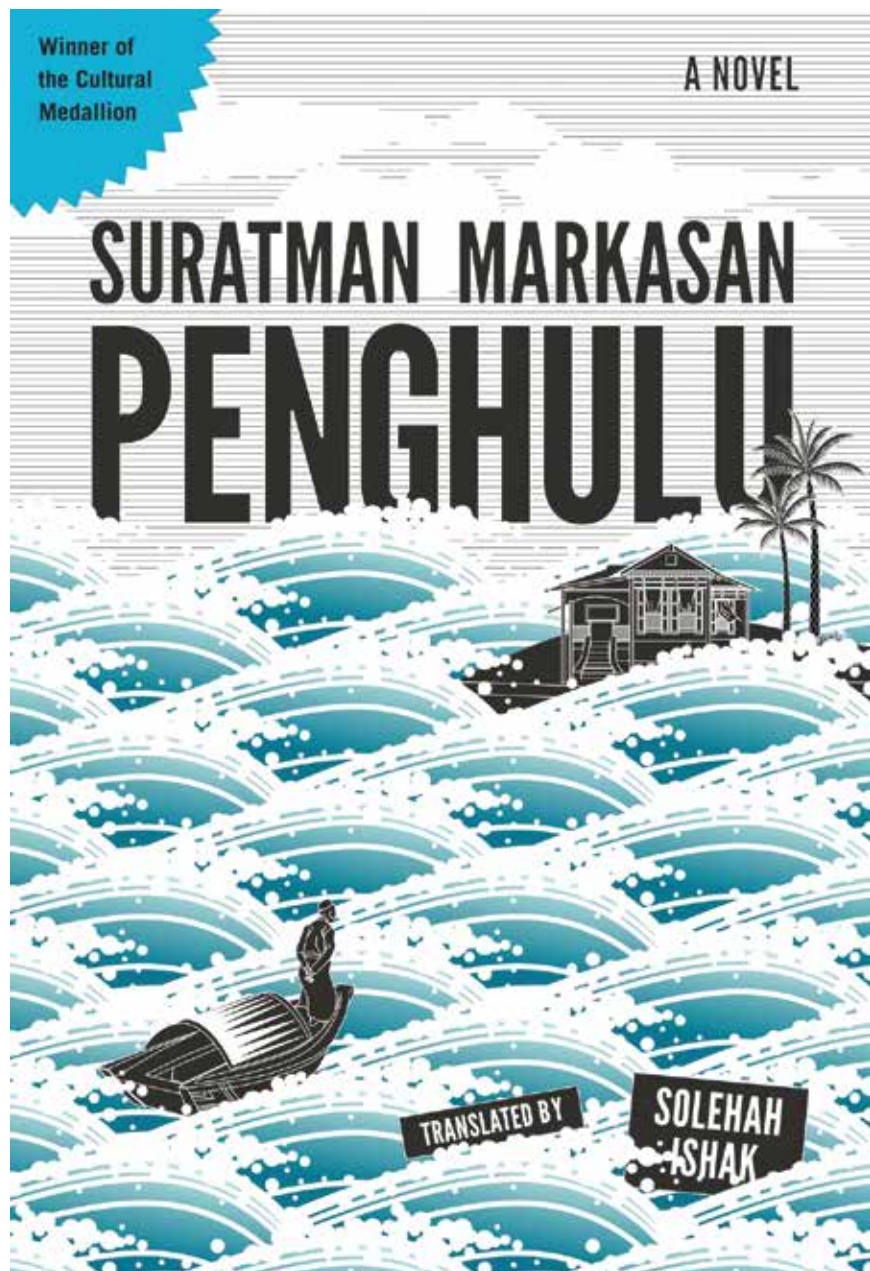
With his move to Australia, Fadhil (seated, in light blue scrubs) is one step closer towards fulfilling his dream of exploring different healthcare systems around the world.

Nur Fiqriya Muhammad Esa is an undergraduate at the Singapore Management University, where she majors in Marketing and Sociology. She enjoys volunteering in her free time and advocates for mental health among other social causes.

