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A Singaporean Peek into Navigating Islam in the Digital Age

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The Karyawan is a publication of AMP Singapore. It is published in association with our research subsidiary, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs.

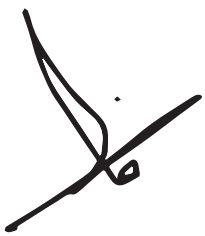
FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In this issue of The Karyawan, we look at how we navigate religious knowledge in today's digital age. As highlighted by Nur Izzatie Adnan in her article on *Page 13*, the accessibility of information online has made it easier than ever to seek knowledge and guidance on Islamic teachings. From online classes to engaging social media content, the digital sphere offers immense potential for learning and connection.

However, this abundance of information also necessitates discernment. While traditional institutions and accredited *asatizahs* continue to play a vital role, there are also independent content creators whose deep knowledge, credibility, and sincere efforts have enriched the dissemination of Islamic teachings. It is essential for us to evaluate sources based on their alignment with sound Islamic principles and their commitment to authenticity, regardless of their institutional affiliations.

This issue also marks a significant milestone as the final print edition of The Karyawan. Since its inception, this publication has provided a platform for critical discussions and community engagement. Moving forward, we are excited to announce the launch of the revamped karyawan.sg in the second quarter of 2025. The new website will offer readers an enhanced digital experience, ensuring that the conversations and insights we value continue to thrive in an interactive and accessible format.

Thank you for your unwavering support, and we look forward to welcoming you to **karyawan.sg**!



FATHURRAHMAN DAWOED
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The Hidden Burden: Understanding and Addressing Caregiver Burnout in Singapore

BY DINAH SYAZA TAN

Caregiving is a vital yet often under-appreciated responsibility, shouldered by countless individuals worldwide who care for aging parents, disabled children, or chronically ill loved ones. While caregivers play an indispensable role in ensuring the well-being of those they care for, this duty often comes at a profound personal cost: caregiver burnout.

Defined as a state of chronic emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion, caregiver burnout stems from the relentless demands of caregiving, compounded by the neglect of self-care. Unlike fleeting stress, burnout is deeply entrenched, eroding caregivers' resilience and compromising the quality of care provided.

Burnout results from the cumulative stress of managing medications, providing emotional support, handling household duties, and financial pressures. These challenges are particularly acute in informal caregiving settings, where caregivers – typically family members – navigate their responsibilities without formal training, institutional support, or adequate resources. The lack of protection, such as financial aid, respite services, or structured support systems, exacerbates the severity of burnout for informal caregivers, leaving them particularly vulnerable. This essay delves into the hidden severity of caregiver burnout, its risk factors and consequences, with a focus on Singapore's unique caregiving landscape, and explores strategies for fostering a sustainable caregiving ecosystem.

THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF CAREGIVER BURNOUT

Caregiver burnout is a pressing but often overlooked issue that arises from a complex interplay of emotional, physical, social, and financial stressors. While caregiving is often motivated by love and responsibility, its challenges can become overwhelming, particularly when caregivers lack adequate support systems or coping strategies. In Singapore, these challenges are amplified by cultural expectations, high living costs, and limited mental health resources, creating a cycle in which stressors and outcomes reinforce each other, perpetuating burnout.

EMOTIONAL STRAIN AND ROLE OVERLOAD

At the core of caregiver burnout is the emotional strain caregivers face as they navigate their demanding roles. Witnessing the progressive decline of a loved one, especially in cases of dementia or terminal illnesses, leads to anticipatory grief – a profound sense of loss even

before the care recipient has passed away[1]. Prolonged stress increases the risk of mental health conditions such as depression[2] and anxiety.

In Singapore, caregiving is often viewed as a familial duty, particularly for women, placing intense social pressure on caregivers to fulfill their roles without complaint. Feelings of guilt frequently arise from unrealistic expectations of perfect caregiving, exacerbated by external judgment from family members, healthcare professionals, or society. This guilt is compounded by cultural stigma surrounding professional caregiving services or mental health support, leaving caregivers to shoulder these burdens alone.

Over time, many caregivers lose their sense of personal identity. As caregiving responsibilities consume their lives, their own aspirations, social connections, and hobbies fall by the wayside. This sense of "losing one's self" creates a vicious cycle: the more caregivers pour themselves into their roles, the more isolated and unfulfilled they feel, deepening their stress and frustration.

PHYSICAL FATIGUE AND HEALTH NEGLECT

Caregiving is not just emotionally demanding – it is also physically exhausting. Tasks such as assisting with mobility, managing medications, and attending to the care recipient's daily needs require constant effort[3]. Many caregivers are on call 24/7, leading to chronic sleep deprivation, which weakens the immune system and increases susceptibility to illness. Increased stress experienced by caregivers, rather than caregiving itself, raised the mortality risk in elderly women, with caregivers who were not stressed having a lower mortality risk than non-caregivers[4]. Studies have linked chronic stress from caregiving to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, hypertension and metabolic disorders[5].

In Singapore, the high cost of living compounds this problem. While government subsidies exist, professional caregiving remains prohibitively expensive for many families. As a result, caregivers often bear the full burden of care, sacrificing their own health and well-being. Neglecting self-care – such as exercise, nutritious meals, and regular health check-ups – further increases the risk of chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes. This physical deterioration can then act as a risk factor, making caregiving duties even more challenging.

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND RELATIONSHIP STRAIN

Social isolation is both a consequence and a perpetuator of caregiver burnout. Many caregivers find themselves withdrawing from friends and family to focus on caregiving responsibilities. Over time, this withdrawal can lead to emotional loneliness, which exacerbates feelings of despair and hopelessness. Unfortunately, society often fails to recognise the isolated nature of caregiving. There is a pervasive assumption that caregiving is a private matter, confined to the family. This societal attitude contributes to a lack of community-level support systems, leaving caregivers to fend for themselves. Even within families, caregiving responsibilities might be unevenly distributed, with one member bearing the brunt of the burden. This inequity can lead to resentment and conflict, further straining relationships.

In Singapore, the lack of accessible mental health resources tailored to caregivers compounds these difficulties. While some programmes and grants exist, the stigma around seeking mental health support discourages caregivers from using them, further reinforcing feelings of isolation and distress. Without external support or understanding, caregivers are left to navigate their struggles alone, deepening their isolation and emotional distress.

FINANCIAL BURDEN

The financial challenges of caregiving are significant and often long-term. Many caregivers reduce their working hours, take unpaid leave, or leave their jobs entirely to fulfill their caregiving duties. This loss of income, coupled with the rising costs of medical care, home adaptations, and caregiving equipment, creates long-term financial insecurity.

In Singapore, government grants alleviate some costs, but out-of-pocket expenses for home-based services, medications, and assistive devices remain high. Professional caregiving services, such as hiring a domestic helper or using respite care, are often unaffordable or inefficient due to the high amount of administrative work needed, leaving caregivers trapped in their roles without reprieve. For those supporting additional dependants, such as children or elderly parents, the financial strain becomes nearly insurmountable. This financial stress adds another layer to the caregiver's emotional burden, creating a cycle of anxiety and burnout.

THE OVERLOOKED NATURE OF CAREGIVER BURNOUT IN SOCIETY

Despite its severity, caregiver burnout often goes unrecognised and unaddressed. Societal perceptions of caregiving as a private, family-bound duty contribute significantly to this issue. The long-term nature of caregiving also makes burnout difficult to identify; caregivers often normalise their stress and exhaustion, dismissing it as part of their role. Caregivers are frequently expected to bear their responsibilities without complaint, and seeking help may be viewed as a sign of weakness or failure.

Moreover, caregiving is frequently underappreciated in policymaking and healthcare systems. In many communities, including Singapore, public awareness campaigns about caregiver burnout are limited, and mental health services tailored to caregivers remain underdeveloped. These gaps highlight a societal blind spot: while caregivers are essential to the well-being of their loved ones and the sustainability of healthcare systems, their needs are often overlooked.

1 Sweeting, H. N., & Gilhooly, M. L. (1990). Anticipatory grief: A review. *Social Science & Medicine, 30*(10), 1073–1080. https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(90)90293-2

2 Drinka, T. J. K., Smith, J. C., & Drinka, P. J. (1987). Correlates of depression and burden for informal caregivers of patients in a geriatrics referral clinic. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, 35*(6), 522–525. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-5415.1987.tb01398.x

3 Pearlin, L. I., Mullan, J. T., Semple, S. J., & Skaff, M. M. (1990). Caregiving and the stress Process: An overview of concepts and their measures. *The Gerontologist, 30*(5), 583–594. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/30.5.583

4 Fredman, L., Cauley, J. A., Hochberg, M., Ensrud, K. E., & Doros, G. (2010). Mortality Associated with Caregiving, General Stress, and Caregiving-Related Stress in Elderly Women: Results of Caregiver-Study of Osteoporotic Fractures. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, 58*(5), 937–943. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-5415.2010.02808.x

5 Ahn, S., Esquivel, J. H., Davis, E. M., Logan, J. G., & Chung, M. L. (2021). Cardiovascular Disease Incidence and Risk in Family Caregivers of Adults With Chronic Conditions. *The Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing, 37*(3), E47–E60. https://doi.org/10.1097/jcn.0000000000000816

Even within families, caregivers may face a lack of understanding or support. Non-primary caregivers may underestimate the intensity of the caregiving role, dismissing burnout as exaggerated or self-inflicted. This lack of empathy can exacerbate feelings of resentment and alienation, deepening the caregiver's sense of being undervalued and unsupported.

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: IMPACT OF CAREGIVER BURNOUT ON FAMILY DYNAMICS

Caregiver burnout is not just an individual struggle – it reverberates through the family unit, creating a ripple effect that can strain relationships and disrupt family harmony. Conflicts in caregiving families typically arise from three key dimensions[6]. First, disagreements about the care recipient's condition can lead to tension over its severity and management. Second, disputes over the involvement of other family members often create resentment due to unequal attention and effort. Lastly, lack of recognition for the caregiver's role can lead to frustration and feelings of being undervalued. While these dimensions are interrelated, conflicts directly involving the caregiver tend to cause the most emotional distress and strain family relationships.

Primary caregivers frequently bear the brunt of caregiving duties, feeling isolated and undervalued, which amplifies their frustration and fosters a sense of emotional disconnection. This emotional burden often translates into guilt, as caregivers wrestle with feelings of inadequacy or question whether they are doing enough for their loved ones. These conflicting emotions make it difficult for them to seek help or set boundaries, perpetuating their exhaustion. The lack of shared responsibility isolates them, depriving them of emotional support, and may result in suppressed emotions that contribute to anxiety and depression. When a caregiver experiences burnout, the quality of care they provide inevitably suffers[7]. The overwhelming stress and exhaustion lead to neglect, medical errors, and emotional detachment, which can leave the care recipient feeling neglected or unsafe. As the caregiver's ability to offer attentive care diminishes, this fuels a cycle of frustration and guilt, deepening their burnout and worsening the care environment for both the caregiver and the recipient.

Left unchecked, this cycle perpetuates itself, deteriorating both the caregiver's mental health and the overall harmony of the family. Open communication is the first step – families must address the "elephant in the room" by openly discussing the challenges of caregiving and equitably distributing responsibilities. Support from extended family, community resources, and professional services can provide much-needed relief and validation for caregivers. Without such interventions, the cycle of burnout and strained family dynamics will continue to escalate, compounding its toll on everyone involved.

COPING STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING AND MANAGING BURNOUT

To prevent and manage burnout, caregivers must prioritise self-care and utilise available resources. Professional support from therapists, support groups, or respite care programmes like SG Enable's services can offer emotional relief and practical assistance. The Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) offers support for caregiving through services such as caregiver training, financial assistance, and access to various care options, aimed at enhancing the well-being of both caregivers and those they care for in Singapore. Caregivers Training Grant (CTG) is a $200 annual subsidy that lets caregivers of seniors attend training and learn how to better care for their loved ones, while looking after their own well-being[8]. Home Caregiving Grant (HCG) by AIC provides a cash payout each month to families who are caring for their loved ones with lasting moderate disabilities, to ease the providing of care at home[9]. This aims to acknowledge caregivers' contributions while also decreasing caregiving costs by offering more assistance to those with lower incomes. Additionally, technological solutions such as health monitoring devices and care coordination apps can streamline caregiving tasks and reduce the overall burden.

CONCLUSION

Caregiver burnout is a multifaceted issue, deeply entrenched in emotional, physical, and societal challenges. In Singapore, the cultural expectation of caregiving as a familial duty, combined with high living costs and limited mental health resources, creates an environment where caregivers struggle to thrive. Without intervention, caregivers face a relentless cycle of emotional, physical, and financial exhaustion, jeopardising their health and the quality of care they provide. Addressing these challenges requires a collective effort from families, communities, and policymakers to create sustainable support systems that prioritise caregiver well-being. Shifting from silent endurance to shared responsibility and empathy can transform caregiving into a collective act of love, reducing isolation and strengthening family resilience. With proactive strategies such as self-care, professional support, and policy changes, the cycle of burnout can be disrupted. ■

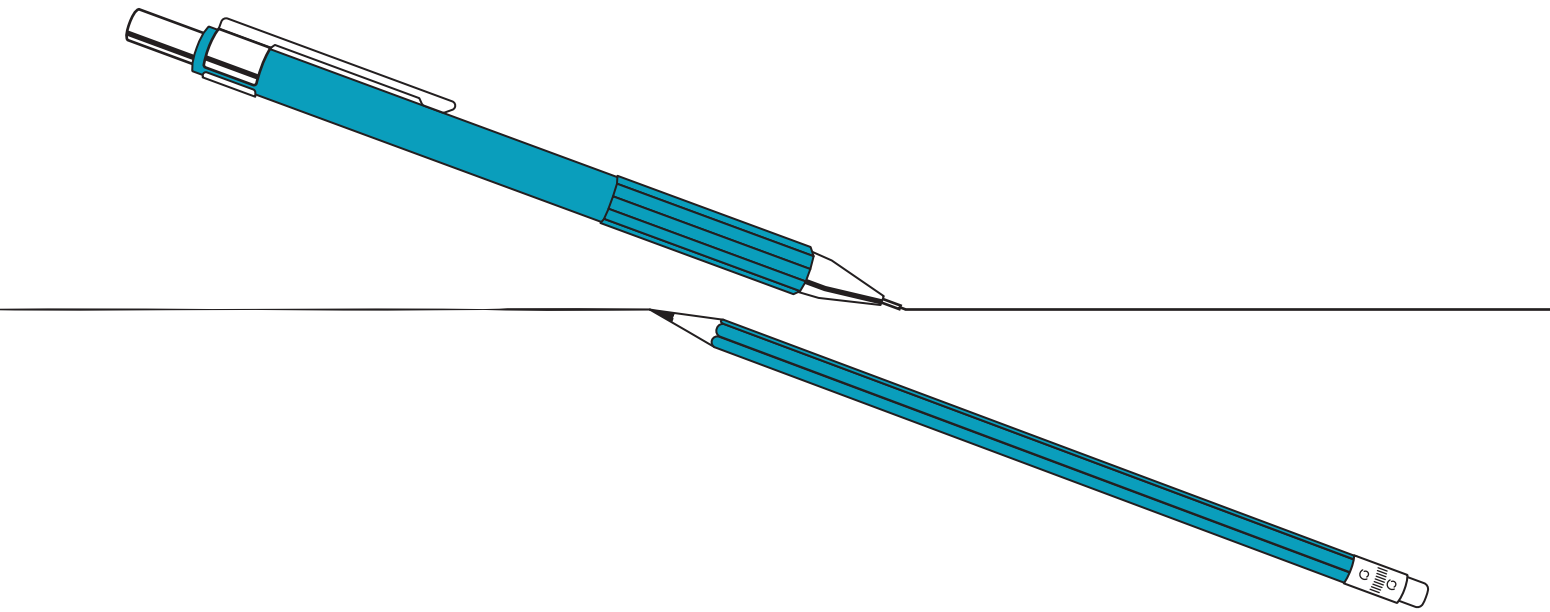
This article is also available on karyawan.sg

Dinah Syaza Tan is currently in her final year of undergraduate study at Singapore Management University, majoring in Psychology with a second major in Health Economics and Management. Her interest lies in understanding individuals and their impact on the community and society at large.

[6] Pearlin, L. I., Mullan, J. T., Semple, S. J., & Skaff, M. M. (1990). Caregiving and the stress Process: An overview of concepts and their measures. *The Gerontologist, 30*(5), 583–594. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/30.5.583
[7] Smith, G. R., Williamson, G. M., Miller, L. S., & Schulz, R. (2011). Depression and quality of informal care: A longitudinal investigation of caregiving stressors. *Psychology and Aging, 26*(3), 584–591. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022263
[8] Agency for Integrated Care. (2024a, August 2). Caregivers Training Grant (CTG) | AIC. https://www.aic.sg/financial-assistance/caregivers-training-grant-ctg/
[9] Agency for Integrated Care. (2024b, November 21). Home Caregiving Grant (HCG) | AIC Singapore. https://www.aic.sg/financial-assistance/home-caregiving-grant-hcg/

THE JC-ITE DICHOTOMY: How Educational Hierarchies Perpetuate the Divide Within

BY SHERLITA ALMEYRA SHERHAN



Singapore's education system has undergone significant transformations over the years, aiming to provide equal opportunities for all students. In 2024, our secondary schools were introduced to the subject-based banding system (G1, G2, G3). While this move towards mixed-ability classrooms is a commendable step, it remains to be seen whether it will truly address the deep-rooted social and academic divisions that exist due to our education system.

At the heart of the issue lies the ultimate destination for students: Junior College (JC), Polytechnic (Poly), or Institute of Technical Education (ITE). This tripartite division, while seemingly created with good intentions, perpetuates a hierarchical structure that privileges academic excellence over other forms of intelligence and talent.

Our Malay community is not immune to the negative impacts of these educational divisions. We often find ourselves navigating a complex social and educational landscape where Malay students are disproportionately overrepresented in ITEs and underrepresented in JCs.

The hierarchy in Singapore's education system where JCs are seen as the "first choice" and ITEs as the "last choice" profoundly shapes the experiences and perceptions of our Malay students. How does this influence their sense of success and failure, and what impact does this have on our Malay students' social identity? In what ways do the societal perceptions of academic success shape the experiences of Malay students in ITE and JC, and what are the challenges faced because of this?

In 2016, Sanwari's thesis "*I'm Not That Kind of Malay*," found that Malay youths

adopted strategies such as defensive othering and social distancing as adaptive responses. These behaviours, in turn, reinforced in-group discrimination[1]. With this thesis conducted 8 years ago, it is important to explore whether such phenomena still exist within the Malay community, given Singapore's evolving educational landscape.

Yasmin, National Junior College alumna, added:

> "I only had ITE friends after I left NJ and worked in F&B. I refrain from saying where I am from to blend in because it is easier to talk to them without that barrier. Like they know me as myself and not a '*budak pandai* (smart kid) *from JC*."

Khalis, an ITE College West student, expressed:

> "I have met with Malay students from JC. Personally, I feel like they lack social skills and some of them think that they are better than students from ITE."

Amirah, an ITE College East student, shared her observations:

> "I know of some Malay ITE students who come from low-income and/or broken families that have a lot of *riak* (arrogance in malay) and are rowdy because they think that everyone hates them. So, when they meet JC Malays, they think that the JC students think that they are better than them. I think JC students would have a hard time interacting with these ITE Malays because they will always think that the JC students think lowly of them."

Nurin, Raffles Institution alumna, shared her experience:

> "I have friends that I've known since primary school who are super *mat* and *minah* – not in a bad way. The way they speak is just very different from my JC friends. They speak very *kasar* (coarsely), and no matter what I do, whenever I interact with friends from ITE, they always say that I am too proper, even though I feel that I am matching their energy. Yes, there are some JC students who do feel better and are pretentious, but from my own interactions, the moment people find out I am from JC, they just don't want to talk to me anymore, and I get singled out."

From the excerpts above, we can see that there exists this 'invisible wall' between our Malay JC and ITE students, solely because they are from different schools. But, how and why exactly does this happen?

The perception of "better-than-thou" attitudes of JC students creates an environment where interactions are charged with underlying assumptions and judgments. Some ITE students coming from a background that is often looked down upon, are primed to view JC students as dismissive, fostering a defensive attitude that can perpetuate further divides. On the other hand, JC students, who find themselves thrust into environments where they are the minority, often adopt a sense of 'otherness' because of their unfamiliarity with their peers' backgrounds and experiences.

This division, even if unintentional, becomes a powerful force in reinforcing the separation between ITE and JC students. The 'invisible wall' goes beyond academic prestige; it is also about cultural and social capital.

Due to their minority status within their cohort, Malay JC students are placed in an atypical position.

Aliya, Yishun-Innova Junior College alumna, shared:

> "I've received a lot of backhanded compliments before. During orientation, I was the only Malay. '*Wah you Malay you enter JC?*' In my head, I thought, '*Racist pe. I enter JC my problem la sia*'. But I think other races just don't see many Malays in JCs so they view us as rare crystals."

Nurin expressed:

> "Being a Malay/Muslim surrounded predominantly by non-Malay/Muslim students often makes me feel like a burden. Like when we want to hang out, they must keep in mind what I can or cannot eat. This was quite challenging for me because I did not want to be a burden to my friends."

Yasmin added:

> "I discovered class disparity in JC. When we had to do projects, I had to do projects at my friends' houses, and it's always landed (property) or condo. Meanwhile, the people who usually live in HDBs are those from my race – the Malays."

These experiences illustrate the sense of discomfort and alienation that many Malay students feel when placed in a predominantly non-Malay/Muslim environment, such as in many of Singapore's JCs. The nuances of cultural and religious differences — such as dietary restrictions — may seem trivial, but they can reinforce feelings of being an outsider. For many Malay students, these minor obstacles are constant reminders of their minority status within the social hierarchy of the school.

It's essential to highlight that these challenges are not just personal inconveniences; they represent the deep-seated realities of class and ethnic divisions. For Malay students, who are disproportionately represented in lower-income housing and have lower average levels of academic attainment, these barriers act as constant reminders of the broader societal structures that shape their educational opportunities and social interactions.

On the other hand, Malay students in ITEs find an environment where their social and cultural capital is more recognised and appreciated. For these students, ITE offers a space where they can connect with peers who share similar backgrounds, cultural experiences, and

[1] Sanwari, F. N. (2016). "I'm not that kind of Malay": negotiating Malay identity in Singapore. *Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

worldviews. As a result, ITE becomes a place of comfort and belonging.

Khalis shared how these disparities are viewed from the other side:

> "Honestly, ITE has been really fun because I get to mix with people of my own race."

Batrisya, ITE College East alumna, added:

> "Being a Malay student in ITE allowed me to easily connect with a lot of people within the Malay community. I feel that being Malay gave me an advantage in ITE in terms of forming friendships and connections because the community is close-knit, and there's a sense of familiarity and shared experiences."

This sense of belonging and ease in connecting with peers is a significant part of the ITE experience for many Malay students. In an environment where shared cultural values and experiences are the norm, students feel a sense of belonging, not just academically, but socially and culturally as well. In turn, this confidence can have a positive impact on their overall experience. Free from the pressure of fitting in, the ITE environment feels more like a second home to Malay students rather than just an institution for learning.

In contrast, Malay students in JCs often struggle with a sense of belonging, as they find themselves as the minority population. As Sanwari notes, patterns in Malay youths' social experiences, both in school and in the workplace, shape their perceptions of themselves and other Malays. They internalise negative stereotypes and often consciously (or unconsciously) resist those notions in an effort to assert their own identities and challenge the assumptions placed on them[2]. The lack of representation of Malays in JC can further deepen this sense of disconnection, leading most to become more inclined to engage in cultural activities to assert their identity and find a space where they feel comfortable.

Nurin expressed:

> "My happiest moments are always with the Malay Language and Literature (MLL)/Malay Language Elective Programme (MLEP) stuff. I really look forward to it. I don't even know what I would do without it, not going to lie."

On a similar note, Aliya shared:

> "Being a Malay in JC made me value the fact that I am Malay. Like since there were so few Malays, I decided to join the Malay Cultural Society (MCS) to sort of contribute to the population. I ended up being very involved and it made me appreciate my culture more."

While engaging in cultural activities provides a sense of belonging, it also underscores the deeper challenges Malay students face due to the racial and cultural dynamics within these institutions.

According to Solorzano et al. , while 'microaggressions' may seem harmless and expressed without overt malicious intent, they reflect stereotypes and beliefs that reaffirm the subordinate position of those on the receiving end[3]. In Sanwari's thesis, Malay youths had been confronted time and time again with others' negative perceptions of their abilities and intellect for they are judged not based on their individual self, but on their race. These experiences of having their subordinate social position reinforced have negative impacts on their self-esteem, aspirations and achievements[4].

The perception that ITE students are academically less capable while JC students are academically elite only deepens the divide between the two educational pathways. This binary view oversimplifies the diverse experiences and abilities of students within each system. It fails to acknowledge that both groups consist of individuals with unique strengths, challenges and aspirations. Such generalisations not only reinforce social hierarchies but also limit the potential of students by imposing labels that don't account for their varied academic journeys and personal circumstances.

Amirah explained:

> "Online, the public sees Malay ITE students *hisap rokok* (smoke cigarettes), wrecking things in the toilet or setting things on fire. It's a bad image, and when I reveal myself as an ITE student, they think of me badly. I get told like '*oh typical Malay, take N Levels only,*' and it makes me feel embarrassed. Some employers also don't want ITE students because of our reputation."

Iman, a student at ITE College Central, shared:

> "I've been told that we lack discipline and don't have a future. But like some Malays aren't keen on studying because they're not interested so they doze off in class or just don't go to school. But there are also those who really like their course, so they pay a lot of attention and they have a high GPA, you know?"

Yasmin shared a contrasting perspective:

> "The Malay community views us JC students as the cream of the crop. They automatically assume we will go somewhere, and it puts unnecessary pressure on us to get a good job and uplift the community. We not only have to excel in academics but outside of academics as well. We must take up leadership roles, etc. I mean it's good that we look outside of academics but there is this pressure to perform holistically because you are a Malay in JC and for a teenager, it's a lot. It doesn't allow you to look at other forms of success either."