Book Review:

THE MALAY COMMUNITY'S POST-INDEPENDENCE EXPERIENCE IN SURATMAN MARKASAN'S *PENGHULU*

BY AHMAD UBADILLAH MOHD KHAIR



The perception of literature has always been diverse in society. While some perceive it as a medium of entertainment and a form of escapism, there are others who view it as a tool. A tool to bring social change and social reform. A tool to plant seeds of empathy, conscience, and humanity. These perceptions influence how people read and study literature differently. Amidst these differences, it is important that we hold on to a pluralistic view of literature so that we are able to extract diverse benefits from it as a source of creativity and criticality. In our current context where literature ranks low as a source of both entertainment and enlightenment, it is best that those who embrace literature engage in constructive discourse with one another.

Surely those who hold on to literature as a catalyst for positive social change will hold on to authors and works that share and belong to that orientation. In such a discourse, we see varied ideas and thoughts on how literature can best assume its role as a positive social catalyst. For example, Kassim Ahmad pondered on certain concepts such as, *Seni untuk Masyarakat (Arts for Society)* and *Seni untuk Seni (Arts for Arts)*. Regarding *Seni Untuk Masyarakat*, he wrote, "... the concept 'Literature for Society' is true, as it is the logical conclusion from the essence of arts and literature that reflect human life."¹

In our local Malay literature, we do not have a shortage of authors whose works fall under the category of *Seni untuk Masyarakat*. We have the *Asas '50*, a literary organisation formed in 1950, whose slogan was *Sastera untuk Masyarakat (Literature for Society)*². Their works engage with the issues facing society, revolving around themes such as identity, emancipation, humanism, and social justice, with the hopes of reforming society, raising awareness, and achieving social progress.

This article is meant to serve as a review of a Malay novel that belongs to this literature culture, *Penghulu (Penghulu Yang Hilang Segala-galanya)*. Published in 1998, it was written by renowned local author, Suratman Markasan, who is a member of *Asas '50*. A prolific poet, essayist, and novelist, he has been awarded the Cultural

Medallion, the S.E.A. Write Award, the *Anugerah Sasterawan Mastera* and the Singapore Literature Prize. His works have spanned decades, engaging with a variety of issues that range from social to religious. It must be mentioned that this article will only discuss briefly the major themes in his novel.

One of the roles literature plays for society is being a form and source of social memory; "the act and will of documenting the cultural experiences which a community has undergone, especially where changing political, social and economic contexts have posed a serious challenge to such memory"³. While we have formal and non-fiction historical documentations, literary mediums provide deeper humane perspectives that go beyond data and statistics. In the case of *Penghulu*, it documents the Malay community's experience in Singapore during a specific context, which is the post-independence period during the 60s and 70s.

Being set in this period, the novel documents the various issues and challenges that the Malay community faced during the post-independence period. One of the themes that feature dominantly in the book is the feeling of loss and lamentations by the community after experiencing displacement from their *kampungs* and villages due to the nation's rapid urbanisation and modernisation following independence. The main character, Pak Suleh, used to be the headman of his island village, Pulau Sebidang. Being relocated to mainland Singapore because of the government's plan to redevelop the island, the novel captures that character's angst and anxiety of being in a new environment that uproots him from the environment that he lived in from a young age, and where his family had lived for generations. It also revolves around the challenges that his family faces such as drug abuse, familial disconnection, structural unemployment, educational opportunities, and leadership vacuum.

Pak Suleh's experience of loss, angst, and anxiety during that period is one that reflects the myriad of cultural and structural problems that the Malay community was facing as a minority

community. For this reason, lamentation is a prominent literary theme in this novel, and one of the constant subjects of lamentation is towards urbanisation. In the novel, urbanisation is seen as a bane for Pak Suleh and his family; his son's drug abuse, his daughter's romantic choices, the deterioration of health, and many others. All were related to the urban context they were forced to live in by the government.

"The mainland is not like our island, Mun. Last time on the island, Mun, there weren't too many outside influences, unlike on the mainland. Here people have gone to English schools, they are no longer like the island Malays, Mun. They're now city folks, mainland people, Singaporeans, so they've forgotten their origins. The cultural traditions and customs of the Malays have been abandoned, for they've seen how their friends behave. The Chinese and Indians do it, and they want to do it too. Their parents have abandoned religion; they too have done the same. That's the reason why, Mun, I really don't like to live on this mainland. We're buried, submerged in the customs and behaviours of city folks, Mun."⁴

While the aforementioned are looked through a collective lens of family and society, the novel also elaborates on the character's personal angst at losing his home. Here, we see a form of character study about an individual who was forcibly removed from a position of power in his village to an ordinary man in an urban setting, stripped of his title and authority. We observe him recalling the heydays of his leadership, where he saw himself as a king beloved and respected by his people. His experience also led him to romanticise village life as well, recalling it as an idyllic life and place, free of troubles and woes.