Nurin added:

> "I feel pressured because I'm told that it's not easy for a Malay to get to where I am. I am still told to '*Be a*

[2] Ibid
[3] Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *Journal of Negro Education*, 60-73.
[4] Sanwari, F. N. (2016). "I'm not that kind of Malay": negotiating Malay identity in Singapore. *Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

doctor! Be a lawyer!' even though I have made it clear that I am not interested in those fields. Being Malay in JC seems like a niche and others will tell you that '*This is a big achievement! You cannot waste this opportunity; you have to make it big!*'"

Stereotypes about ITE and JC students often stem from unfounded assumptions. ITE students face prejudice due to stereotypes that unfairly label them. These misconceptions overlook the diverse talents, aspirations, and potential that the ITE students possess. The stigma, reinforced by the media and social narratives, can undermine their self-esteem and ambitions, leaving many feeling undervalued. JC students, on the other hand, are pressured to excel holistically to serve as role models for their community. Being seen as the "exception" within their community, their journeys are made to be even more challenging as they face heightened expectations.

As a result, both ITE and JC students are trapped in a cycle of misunderstanding, where their individual struggles and achievements are overshadowed by stereotypical assumptions that limit their opportunities and reinforce social divisions.

We must reflect on how these stereotypes, reinforced by societal structures and biases, shape the experiences of Malay students in Singapore's educational system. As discussed by Aziz, the habitus concept – originally introduced by Pierre Bourdieu – suggests that our thoughts, values, beliefs, and actions are deeply influenced by the social environment in which we are immersed. This concept is relevant when considering the divide between ITE and JC students[5]. It is not only the educational pathways that shape their identities but also the societal pressures and stereotypes that surround them, often dictating their perceived worth and place within the community.

Nurin shared:

> "Relatives like to use JC students as "bragging rights" and this makes others think that I '*berlagak bagus* (act all high and mighty)' but I didn't say or do anything. It's my relatives that show off."

The above experience sheds light on how the community often elevates JC students, framing them as symbols of success. This pedestal, however, comes with a cost, as it perpetuates the stereotype that JC students are arrogant, even when these perceptions stem more from society's views than from the students' own actions.

Amirah also commented:

> "There is this whole thing about how JC students should teach ITE students. I think we should see ourselves as one Malay community. I don't understand why it is always that ITE students must learn from JC students. I think if we are given the chance to feel like we are on-par with each other then ITE and JC students can connect more easily."

This highlights the common assumption that JC students are positioned as the 'better' role models. The idea of mutual learning and understanding taking place in the Malay community challenges this hierarchical thinking. Perhaps if students from different educational backgrounds are given more opportunities to connect on common ground, they can foster more empathy and support for one another.

This brings us to a crucial question: what does creating a hierarchy between ITE and JC students really achieve? Is it productive to impose this ranking, suggesting that one group is inherently 'better' than the other simply because JCs are often seen as the 'first choice' and ITEs as the 'last resort? After all, the academic experiences and challenges faced by students in these two pathways appear to be covering the same themes – albeit in different contexts.

Rather than perpetuating divides, it's time we tear down the walls between ITE and JC students and create spaces where they can truly learn from one another. Imagine a future where students from both paths come together – not just to share knowledge, but to challenge stereotypes, build empathy, and grow collectively. Let's advocate for programmes that break away from the hierarchy, encouraging collaboration, shared goals, and mutual respect. In doing so, we can nurture a generation that values diverse talents and supports each other, paving the way for a more united and resilient Malay community. ■

All quotes in this article are attributed to individuals using pseudonyms to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality.

This article is also available on karyawan.sg

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[5] Aziz, N. (2009) Malay Stereotypes: Acceptance and Rejection in the Malay Community. *National University of Singapore, Singapore*

MOSQUES, A CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

BY SHARIFAH INSHIRAH ALJUNIED

MONUMENT OF HOPE

In an era characterised by rapid technological advancements and continual evolution of competencies to navigate the complexities of the modern world, the mosque has served as an enduring sanctuary of faith and healing. This space has served all groups; both young and old, to seek refuge, reconnect and immerse in their intrinsic nature; the Fitrah, in seeking the path of spiritual renewal to Allah SWT, the Most Gracious and Most Merciful.

The existence of mosques dates back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) during his notable emigration to Madinah. Taking the stance to build a mosque in this new land, the strategic move would allow Muslims to pray, learn and socialise. This strengthened the nascent bond of the Muslim brotherhood between the Muhajirun and the Ansar, leading to a fundamentally strong, sound, confident and religious society. In the annals of Islamic history, successors established new mosques, suited to the waves of time, and the function of mosques expanded into a multitude of innovative structures.

In Singapore, mosques have long served as a monumental symbol of hope and identity for the Muslim community, tracing their significance back to the arrival of Islam on the island. These religious institutions are regarded as irreplaceable treasures, whose destruction would provoke widespread outrage among Muslims across all sects. As such, the mosque functions as a timeless emblem of Islamic identity in the region. The Muslim community in Singapore has faced a range of challenges in preserving and maintaining these mosques, including bureaucratic, administrative, manpower, and resource-related obstacles.

This article aims to clarify the critical importance of mosque-related work and seeks to explore potential areas for improvement, with the goal of fostering an ecosystem of mosque communities that thrive and contribute to the continued success of Muslims in Singapore.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MOSQUES IN SINGAPORE

Singapore's history with mosques is distinctive, shaped by the unique demographic composition of the nation.

As a multicultural and multi-religious society, the establishment and preservation of mosques have been fraught with challenges and compromises, reflecting the broader tension between religious identity and the demands of a secular state. In the early stages of Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), the responsibility of maintaining mosques became a critical concern, particularly as the forces of modernisation began to encroach upon the country. Singapore was no longer the rural, *kampung* (village) environment that it had once been.

With the advent of new leadership and governmental policies, a significant restructuring of religious spaces took place, particularly in the realm of urban redevelopment. The Singaporean government mandated the demolition of several religious institutions, including 11 mosques and 172 temples[1], to make way for modern infrastructure. This policy decision ignited widespread dissent, underscoring the profound sensitivity of religious institutions to their communities. For Singapore's Muslim population, this marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of their relationship with the mosque. What had traditionally been viewed as the modest, communal '*kampung* mosque' gradually transformed into a more bureaucratically structured institution, one that not only required systematic management but also increasingly represented a crucial component of Muslim identity in the modern Singaporean context.

CREATIVE OUTREACH, TO REACH THE MASSES

Mosques in Singapore operate under a governance structure that significantly differs from those in Muslim-majority countries. In contrast to the more traditional and communal management systems prevalent in neighbouring countries, mosques here are characterised by a more centralised, regulated, and systematic approach. This operational model is largely influenced by the distinctive nature of the Singaporean state, which is marked by a strong emphasis on efficiency and performance metrics.

"Here in Singapore, Muslims aim to create *masjids* with the scope and functions reminiscent of *masjids* that existed during the golden days of Islam. Financed entirely from voluntary contributions to the Mosque Building Fund, the *masjids* are run by volunteers who give freely of their time and energy. Such is the commitment and sense of ownership that Muslims have towards their *Masjids*."[2] In the words of President of MUIS, Hj Maarof Salleh, mosques must continuously thrive in a manner that is compatible with the movement of time and context, especially in a country like Singapore. From the early stages of mosque restructuring, administrative and bureaucratic frameworks were introduced to formalise mosque operations, moving beyond the volunteer-driven model that had previously prevailed.

This new structure was crucial, not as an indicator that the governing body (MUIS) was scrutinising mosques, rather, it was to ensure that mosques would consistently produce Islamic programmes to allure the society back to Islamic values. This marked the introduction of roles like Mosque Executive Chairman, District Superintendent, and other specialised positions into the mosque's ecosystem[3], designed to recalibrate the mosque's focus and ensure the delivery of high-quality Islamic programmes.

Though a topic of debate and complexity, there remains a prevalent sentiment, particularly among the youth, that Malay Muslim organisations, including mosques, often perceive or assume that mosque activities are outdated and misaligned with the type of Islam that resonates with their preferences or modern sensibilities. This belief usually stems from those who either are nescient to mosque activities or decide to not partake in them entirely. For this very reason, the dwindling numbers of youths today wanting to partake in mosques activities have become alarming, especially post COVID-19, where many became more acclimated with learning Islam online.

These circumstances underscore the critical importance of having creative and dedicated individuals – staff, board members, and volunteers – who are capable of engaging and attracting more people to the mosques. The objective is not to compete with international institutions or online platforms, but rather for local mosques to serve as tangible embodiments of Islam within the country. The mosque, as a physical sanctuary, holds a unique responsibility to remain a trusted source of Islamic guidance.

Planning bodies must actively seek solutions and strategies tailored to the evolving needs of society as it moves through various cultural and social trends. Mosque personnel should feel empowered to move beyond traditional initiatives that may no longer resonate, adopting more innovative approaches to d*a'wah* (Islamic outreach) and engagement. This call for innovation is not an advocacy for the abandonment of traditional practices, but rather an affirmation that mosques can remain progressive and attuned to contemporary needs, rather than merely replicating programmes that may no longer be as effective.

However, this shift is not without challenges. New approaches may provoke skepticism, particularly among those who fear that adapting to modern contexts might undermine core principles and values – a concern that is, in many respects, valid.

Trailblazing in mosque programmes can be both harmless and, in fact, highly beneficial, provided it is well-managed and remains consistent with Islamic values and fundamental ethical principles. The community, in general, should be open to embracing new approaches to mosque programming, particularly in light of the declining engagement among youth, both in terms of mosque attendance and broader interest in religion. Such innovations are crucial to revitalising the relevance of mosques in contemporary society.

Mosque officers should be up to date with current issues and understand what the current community needs (to which will always be changing through time) rather than being stringent on certain modes and efforts that do not attract the youths nor the seniors. The programmes become dispensable and if done in large amounts,

[1] Saat, N. (2018). Fulfilling the Trust: 50 years of shaping Muslim religious life in Singapore. *World Scientific*, p. 133.
[2] Sapawi, T. (2000). Mosques Guide 2000. *Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS)*, p. 3
[3] Saat, N. (2018). Fulfilling the Trust: 50 years of shaping Muslim religious life in Singapore. *World Scientific*, p. 141

superfluous and ambiguous in their objectives and intended outcomes. This is where all mosques and planning committees should be clear, as to why and how every programme works, and not for mere execution to achieve and reach certain Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Mosques must be ready to learn that some things can be changed to cater to the needs of the current community more grounded and rooted by the sound teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah even if unexplored. This is where the art of listening and reading the community rather than blind execution becomes crucial to uplift the mosques' methodology of *da'wah*.

EMPOWERING THE YOUTHS

Youth play a central role in nation-building, holding the key to shaping the success or decline of the future. Mosques must leverage this potential by adapting and enhancing their activities to engage young people, particularly those who perceive the mosque as dull, unappealing, and primarily for older or more devout individuals. This presents a significant challenge: mosques must strive to create dynamic and inclusive spaces where Singaporean Muslim youth can envision and shape their ideal futures, initiate their own projects, and forge meaningful connections within the mosque community.

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Moreover, Muslim youth should be encouraged to take pride in their Islamic identity and contribute actively to the advancement of their faith. The mosque provides an ideal platform for cultivating an ecosystem of future leaders. In this context, innovative strategies to re-engage youth in mosque activities are crucial, especially in the post-COVID era. While youth groups were once a staple of Mosque life, their influence has waned in the aftermath of the pandemic, underscoring the need for fresh, engaging approaches to revitalise youth participation.

While this remains a continuous challenge, mosques such as Ar-Raudhah Mosque conduct their own sets of youth activities that are fresh and new, such as 'Youth Sleepovers' or 'Bonding Al-Fateh Ar-Raudhah' where youths come together to share and listen to advice from young *asatizah* themselves. This also includes being acquainted with litanies such as the *Ma'thurat*, for them to carry as a habit of their daily lives.[4] Apart from direct family members and parents, mosques should aim to create an impact on the spiritual lives of youths. For this reason, mosques in Singapore should take a proactive approach in gathering and analysing data on youth engagement and activism within the mosque, while also implementing comprehensive outreach initiatives to connect with young people who may not have had the privilege of growing up in a religious environment. This is the type of ecosystem we aim to cultivate – one where, amidst the increasing prevalence of secular values, religious values can continue to thrive and retain their significance.

In other non-conventional ways of pulling the crowds to the mosque, Al-Falah Mosque also launched an inaugural programme to attract young parents, called 'Mosque Night with Mom & Dad'. The programme served as a mean to dispel narratives that children cannot have fun in the mosques and to re-educate the community that children may use this space as they freely wish, as much as their parents. The event is fresh and unique, for it creates a space with bouncy castles, games and stations for kids to play, manned by the youths of the mosque, followed by a *Qiyamullail*[5] for parents and children the next morning. This comes to show that unconventional approaches of *da'wah* may spur more people to see the mosques as an inclusive space for all, and not merely a space of prayer.

Bencoolen Mosque also launched its youth study space for youths to utilise the comfortable and conducive space. Such spaces serve as an alternative from other study spaces like cafes and libraries, particularly for Muslim youths, since the mosque would allow for them to pray *jemaah* (in congregation) and perform their religious duties while revising.[6] This effort unconsciously spurs youths to think of prayer as a convenience, since the space itself is connected to the mosque. Like all other efforts, these initiatives come with a price of maintenance. The critique of such efforts often centres on the challenge of

[4] Cue. (2024, October 24). Membangun potensi belia melalui pelbagai program masjid. *Berita Harian*. https://www.beritaharian.sg/singapura/membangun-potensi-belia-pelbagai-program-masjid
[5] *Qiyamullail* is the supererogratory night prayer, performed one third of the night
[6] Yusoff, S. (2024, March 1). Masjid Bencoolen dibuka semula: Hab Belia baharu galak belia pupuk jalinan bermakna dengan masjid. *BERITA Mediacorp*. https://berita.mediacorp.sg/singapura/masjid-bencoolen-dibuka-semula-hab-belia-baharu-galak-belia-pupuk-jalinan-bermakna-dengan-masjid-828736

sustaining and promoting these spaces, ensuring that programmes and initiatives do not remain isolated successes or become redundant, thus undermining their original purpose and resulting in a waste of resources.

In this regard, these efforts, though unique and innovative, allow core values to remain intact while the delivery methods are adapted to meet the needs and contexts of individuals.

TOWARDS AN ADVANCED AND INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY THROUGH THE MOSQUE

It is critical to recognise that mosques must be places of intellectual advancement, particularly in the Islamic sciences. This has long been the tradition of Islamic civilisation, as exemplified by historic mosques such as Masjid An-Nabawi, Qarawiyyin Mosque, and the Alhambra. In an era where social media is both a boon and a bane, mosque officers in Singapore should look to the future, utilising these platforms as an opportunity to develop supplementary online content. This should be supervised by trained *asatizah*, who are typically active within the mosque sector, allowing them to stay updated on new skills and technological trends in social media, ultimately to spread Islam through digital channels.

Taking Yaqeen Institute in the United States as a prime example, along with other Islamic institutions, mosques in Singapore should follow suit by creating creative, impactful content. These initiatives would enhance public trust in Singapore's mosques and demonstrate to both local and international audiences that Singapore's mosques are capable of producing high-quality content comparable to those in the Middle East, the United States, and Southeast Asia.

However, this process is not without challenges, particularly since producing content is an intellectually demanding task. Yet, the long-term benefits for the mosque's image and outreach are significant. One notable example is Assyakirin Mosque, which has successfully created engaging, bite-sized videos in the Malay language discussing Islamic values. These videos have garnered impressive views and high levels of engagement. This trend offers a window of opportunity for mosques to explore new, creative ways to enter the digital realm and build an online presence. Such efforts can also enhance the mosque's credibility, foster greater interest in supporting mosque programmes, and encourage donations. Subconsciously, this form of *da'wah* adds value to the educational mission of the mosque, reaching a wider community through the accessibility of social media, even with simple, bite-sized content.

The people of Singapore's mosques should embrace the digital realm and explore creative, limitless ways to attract patrons, social media users, and donors. By doing so, they can foster a deeper connection to the mosque, inspire contributions, and cultivate a sense of community.

CONCLUSION: MAINTAINING THE PURPOSE

Change is usually easier said than done. Working and carrying the torch is not a simple task as usually deemed to be, especially towards progress and renewal. More importantly, it is a trust conferred by Allah SWT towards his selected servants, in which every act would be questioned on the day of judgement.

The mosque has a unique opportunity – and a responsibility – to go beyond its current efforts in reaching out to both Muslims and non-Muslims. It should actively engage in spreading the teachings of Islam while also showcasing the passion and commitment of Muslims in embodying religious values. These values, timeless and universal, remain relevant across all times and places.

The verse of Allah SWT stresses on the people of the mosque most succinctly yet deep and profound:

> *The mosques of Allah should only be maintained by those who believe in Allah and the Last Day, establish prayer, pay alms-tax, and fear none but Allah. It is right to hope that they will be among the truly guided.*[7]

If this verse would be emulated in its entirety in the context of our mosques here in Singapore, while curating programmes or content, we would reach the zenith of success, and the amelioration of the Muslim community. The goal is that these actions, though modest, will generate a lasting ripple effect that benefits future generations. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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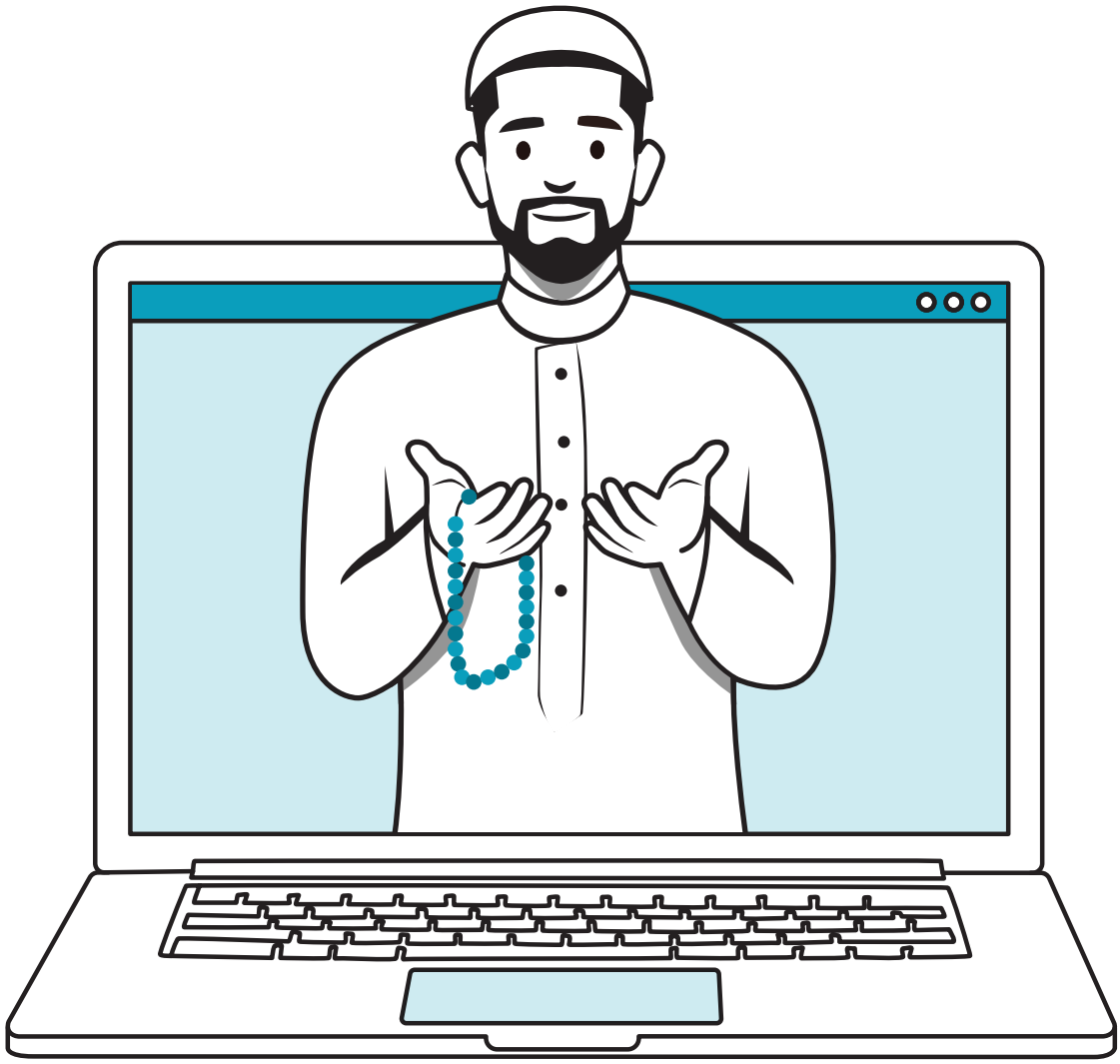
[7] Surah At-Taubah, Verse 18

A Singaporean Peek into Navigating Islam in the Digital Age

BY NUR IZZATIE ADNAN



Contrary to the secularisation theory which posits that the shift to a non-religious belief system would necessarily equate to the decline of the stronghold of religion in our everyday lives, we observe today an increased awareness of religion's vital role in contemporary society. This resurgence, alongside the rise of new media, has challenged the predictions of secularisation theory and prompted academics and religious leaders to closely examine its impact on religious beliefs and practices. As Campbell argues, "One cannot fully understand contemporary religiosity without understanding the traits of religious practice online and how they reflect larger trends in religious beliefs and practices offline"[1]. Campbell is also a champion in this increasingly robust field of study of digital religion, looking at it as a frame for articulating the evolution of religious practice online. Here, she looks at not only how digital media necessitates religious groups to adapt to changing ideas of religious traditions, authority or authenticity, but also to give thought to the contributions that the digital sphere is making to religion itself. How then is this exemplified in the Singaporean Islamic context? This article hence seeks to explore the different ways the rise of this digital space affects how we perceive and understand Islam.

In an era of search engines, the phenomenon of 'Sheikh Google' becomes prominent, where many turn to search engines to answer religious queries. As Ustaz Ridhwan points out, "Social media has led to the decentralisation of authority, including religious authority. Anyone and any channel may be able to gain 'credibility' online by sounding compelling, targeting the right users and being active online."

Despite the ubiquity of the internet in our everyday lives – with close to 99% of resident households in Singapore having internet access (according to the 2023 Singapore Digital Society Report)[2] – the intersection between religion and the digital space has yet to be thoroughly explored in the Singaporean context. In the academic space at least, the limited studies on the Islamic cyberspace in Singapore tend to focus on niches such as how the digital space affects Singaporean women, or the influence of media on Singaporean Muslim's perceptions of cultured meat. The former two studies had a rather modest sample size, while the latter garnered 658 survey respondents. In 2008, a study of similar sample size was conducted regarding the types of religious activities Muslim users engage in on the internet. Though limited in number, these studies have been very valuable in adding to the corpus of knowledge regarding the intersection of Islam and the digital space.

There are also commentaries and articles that add to this discourse. In my observation, much of the local discourse on Islam and the digital space revolves around addressing or combating online radicalisation. It has been a concern for the Internal Security Department (ISD) that the country "remains a target for religious extremists" who are actively advancing radical Islamist ideology, specifically in reference to the pro-Islamic State ecosystem on social media[3]. Commentaries on these discuss the ways extremist narratives may arise through various digital phenomena – through filter bubbles, echo chambers and algorithms – which, when left unchecked, can reinforce and perpetuate radical narratives[4]. These articles would also put forth the ways in which online radicalisation can be countered, of some would be through inculcating digital media literacy, expanding online circles to avoid filter bubbles created by algorithm, or for the *asatizah* (religious teachers)[5].

In other areas, we see that the discourse of Islam and the digital space steer towards the role of local *asatizahs*. Zulkarnain discusses the advantages of using social media for proselytisation, noting how many asatizahs globally and locally have jumped on this bandwagon to disseminate Islamic knowledge due to its ability for mass outreach, to establish connections and relationships, as well as to safeguard the community from radical ideologies[6]. In a similar vein when discussing *asatizahs*, Faris' commentary on developing a new generation of *asatizahs* suggests that future *asatizahs* should be able to incorporate a fresh religious outlook that is contextually grounded, who are not just able to "master the English language in religious discourse" or "[reach] out to the masses by using new media"[7]. Here, there is an acknowledgement of the complexities of the times, where it is seemingly inevitable that *asatizahs* would have to, one way or another, utilise the digital space in their teaching processes. To further expand on this discourse, Fadhlin gathered preliminary data of the Singapore Muslim religious landscape by examining prominent *asatizah* within the Singaporean Muslim community in her thesis. Here, she engages in a conversation with five selected prominent "*asatizah* influencers", exploring the extent to which the use of social media has "brought about a corresponding change in religious outlook which is more conducive towards adapting to social change"[8].

[1] *Campbell, H. A. (2012). Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. Routledge.
[2] Tham, D. (2023). Nearly 9 in 10 Singapore resident households have internet access: IMDA. *Channel News Asia*. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/digital-access-smartphone-ownership-imda-3894676
[3] UCA News. (2022). Singapore's anti-terror agency warns against cyber jihad. *ucanews.com* https://www.ucanews.com/news/singapores-anti-terror-agency-warns-against-cyber-jihad/98044
[4] Ismail, N. (2020). Youth radicalisation in Singapore: A growing threat in the digital age. *RSIS Publications*. https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/youth-radicalisation-in-singapore-a-growing-threat-in-the-digital-age/
[5] Ibid.
[6] U Azman, M. (2023). The power of social media dakwah. *karyawan.sg* https://karyawan.sg/the-power-of-social-media-dakwah/
[7] Alfiq, F. (2019). Developing a new generation of asatizah. *rima.sg* https://rima.sg/developing-a-new-generation-of-asatizah/
[8] Ismail, N. (2021). Asatizahs & Social Media: A Study On Singapore's Prominent Asatizah Influencers.

This is also reinforced by the many online and offline conversations over the years regarding this discourse of *asatizahs* in the digital space, which include discussions titled "*Dakwah Media Sosial: Lebih berkesan atau sekadar kumpul followers?*" (Social Media Proselytisation: More effective or just gathering followers?) (Berita Harian FB Live, 2022), or "*Perlu ke asatizah jadi influencer atau 'asatizah celebrity'?*" (Is there a need for *asatizahs* to be influencers or "celebrity *asatizah*"?) (Fitrah podcast, 2024), or "Islam Commodified: Preachers and Influencers in the New Business Model" (NUS Malay Studies forum event, 2024).