"Memories of the past slowly invaded his thoughts. He remembered when he was *penghulu*, the village headman, on the island. He was king of that island. Old and young alike called him "Tok". He was the one who settled all fights. For all disputes, he was the mediator. All problems were reported to him and he tried to solve them. And the people always remembered his deeds. If he was sick and did not go out to sea, or if he had things

¹ Ahmad, K. *Dialog Dengan Sasterawan*. Obscura Enterprise, 2019. p. 81

² See: *Asas50*. Available at: <https://www.asas50.org>

³ Alwee, A. I. *Literature and Social Memory: The Case of Suratman Markasan*. In *A Portrait of the Arts in Singapore*, edited by Poon, A., vol. 21. National University of Singapore Society (NUSS), p. 74

⁴ Markasan, S. *The Penghulu*. [translated by Ishak, S.] Epigram Books, 2012, p. 21

to do on the mainland, they would give him his share, such a large amount of fish, crabs and other types of seafood that he would not be able to finish everything for the next two or three days. Oh! How easy it was for people with power, he thought.”⁵

While phenomena such as urbanisation and modernisation were identified as external and structural impediments, the novel does not shy away from engaging with the internal issues that lie within the Malay community. One example would be the community’s religious understanding which the author believes to be erroneous. In several instances, the novel incorporates religious themes based on Quranic verses, while also emphasising the importance of reading the Quran and understanding its interpretations.

“Just look at the people who say that Islam is their religion. They’re always going to the mosque, but they practise wastage, for example, during wedding feasts. They invite a lot of people and the bride and groom change dresses seven times during the wedding ceremony, why, isn’t that wastage? They all know that wastage is Satan’s game, but they still do it. And then, with all the things forbidden by God, they lump everything together to become one. A wedding witnessed by a huge crowd of people who are not related to one another, according to Ustaz Lokman, should not take place. The male and female guests are all mixed together. What’s worse is that there are those who have the kuda kepang, or hobby horse, performance to celebrate their wedding feast. Wasn’t that clearly stated by the religious council to be against religion, a bidaah, and forbidden by the religious adviser, but still they ignore it all and continue to do it.”⁶

Another major theme in the novel would be its criticality towards authority and leadership, specifically the community’s political and religious leaders. It underlines how certain leaders would contradict themselves, while not aligning with the tenets and principles of Islam. It also highlights the fixation on power and authority roles, to the point that their ambition takes precedence over the welfare of others.

“That’s you, always thinking of yourself first and not about the fate of others.”

“Don’t just accuse me, Lamit!”

“Why not? Last time when Sohrah went missing, you didn’t allow us to report the matter to the police because you said that you’d look for Sohrah. But finally Sohrah came back home by herself in a rather sorry state. I know why you didn’t want the incident to be reported to the police. You were afraid that it would be leaked to the press, and when it was reported in the newspapers, your chances of becoming an MP would be considerably reduced!”

“It’s easy for you to talk, but do you know what lies behind it all, Lamit?”

“It’s all so very clear, Bang. You place more importance on your own career than on the fate of the family. This case is yet more proof.”⁷

Upon observation, we find that the themes in *Penghulu*, although localised in context, reflect the general tenor of post-independence regional (ASEAN) and global literature (Global South). Despite hailing from different countries and regions, we see that the major themes mentioned in *Penghulu*, such as the after-effects of colonialism, the impact of urbanisation, the structural barriers towards social and economic progress, the tensions between community and state, criticality towards authority and leadership, are featured in numerous other works. It displays the universal perception of literature as a catalyst for social reform and progress. With the increasing efforts of translating literary works from non-English languages, such as *Penghulu*, we are able to appreciate the common themes that are found in works from this period, despite the differences in contexts. These works should be deemed as sources of inspiration for our criticality and creativity, while also tying ourselves with the larger humanity.