Hence, outside of these aforementioned foci in the broader discourse, this article seeks to better situate the study of the digital world and Islam in Singapore, be it through existing literature or otherwise, against the broader field of religion and the Internet – expanding on some highlighted characteristics of religious practice online with reference to Campbell's critical literature review of the subfield of Internet Studies.[9]

VARYING CONCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITY

The immediate source of religious authority that we think of locally may be our local *asatizahs*. Their appeal to the community likely stems from institutional trust, where local *asatizahs* who are active in the online space are more likely to hold an Asatizah Recognition Scheme (ARS) certification. This is part of the requirement before *asatizahs* are allowed to provide any Islamic instruction to residents in Singapore. On top of that, there have been many initiatives to enhance skills and competencies of *asatizahs*, such as the development of the Asatizah Workforce Development Plan (AWDP). However, while we have been discussing the role of local *asatizahs* in the digital space, there is a need to examine shifting or various conceptions of authority outside of the local *asatizah* fraternity, and the various players whom the community may deem as a 'religious authority' in the online space. In defining religious authority in this article, I refer to Weber's concept of authority as one that is intimately linked to legitimacy. That is to say, who do we deem as legitimate in disseminating Islamic knowledge?

In an era of search engines, the phenomenon of 'Sheikh Google' becomes prominent, where many turn to search engines to answer religious queries. As Ustaz Ridhwan points out, "Social media has led to the decentralisation of authority, including religious authority. Anyone and any channel may be able to gain 'credibility' online by sounding compelling, targeting the right users and being active online."[10]

It may also be helpful to look at the different types of online platforms or accounts that produce or provide Islamic content. An examination of this landscape shows that it is not only *asatizahs* as a religious individual who produce Islamic content under their own name, but there also exist other content producers who belong to one of these few categories: local mosque accounts, Islamic education organisations, or Islamic content creators who may not necessarily be ARS-certified.

There is also an increasing number of Singaporean mosque accounts on platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, in a bid to garner more engagement and encourage more of the community to attend mosque events, or the mosque in general. Different mosque accounts would also have their own 'personality'. Assyakirin Mosque has a mix of humourous reels with Islamic teachings interspersed, alongside informative posts in response to contemporary happenings. One such post discusses "In-Laws is Death" in the Islamic context, introducing the Hadith relating to it as well as its nuances, which is in response to a recent popular Netflix show of the same name in Malay (*Ipar Adalah Maut*). For those who are non-Malay speaking, or prefer more English-based content, they can refer to mosque accounts such as Al-Falah Mosque who also post informative posts that are more timeless, of which some are snippets from their article bank on alfalah.sg. We can see that these mosque accounts do diversify in terms of platform and content form in disseminating Islamic teachings. More importantly, regardless of the platform, many from the community view these accounts as a form of religious authority that they can garner religious knowledge from.

Other types of religious authority would also be organisational accounts of religious educational institutions in Singapore, which include names such as PERGAS or Alqudwah Academy, aside from the main Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS). PERGAS releases the occasional religious guidance that is disseminated via the online space, on pertinent topics such as domestic violence, or same-sex attraction. PERGAS also has a blog that releases articles written by their *asatizahs*, in both Malay and English, that explores various categories relating to Islam – from Contemporary Issues, to Personality, or Finance, among others. We can also note the endeavours of Muslim societies from Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) who may also disseminate beneficial knowledge on their organisation's social media accounts.

While it is true that there are *asatizahs* behind these accounts who may give guidance on the content, knowledge-making and dissemination can be said to be a collective societal endeavour, considering that not everyone behind these accounts would be a certified *asatizah*.

THE INTERNET AS A SPACE FOR IDENTITY PERFORMANCE

Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical approach that posits how social identity is understood as something performed by the individual, this would be closely interlinked to the above when we discuss the different local stakeholders in those utilising the digital space in disseminating religious content.

By simply charting the success of the bigger names in the local religious online space in Singapore such as Ustazah Liyana Musfirah, we can see that much lies in personal branding, and in the way they brand their content as well. #FeelGoodIslam, as a hashtag that has been circulating in recent years, is an embodiment of the pedagogical approach taken by many *asatizahs*, by producing content that provides a softer intonation when delivering *da'wah*. Ustazah Liyana is seen

[9] *Campbell, H. (2001). Religion and the Internet: A microcosm for studying Internet trends and implications.* Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 6(2).
[10] Basor, R. (2021). How does social media influence online radicalisation? *muslim.sg* https://muslim.sg/articles/how-does-social-media-influence-online-radicalisation

as a champion for women, with her starting her own network that aims to "offer a difference towards how women experience themselves, their relationships with others and especially, their relationship with religion ..." She often draws on her own personal journey in her *da'wah*, using it as a motivational tool for women to empower themselves in the face of hardship. In this sense, Ustazah's online identity can be said to closely resemble her offline identity.

There are of course other interesting case studies of religious content creators who may not fall neatly into the *asatizah* category, but whose content still yields much influence in the community. For instance, Donjany, with 82k followers on Instagram and 399k followers on TikTok, has managed to build a name for himself from his motivational, Islam-based videos. Choosing to take the route of connecting directly with his audience by speaking into the camera, and then later, co-founding a faith-driven business that offer opportunities for the community to build their religious capacities (either through their products, services, or classes), Donjany's identity has been solidified as someone who is able to do good and bring the community together through his content. Perhaps we may need to further explore community sentiments, but it is a fair assumption to make that these creators do yield much influence in bringing the community together through the various efforts and events organised. In Donjany's case, he can be trusted to bring his own take on certain 'trends' that we might have observed overseas, such as *Geng Subuh Macam Jumaat*, that aims at bringing more people to the mosque for dawn prayers, or offering free haircuts to migrant workers on National Day. The receptiveness of the community to these community endeavours is largely contributed by the identity that he has curated for himself within the social media context, where the presentation of the self is crucial. While his own charisma and eloquence in presenting his content may be part of his appeal, his appeal might also be that outside of the online space, he works closely with *asatizahs*, which adds to his legitimacy and credibility as a religious content creator.

THE EMBEDDED ONLINE-OFFLINE CONNECTION IN INTERNET PRACTICE

A 2008 study discussing the types of religious activities Muslim users engage in on the internet found that instead of totally replacing offline religious activities with online ones, their online religious activities seem to supplement traditional offline activities[11]. This can still be seen today, especially in the context of a post Covid-19 world, that urged society to explore alternative, online options in knowledge-seeking. Campbell supports this assertion by noting how "online religious practice may simply be an extension of offline religiosity".

It has become a norm in recent years that many religious educational institutions in Singapore such as Alqudwah offer the option to attend their classes and seminars remotely, on top of having the option to attend physically. As a result of this shift towards a more technologically-savvy society, we see some measures taken to preserve the sanctity of religion in such a blended space. Some questions that may arise include: What, then, is the etiquette when seeking knowledge through online classes, in a context where one does not have to physically be in the presence of their teacher? If the class is pre-recorded, does the same etiquette still apply?

In such a space, there are some local *ustazahs* who do preface to their students before they start their female-only online classes to ensure that students are not taking the class at a place where non-*mahrams*[12]are able to listen in or watch, in order to preserve *hayaa'*(modesty). In other mixed-gender contexts, male students are urged to turn on their video cameras out of respect for their teacher. The principles behind these practices are not new – ultimately exemplifying the embeddedness of the online and offline practices in Internet practice.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While Campbell's critical literature review is dated and there have been many major changes in the fabric of digital space since then, this preliminary examination allows us the first step into better situating the study of the digital world and Islam in Singapore to the broader field of Internet studies, where we have specifically explored the shifting conceptions of authority, the embeddedness of the online and offline space, as well as the internet as a space for identity performance. Our conceptions of what lies at the intersection of digital space and Islam is something that is constantly being shaped and reshaped, which may inevitably mean that the content and examples used in this article may be dated in a matter of years. However, there is still value in noting down these observations, to track the changes in the Singaporean Islamic digital landscape over the years, and observe – as consumers and creators of content – how we can we better navigate our faith in relation to the digital space. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

Note: The Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) is conducting a perception study of Muslim youth towards online Islamic content. Through the nuances of these perceptions, this study aims to provide insights to elevate the quality of local online Islamic content, to ensure that it remains relevant and beneficial for Muslim youths. We are still searching for respondents and interviewees for this study, and we want your input! Head over to ***bit.ly/RIMA-OICS*** *if you're interested in participating in this study.*

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[11] Ho, S., Lee, W., & Hameed, S. (2008). Muslim surfers on the internet: Using the theory of planned behavior to examine the factors influencing engagement in online religious activities. *New Media & Society, 10*(11), 93-113. doi: 10.1177/1461444807085323

[12] A non-*Mahram* in Islam refers to a person whom it is permissible for one to marry, which means that it is obligatory as a Muslim who has reached puberty to guard their *aurat*. *Aurat* refers to parts of the body, for men and women, which should be covered according to Muslim laws for the preservation of modesty, and may include other aspects of the self, such as one's voice, depending on the school of thought.

Preschool and Parental Partnership in the New Era

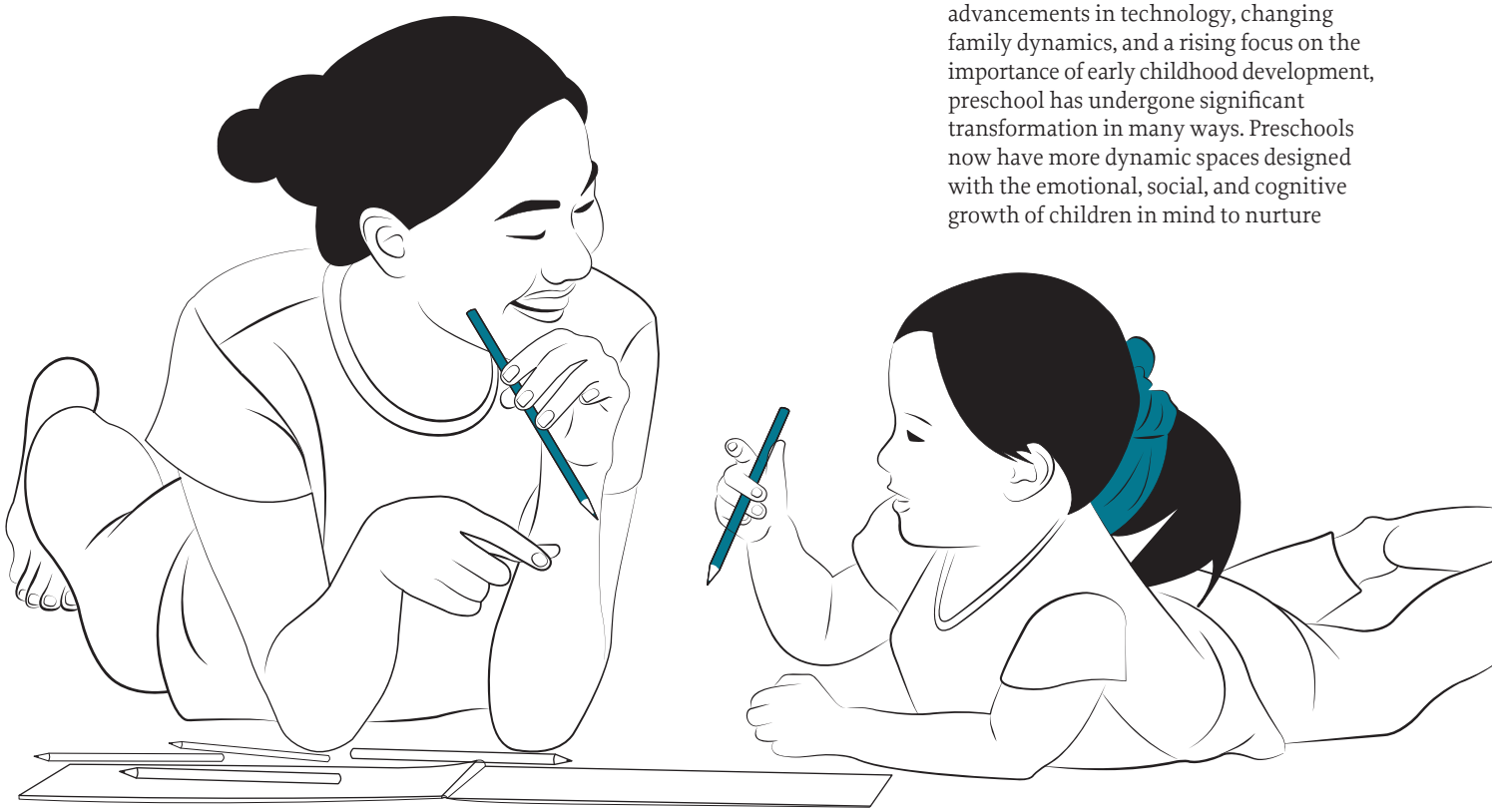
BY FADILAH ADNAN

PRESCHOOL AND PARENTAL PARTNERSHIP IN THE NEW ERA

I recall an occasion when I brought my children out to play in the heavy rain with their raincoats and jumping in muddy puddles with my spouse. It is a simple activity that my children enjoy, but I recall receiving numerous stares from passers-by who looked at us in disbelief, particularly after my son climbed down into the drain on his own to pick up a ball that had rolled down. How has the once-normal sight of children playing in the rain come to be seen as odd, reshaped over the years by advancements in technology, evolving lifestyles, and changing societal norms? These experiences of play aren't the only ones that have transformed in many ways. In fact, parenting during the preschool years in today's fast-paced, technology-driven world likewise comes with unique opportunities and challenges. Many modern and young parents are required to balance traditional parenting practices with the demands of contemporary lifestyles and advancements in education.