The awareness of these themes and the interconnection with the wider region and globe reinforces the role that literature can be a tool for social memory. It should serve as a reminder about the relevance and importance of literature. In our modern and fast-changing environment, the book reminds society about the origins of our

predicaments and the strides we have made towards progress, preserving the community’s history and experiences in words and pages in a way that no other medium is able to capture. For the young generation, it roots them in the community, engaging them with the community’s past that would allow them to better appreciate and understand their current context. ■

Ahmad Ubaidillah Mohd Khair is currently a Research Analyst at the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). He holds an Islamic Jurisprudence degree from Yarmouk University, Jordan. His research interests are literature discourse and sociology of religion. He has also written for other platforms such as Muslim.sg, Wasat Online, and BeritaMediacorp.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 1-2

⁶ Ibid, pp. 113-114

⁷ Ibid, p. 151



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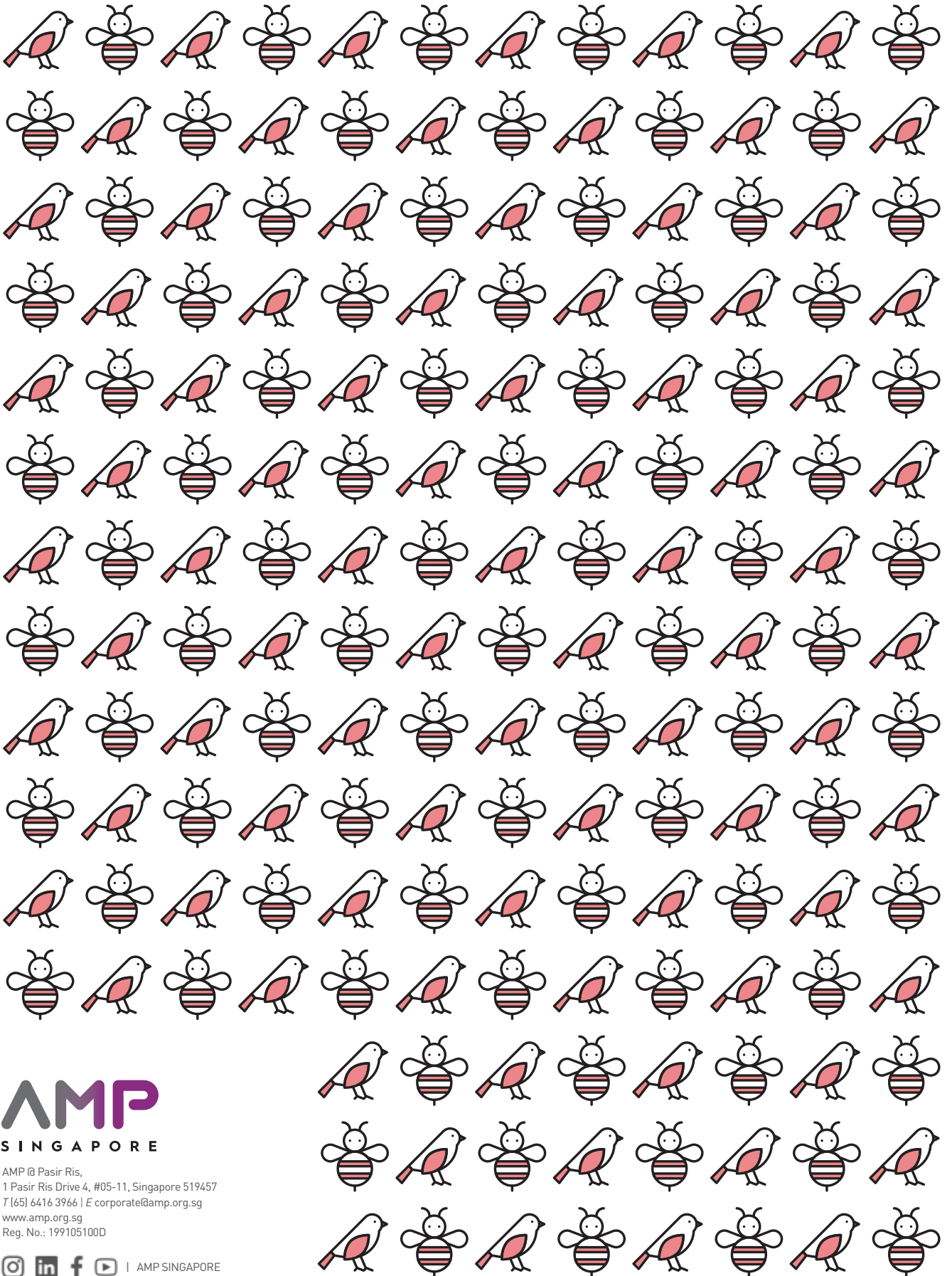
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