THE EVOLUTION OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Preschool education has always laid the foundation for lifelong learning and development. But in the new era, driven by advancements in technology, changing family dynamics, and a rising focus on the importance of early childhood development, preschool has undergone significant transformation in many ways. Preschools now have more dynamic spaces designed with the emotional, social, and cognitive growth of children in mind to nurture



them in creative and engaging ways. In recent years, parental partnership has also evolved where parents are more aware and involved in their children's development in preschools. Parental partnership is about building a cohesive, collaborative environment where parents and educators now work together to support children's growth and mental well-being. Parents are seen as active partners, and preschools make concerted efforts to foster communication, engagement, and collaboration. Young fathers take on a more active role now in partnership with the schools and are seen as playing an equal role as mothers in providing holistic parental support. Grandparents are more technology savvy and are keen to participate in activities with the schools such as Grandparent's Day and are willing to collaborate for other school activities. With the rise of technology in recent years, it has certainly transformed many aspects of how schools and parents engage with one another. This new era demands a collaborative approach, which isoften referred to as parental partnership.

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY IN PARTNERSHIPS

Communication in preschools has become more open and accessible, offering various platforms such as mobile applications, updates, and newsletters to share insights into daily activities, diet, routines, and themes, all aimed at supporting further learning at home. The open and regular communication also allows teachers and parents to have consistent check-ins to discuss any changes, challenges, or achievements in the child's behaviour. With educational technologies like online learning platforms, parents are increasingly involved in their children's education. This collaboration creates a cohesive learning environment that extends beyond the classroom to support the children holistically. These platforms also facilitate consistent updates and dialogue. Parents are encouraged to share photos of projects that children participate in at home with family members. This active communication with teachers and schools helps parents understand how technology now plays an integral part in the children's learning.

Technology not only plays a huge role in communication between schools and parents, but children are also learning how technology can be used in many ways. Schools and parents had to learn and adapt quickly in using technology for online lessons during the Covid-19 pandemic. This highlighted the potential for virtual learning in early childhood settings though it also underscored the challenges of remote learning for young children. As technology continues to move at a fast pace, we see how automation and artificial intelligence (AI) are also changing the future job market. This encourages preschools and parents to focus further on teaching children critical thinking, problem solving and adaptability skills that are vital for the future. As technology becomes more prevalent, there is a strong push to ensure that screen time is balanced with hands-on activities and real-world interactions. Technology has blurred the lines between work, school, and communication, often leading to screen fatigue and mental health concerns. Both adults and children must navigate the fine line between leveraging technology for education and avoiding overexposure.

MENTAL WELL-BEING

Childhood is a critical period for brain development. Addressing a child's mental distress early can prevent severe mental health issues in the longer term. In this new era, we see how mental well-being is being brought to the forefront. We see more emphasis on mental well-being as preschool curriculums now integrate activities that promote social-emotional learning (SEL), teaching children develop soft skills like empathy, self-regulation, and cooperation. Social emotional development refers to the process where children develop the ability to understand, manage and express their emotions. These skills are taught and enhanced further through small group learning and games. Teachers are trained to recognise signs of stress and behavioural challenges and adopt practices such as mindfulness and breathing exercises to help children regulate. Parents are informed that preschools are partnering with local health providers to ensure children have access to necessary health services such as vision, hearing screening and mental health support. In doing so, we are also equipping our children with coping mechanisms that will benefit them throughout life.

Mental well-being education for parents is a vital part of fostering healthy families. Families are invited to learn more about the importance of social-emotional development through parental workshops and engagement sessions. The ability to regulate emotions in healthy ways, think before acting, and reflect on behaviour are essential skills that families can teach their children – especially in an era of increased physical and online interactions. Schools play a crucial role by conducting workshops on child development, early learning strategies, and mental health, empowering parents to better support their children's growth. Parents are more attuned to the emotional and psychological needs of their children and are encouraged to foster open discussions about feelings and stress management. Fostering socio-emotional development during the preschool years ensures that children grow into emotionally intelligent and socially competent individuals. Mental well-being is a crucial aspect of a child's development. Addressing these socio-emotional skills early can prevent more severe issues later in life as it plays a fundamental role in overall mental health and well-being and is essential for success in both academic and personal life.

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

Preschool education has moved to prioritise play-based learning over rote learning, where children explore concepts through hands-on activities, storytelling, and imaginative play. Parents will have to look at education as holistic learning that celebrates academic achievements differently. With the shift in mindset to allow young children to explore learning with their hands using clay and paints rather than paper and pencil, it brings a strong message that education is now moving towards developing creative thinkers. This experiential learning ensures that children understand concepts deeply through experiences rather than rote memorisation. Schools use qualitative assessments to understand each child's strengths and areas for growth, creating customised learning plans to meet individual children's needs. At the same time, preschools today strive to create a more inclusive environment that celebrates diversity. This holistic, child-centred approach may be different from how parents received their education years ago,

as the focus is to develop children holistically and empower them with relevant skills for life. The learning and understanding of different cultural practices are not only shared during festive celebrations but incorporated as part of the curriculum. Preschools often work with local cultural organisations to ensure their curriculum reflects the values, languages and traditions of the families they serve. This approach allows children to recognise differences, teaching acceptance and build mutual respect towards others.

EMPOWERING PARENTS

Parenthood is, of course, a lifelong journey. Empowering parents is about equipping them with the tools, knowledge and support from schools to be confident and effective caregivers. By providing education, fostering emotional well-being, encouraging positive parenting practices, and building a strong support network with other parents, it will help to create an environment that promotes the overall development and well-being of their children. When parents feel empowered, they are better able to navigate challenges and build resilient, healthy families. Measuring this family-school partnership can also provide valuable information on how teachers are progressing in areas such as communication with parents, responding to parental needs and incorporating suggestions about their children. With dual-working parents becoming common, time management and quality interactions with children are crucial. We see how the gender roles in parenting have likewise evolved and there is a growing trend towards shared responsibilities in some households. Both parents are generally more involved in sharing of childcare, parental partnership and housework. With many parents now working from home or having more flexible hours, it allows them to spend more time with their children while managing the boundaries between work and family. Preschools offer support groups where parents can discuss challenges, share experiences, give suggestions to the school as well as seek advice from educators and other parents. This sense of community helps parents feel less isolated and more confident in their parenting. By providing insights about their child's interests, strengths and areas for growth, teachers are able to tailor the classroom learning experiences to each individual child. Similarly, educators work with parents to share classroom's activities that parents can reinforce at home. Modern parenting is a collaborative and dynamic partnership, with parents increasingly recognising the importance of being actively involved in their children's learning and participating in school-led initiatives. However, some parents may find this challenging as they navigate the dual demands of adapting to technological advancements in education while managing household responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

Preschool partnerships in the new era are about recognising that early childhood education and development are best supported through collaboration with families, schools, and communities. These collaborations foster more holistic, inclusive and equitable learning environments that better prepare young children for future success. In working closely together, parents and educators can create a safe, nurturing environment where children feel secure and equipped to handle the world around them. This strong partnership not only strengthens individual families but also contributes to the development of healthy, resilient communities. By embracing technology, prioritising mental well-being, fostering diversity and inclusion, and empowering parents, we can ensure that preschool education in the new era meets the needs of children and their families. This collaborative approach lays the groundwork for a brighter future, where children are supported, understood, and prepared to thrive in an ever-changing world. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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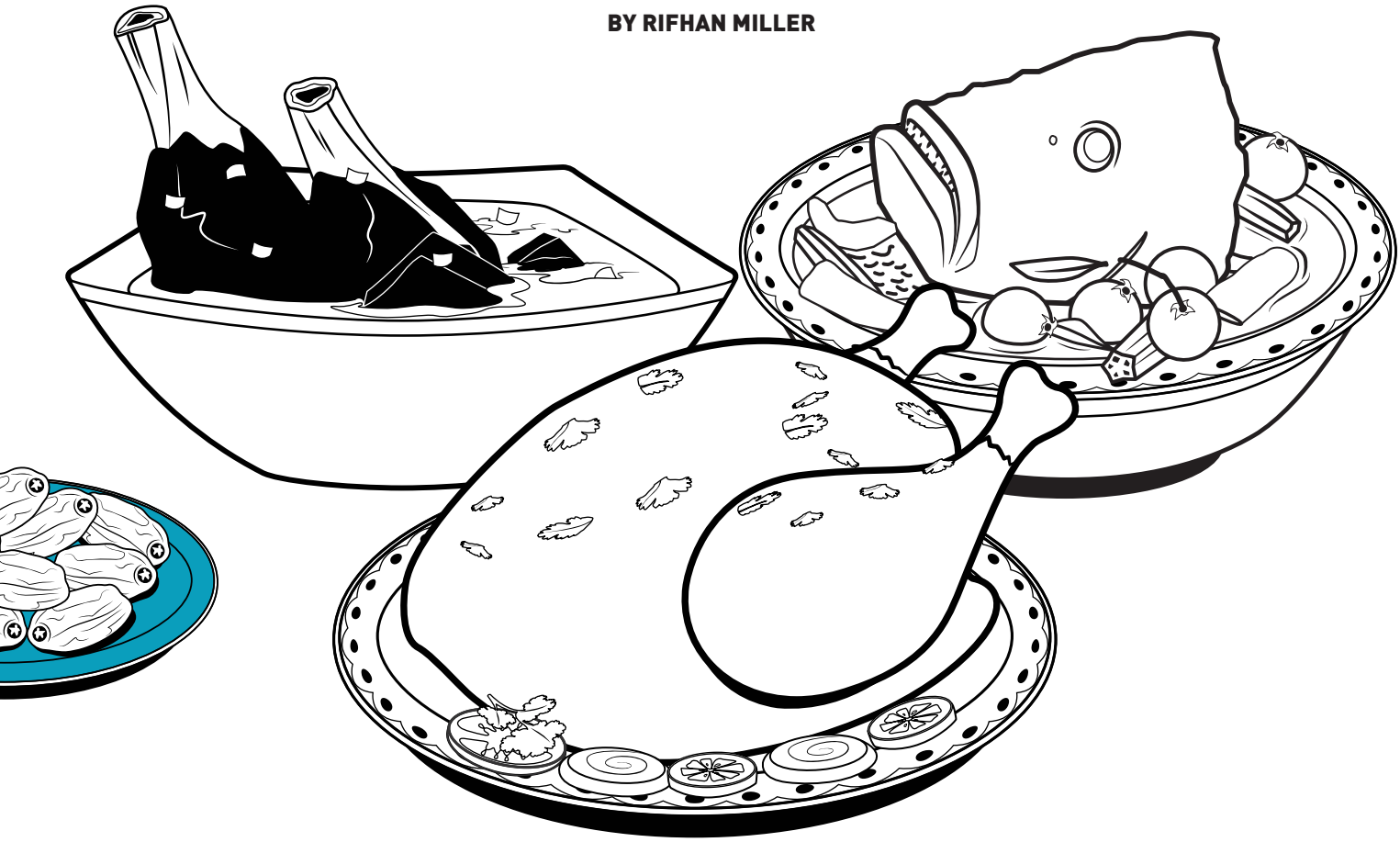
Parenthood is, of course, a lifelong journey. Empowering parents is about equipping them with the tools, knowledge and support from schools to be confident and effective caregivers. By providing education, fostering emotional well-being, encouraging positive parenting practices, and building a strong support network with other parents, it will help to create an environment that promotes the overall development and well-being of their children. When parents feel empowered, they are better able to navigate challenges and build resilient, healthy families.

The Commercialisation of Ramadhan: What Happened to the Ramadhan Spirit?

BY RIFHAN MILLER



Ramadhan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, is widely recognised as a period dedicated to fasting, prayer, and spiritual reflection among Muslims worldwide. From dawn until sunset, we abstain from food, drink, and other physical needs, purifying the soul, fostering self-discipline, and deepening our respective connections with Allah. This month is also traditionally associated with self-reflection, heightened devotion, and acts of charity, which align closely with core Islamic values.

In recent years though, observers have noted a shift in how Ramadhan is practiced with greater commercialisation, particularly over-consumption and opulence. While this article merely focuses on food consumption, it merely scratches the surface as this extends well into excess spending and flagrant displays of materialism. One may argue that these may diminish the spiritual essence of the month, emphasising indulgence over introspection and piety, particularly regarding the consumption of food during sahur (the pre-dawn meal) and iftar (the meal to break the fast at sunset). These meals, initially intended as simple sustenance to support the fast and encourage gratitude, are becoming more elaborate. This trend toward indulgence and culinary excess has drawn attention for its potential to diverge from principles of moderation and self-restraint that are integral to fasting, as well as its impact on the opportunities for spiritual growth and empathy toward those in need.

These changes stand in stark contrast to the realities faced by many Muslims worldwide who are unable to observe Ramadhan in comfort due to war, displacement, and severe economic hardships. In countries like Syria, Yemen, Palestine, and Afghanistan, ongoing conflicts leave countless families struggling with hunger and insecurity. Refugees and internally displaced persons often lack access to even basic necessities, let alone the ability to celebrate Ramadhan in the traditional sense.

For these communities, fasting takes on an entirely different meaning – an extension of their daily struggle for survival. The evening meal to break the fast, which is a moment of celebration and gratitude for many, might consist of the barest scraps, if anything at all. This stark disparity between those who endure Ramadhan in hardship and those who observe it amidst abundance prompts a deeper question about how Muslims worldwide can embody the spirit of the month: through empathy, solidarity, and action to alleviate suffering.

COMMERCIALISATION TO MATERIALISM

Iftar, arguably, traditionally a family-centred tradition, has increasingly evolved into a platform for economic and social posturing. Lavish iftar dinners hosted by larger organisations have become tools for public relations and, according to some critics, a way to showcase wealth. This trend reflects the rising visibility of religion in public spaces and the emergence of an affluent Muslim bourgeoisie, which is not necessarily a bad thing. However, there appears little resistance to such gatherings being politicised and highly focused on their lavishness and social exclusivity, increasingly turning them into more a social activity than a religious one.

A good example[1] from Türkiye is the Ciragan Sarayi, a lavish 19th-century Ottoman palace now operating as a luxury hotel, usually used for hosting high-profile weddings. During Ramadhan, it becomes a hub for corporate iftar gatherings and as expressed by Ulku Karadaglilar, an executive at the Ciragan that "a company to have iftar here is a kind of statement... It is like asking, 'Where did you have your wedding or gala event?' With only one chance each year, they want the very best." This shift is also felt by high-ranking individuals like Cemal Usak, secretary-general of Istanbul's Intercultural Dialogue Platform, who admits to "have an iftar to attend almost every night... I've only had a chance to break fast with my family twice this Ramadhan."

Ozlem Sandikci, a marketing professor at Ankara's Bilkent University specialising in consumerism, noted that "Across the Muslim world, Ramadhan – a time for fasting, prayer, and reflection – is increasingly resembling a cultural and commercial holiday." Nilufer Narli, a sociologist at Istanbul's Bahcesehir University also noted that "the religiously conservative and newly urbanised middle classes and upper middle classes have given increased importance to the iftar dinner and have influenced the established middle classes." The trend is not limited to Türkiye. In Dubai, luxury hotels set up elaborate iftar tents with vast buffet spreads, catering to those seeking an opulent way to break their fast. In Cairo, exclusive restaurants and clubs attract diners eager to see and be seen, spending on a single meal what the average Egyptian earns in two weeks.

As expected with any commercialised holiday, an opportunity is created for businesses to sell the "Ramadhan vibes" to maximise customer spending and engagement through for example, competing TV shows, advertisements, decorations, new clothing and furniture – basically new everything. On top of that, racing to reserve a place in a popular restaurant for the food, exclusive dishes carefully designed for the occasion and social media posts of having been there. This is not a trend centred in the Middle East and Türkiye. In the Southeast Asian regions, specifically Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, renowned restaurants and especially hotels have jumped on this bandwagon for years offering lavish buffets, offering immersive experiences breaking one's fast in a luxurious setting. While these events provide opportunities for communal gatherings, they also raise questions about maintaining the spiritual essence of Ramadhan amidst increasing commercialisation and indulgence.

This list is non-exhaustive, and it would be interesting to have a study conducted in our community on evolving Ramadhan traditions and activities but here is what I feel is the real problem: this is a religious occasion, materialism and indulgence are redefining it and not everyone will be able to afford this evolving new Ramadhan.

OVER-EATING

Despite Ramadhan being a time for fasting and spiritual reflection, overeating has ironically, become a common issue once the sun sets. Jumping back to the Middle East, many hospitals across the Gulf states see a significant rise in inpatient cases during Ramadhan.

Doctors in this region generally see a surge in patient visits with gastronomic issues during Ramadhan. Dr Rabee Harb, a family doctor at Kuwait's Royale Hayat Hospital, noted he sees a noticeable increase in digestive-related complaints, particularly indigestion, gastroenteritis, and peptic ulcer disease. The impact of fasting on health has become a growing concern in Gulf countries and in 2011, the Hamad Medical Corporation in Doha reported over 7,700 cases in the first week of Ramadhan alone. Dana Al Shakaa, a dietitian at the American Hospital in Dubai, claims to "treat an extra five to six patients a day during this time" and even points out a troubling trend: a rise in diabetes diagnoses during Ramadhan, with many patients neglecting their medications due to disrupted eating and sleeping patterns[2].

In the United Arab Emirates, emergency departments also report an increase in food-related health issues during Ramadhan, particularly due to overeating. Indigestion is the most common

[1] Schleifer, Y., (2008). Ramadan trend: Iftar emerges as high-profile social event. *The Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2008/0923/p01s04-wome.html
[2] Carrington, D., (2013). Not so fast: Ramadan sees rise in binge eating and A&E cases. CNN. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/07/world/meast/ramadan-over-eating-eid/index

complaint, as people tend to consume substantial amounts of food in a short period. Dr Archana Baju, a clinical dietitian at Burjeel Hospital, explains that after long hours of fasting, the metabolism slows down, and it is crucial to introduce food slowly when breaking the fast[3].

FOOD WASTE

There is little data available on the state of food wastage in our Southeast Asian region during the month of Ramadhan, though the Middle East has, in recent years started looking into addressing food wastage. Looking at the data below, it may not surprise us that we probably reflect similar trends due to evolving trends in how Ramadhan is being practiced in our own community. In general[4],

- **Saudi Arabia:** Approximately 30–50% of food prepared during Ramadhan is discarded. Annually, the country wastes around 4 million tons of food.
- **United Arab Emirates:** Food waste surges by up to 67% during Ramadhan.
- **Qatar:** About 25% of food prepared during Ramadhan ends up as waste.
- **Bahrain:** Food waste increases by 50% during the holy month.
- **Riyadh:** Approximately 30 percent of 4 million dishes prepared daily in Ramadhan is wasted. Translated into money, it amounts to SR1.2 million[5] (about SGD 433,638.13) every day.
- **General Trend:** It is estimated that 15–25% of all food purchased or prepared during Ramadhan is discarded across various Muslim-majority countries.

So, this Ramadhan, what can you do to be more mindful of your food purchases and consumption?

1 **Talk about food waste.** Speak to your peers on your thoughts regarding food waste following Islamic principles of sustainability.

2 **Serve fewer options.** Focus on quality and not quantity. You have a full month to achieve variety and enjoy all the dishes you love with your family. Moderation is key.

3 **Think about your portions.** Take what you need and eat what you take. Start with smaller portions and serve yourself again with more small portions. Remember that most of us feel full easily after a full day of fasting.

4 **Plan your meals.** Again, you have a full month to achieve variety in your meals. Plan your food preparation and be prepared to freeze or even donate unprepared or excess food to reduce wastage.

PRACTICING GREATER MINDFULNESS IN RAMADHAN

Ramadhan is a month of abrupt changes, from disrupted mealtimes and sleep schedules to balancing our busy lives on an empty stomach. I personally find this month the greatest test of self-discipline. At the heart of our consumer society though, where we are spoiled with options and convenience of easy access to goods and services for our various needs and wants, I feel this month requires us to take a step back and return to the centre and meaning of our lives. Through deep introspection, it reminds us of the importance of detail, precision and discipline in our religious practices; specific days and timing of our fasts, the specific days and timing within the month itself for additional acts of worship and charity; the meaning of this holy month goes beyond going hungry and preparing for the first day of Shawal and its celebrations.

Beyond the practices, let us also not neglect practicing our faith with our hearts through acts of forgiveness, charity and understanding, particularly those around us who cannot afford to keep up with material purchases for Aidilfitri celebrations and acknowledge the struggles of fellow Muslims enduring conflict and hunger in conflicted countries worldwide. This upcoming Ramadhan, let us observe it more mindfully, to transform Ramadhan of 2025 from a time of personal indulgence into a meaningful expression of faith and compassion. ■

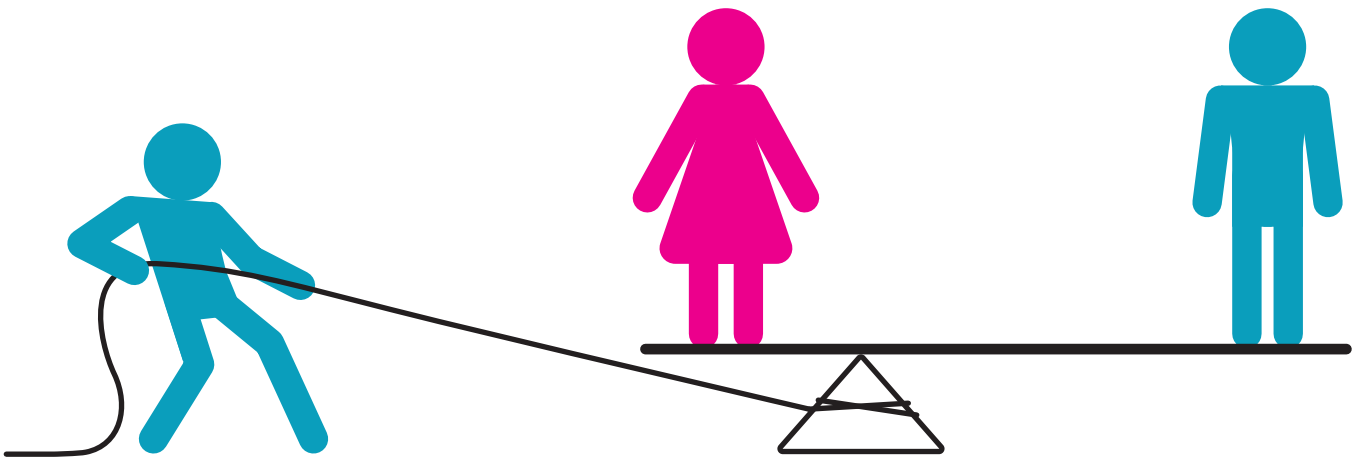
This article is also available on karyawan.sg

Rifhan Miller is Centre Manager for the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA). Her research interests include gender, equity, and social justice issues.

[3] Bell, J. (2021). UAE doctors warn of overeating at Iftar to avoid a trip to the hospital. *Alarabiya News*. Retrieved from https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/04/15/UAE-doctors-warn-of-overeating-at-Iftar-to-avoid-a-trip-to-the-hospital-#:~:text=Doctors%20in%20the%20United%20Arab,gastroenteric%20issues%20and%20stomach%20ulcers.
[4] Altantawy, S. (2024). Overeating on the rise in Ramadan: rpt. *LinkedIn News*. Retrieved from https://www.linkedin.com/news/story/overeating-on-the-rise-in-Ramadhan-rpt-5958924/
[5] Taga, A. H. (2016). A third of Ramadan food is wasted. *Arab News*. Retrieved from https://www.arabnews.com/node/941786/saudi-arabia

Men's Roles in Gender Justice Efforts in Muslim Communities

BY IMAD ALATAS



Why is gender justice such an important topic? There are a few reasons. One, gender (not to be confused with sex) is an indelible aspect of our identity. Gender refers to norms and behaviours that we are expected to conform to because of being assigned male or female at birth. Those norms and behaviours are encapsulated in the masculinity and femininity that men and women are expected to portray. Individuals who may not identify with the sex they were assigned at birth are also familiar with these gender norms. Secondly, gender determines how we are treated by people in our private lives and in the larger public. In the former, parents may have separate expectations for their sons and daughters. An example of the latter is how much prestige and attention men's soccer is given compared to women's soccer, reflecting how certain sports and practices are more strongly associated with men than with women. Lastly, the state of gender relations in a society (especially its treatment of women) is a reflection of how much that society embraces equality. The more rights women have in any society, the more likely that society takes equality seriously.

For a long time, women have been at the forefront in efforts to advocate for gender justice, with the #MeToo movement serving as an example in relatively recent memory. Over time, men also became involved in the movement, contributing to its broader impact. For instance, actor Terry Crews opened up about an incident where he was inappropriately touched by a Hollywood executive. In Singapore, the Young Women Muslim

Association (PPIS) focuses on women's empowerment, family support, and early childhood education. In neighbouring Malaysia, women have spoken out against the moral policing of women, domestic violence, and matrimonial rights. Sisters in Islam, an NGO, has worked to address legal injustices faced by Muslim women while upholding the democratic principles as laid out in the Federal Constitution.

Whether we use terms such as feminism, gender justice, gender equality, and gender equity, these social movements are associated with women because it is they who lead these movements. One hardly thinks of a man when they hear the word 'feminist'. After all, feminism started out as a movement addressing discrimination faced by women; men do not face the same discrimination that women do.

What are men's roles in fighting for a more gender egalitarian society, if it is a role they wish to undertake? On the surface, one could simply equate patriarchy and male privilege with men. After all, it is men who possess this male privilege. In the sphere of gender relations, even privilege itself could be associated with men. Nobody talks of female privilege because women, more than men, bear the brunt of patriarchal ways of thinking. However, men do have a role to play in advocating for more equal gender relations, depending on how much they are willing to confront male privilege. This role is a delicate one and raises a few questions.

How does a man acknowledge he has privilege and show an openness in dealing with this privilege? What incentive does he have in order to deal with this privilege and get out of his comfort zone? Can he talk about his own negative experiences of patriarchy without implying that his and a woman's experience are similar? Men have spoken up, both in favour of supporting women's rights and retaining what they think is a lost masculinity and male privilege. In the former case, men have been collaborating with women on issues such as violence prevention and reproductive health. In the latter case, men's rights activists such as Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) have been vocal in claiming that feminism has stripped men of their rights.

In the Muslim world, there are men who do and have spoken in favour of interpretations of Islam that accord equal respect to men and women. Ali Ashgar Engineer, an Indian activist, argued that women and men are "co-partners" in looking after their families and financially supporting themselves. Engineer further argues that because of this, women will no longer tolerate being subjugated to men like before.[1] Syed Syeikh Al-Hadi, a Malay-Arab writer and publicist, expended his efforts on women's emancipation as an important part of social reform. According to him, "the progress of a community depends on a number of factors, but the most essential factor is the state of progress of the women in the community".[2]

Mohammad Naciri is UN Women's Chief of Staff, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. He is also the first man to occupy both the roles of Regional Director and Chief of Staff at UN Women. Like other communities, Muslim communities require the voices of both women and men if communities are to improve their treatment of women's rights. The human rights organisation Muslims for Progressive Values, which was founded in the US, launched the #ImamsForShe campaign to encourage Imams to voice their support for Muslim women's rights and to challenge interpretations of Islamic scripture that seemingly place women in an inferior position.[3] The campaign expanded to Malaysia in 2017, taking on the name #UlamaBersamaWanita, roughly translated as 'religious scholars for women'.

In 2021, news came out that there was an online poll ranking female *asatizah* (Islamic religious teacher), in Singapore for their sexual attractiveness. The poll showed at least 12 *asatizah* being ranked, with The Straits Times reporting that at least 20-30 were being ranked.[4] 1,005 people took part in the poll. The act of organising such a poll is no doubt abhorrent, but there are also deeper questions to be asked about the kinds of masculinity men espouse as they treat women as sexual objects. If the problem lies in masculinity, so too does the solution.

All of us, including Muslim men, cannot do away with gender, but we can redefine what it means to be masculine. Masculinity need not, and should not, entail treating women as objects and degrading them by ranking them according to their looks and sexuality. Neither should it involve staying silent on other instances of sexual harassment. One does not need to get involved in gender justice advocacy to speak out on these issues and show a commitment to gender justice. However, as mentioned, there are men who are active in gender justice advocacy, and their involvement presents both opportunities and challenges.

Very recently, sociologist Emily Carian wrote a book titled "Good Guys, Bad Guys: The Perils of Men's Gender Activism".[5] Focusing on the US, she argues that both feminist men and men's rights activists have one goal in common: to be perceived as "good men". They adopt "privilege renegotiation strategies" to deal with being called out for their privilege. These strategies allow them to distance themselves from their complicity in gender inequality. She adds that activism for feminist men becomes more of an individual identity formation project rather than a project aimed at addressing structural inequality. Hence, even the feminist men with good intentions can only do so much to address gender injustice. They might perpetuate it, even if unintentionally.

It is scholars such as Carian that guide my own thinking about Muslim men and their roles in gender activist spaces. Similar questions can be asked of all men. Are there certain types of masculinities that they espouse, and if so, where do they

[1] Engineer, A.A. (2004). The Rights of Women in Islam. 2nd ed. Elgin, IL: New Dawn Press Group, 190.
[2] Al-Hadi, S. S. (1930). "Changes in the Upbringing of Girls are Urgent." Pp. 226-28 in *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady with Selections of His Writings by His Son Syed Alwi al-Hady* (1999), edited by Alijah Gordon. Kuala Lumpur: MSRI.
[3] Muslims for Progressive Values. (2019). "#IMAMSFORSHE."
[4] Baharudin, H. (2021). "Police investigating offensive poll ranking female Islamic teachers; president Halimah and other leaders criticise poll."

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get their ideas about masculinity? For Muslim men in the Malay world, perhaps Malay and Islamic cultural traditions are sources of inspiration. Then, there is the broader, global influence where Muslim men may be learning from an international exchange of ideas about masculinity and what it means to be a male activist in gender activist spaces.

Additionally, when focusing on Muslim men, one must ask how they interpret gender norms within an Islamic framework. They may interpret gender roles as complementary and thus focus on advocating for the rights of women as caregivers, for example. Or they may interpret gender roles within a framework of equality so that they advocate for rights to be given to women that have long been accorded to men. When engaging in activism, which issues matter to them? What motivates them to care and what do they consider as activism? These are important questions to ask when exploring the potential for men in Muslim communities to be supporters of women's rights.

When we look at Muslim men involved in gender justice advocacy, we should also consider how these men identify themselves, rather than impose terms such as 'feminist' or even 'profeminist' on them. There is a considerable amount of scholarship on what it means to achieve gender justice within an Islamic framework. One set of ideas that takes this framework into account is Islamic feminism. Margot Badran (p. 242) suggests the following definition of Islamic feminism: "Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence".[6] Not every Muslim will identify as an Islamic feminist, for various reasons. Some may argue that women's rights are already guaranteed in Islam, making the label "Islamic feminist" redundant. Or they might associate feminism with Western cultural imperialism. For Muslim men who do believe in gender justice, they might not identify themselves as feminist.

As I mentioned earlier, gender justice advocacy has traditionally been female-dominated. Men who enter these spaces may sincerely want to address gender inequality, but power dynamics also exist within activism. Women in NGOs may feel hesitant to air any frustrations about men's participation in gender justice advocacy due to the expectation that one should be grateful to men for participating. Are men's participation in gender justice advocacy a privilege women should be grateful for? To use an everyday example, should women thank men for doing the dishes at home?

It is hard for anyone to confront their privilege, whether we are talking about racial, economic, or gender privilege. Admitting that you are privileged is hard, but the costs to men for putting their privilege under scrutiny is lower than the costs of an unequal society. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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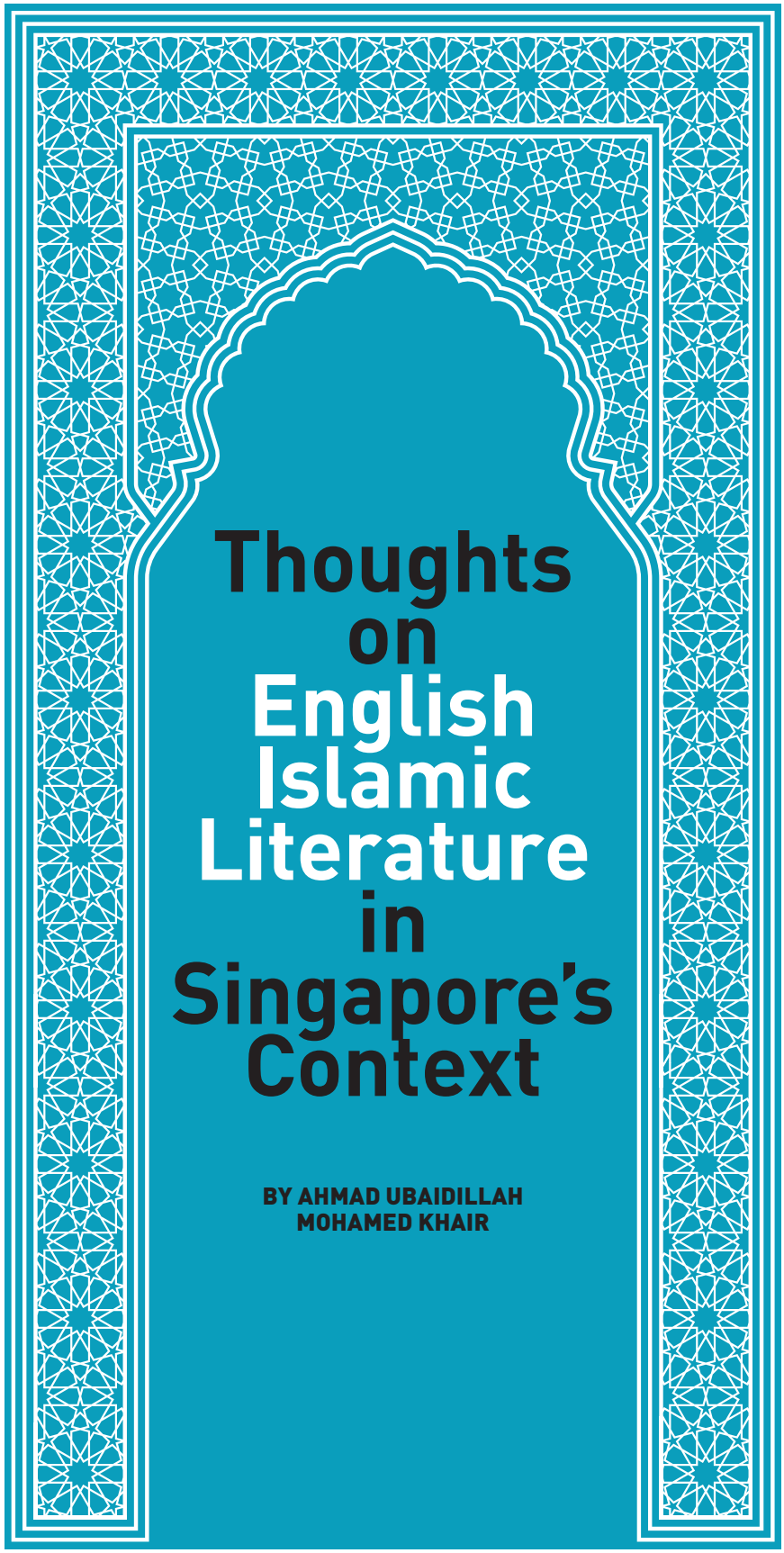
[6] Badran, M. (2009). Feminism in Islam: Secular and religious convergences. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 242.



Thoughts on English Islamic Literature in Singapore's Context

BY AHMAD UBAIDILLAH MOHAMED KHAIR

In recent times, we have witnessed increased output of Islamic works in English by Singaporean Muslim writers, mainly non-fictional in nature. This is different as compared to the past, where Singaporean Muslim writers would primarily write and publish Islamic works in the Malay language. It certainly reflects the changing trend within the Muslim community, where English has become – or is almost becoming – the primary language of discourse and communication in socio-religious spaces. Naturally, this trend has been translated into a rising demand for Islamic works in English. Today's popular Islamic books in Singapore are almost exclusively in English, with local writers such as Ameera Aslam, Mizi Wahid, Liyana Musfirah, being frequent names on Wardah Bookstore's bestseller lists. While the aforementioned writers primarily publish spiritual, non-fiction and self-help Islamic works, we are also seeing efforts that mainly cater to Singapore Muslims who are passionate and interested about poetry, such as Layl Ash-Shayr, an initiative by local Muslim literary advocates that frequently holds poetry and open-mic nights. Their initiatives, which include an anthology and poetry competitions, has provided an insightful window to the communal and widespread interest within the Muslim community towards poetry.

Although it can be said that these works and initiatives by our local writers and advocates are a reflection of the rising need and demand of English Islamic works, the output is mainly poetry, spiritual, and self-help in nature. Regarding these works, there is clearly high demand as we can see from their popularity and sales numbers. However, we do see a lack of contemporary output and representation of Islamic Literature that is of a creative, literary and fictional essence, such as plays, novels and short stories. In the past when works were mainly written in Malay, there were copious number of works that can be categorised as Islamic Literature. The works of figures such as Suratman Markasan, Masuri SN, Mohamed Latiff Mohamed, Isa Kamari, Jamal Ismail, Rasiah Halil, Johar Buang, Maarof Salleh, and several others, contained Islamic elements that came in the form of both novels and short stories. It would be inaccurate to conclude without formal inquiry that the reason for this is a lack of

demand and relevance for Islamic literary works of such nature, as general trend indicates that novels and short stories in general are still popular and relevant. In my opinion, what seems to be the case is a supply issue rather than demand.

Why then, do we not see a proportionate output of Islamic creative and fictional works in English, as we observe with other forms of writings? What is the importance and relevance of such works today? With Singapore's context in mind, how should we define the concept of Islamic Literature? What should be the objectives and parameters for this genre of literature? This article would not claim to be comprehensive, but rather an attempt to initiate discourse and discussion on how we can improve the ecosystem of Islamic Literature.

The discourse on Islamic Literature, regarding its definition, importance and manifestation, can be considered as a mature discourse that goes back to the fifties with the emergence of Muslim-majority states and nations in the post-colonial period. The discourse took place throughout the Muslim world. From the Middle East and South Asia, Syed Abul Hasan Ali Hasani Nadwi (who was very much influenced by Muhammad Iqbal), Muhammad Qutub, Najib Kilani, Imad Al-Din Khalil, and Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan Al-Buti, wrote extensively on the role and concept of Islamic Literature, albeit in the context of their own societies. Though the discourse took place slightly later in the Nusantara region, it was nevertheless a lively discourse with intellectuals from Malaysia and Indonesia such as Shahnon Ahmad, Hashim Awang, Othman Kelantan, Kuntowijoyo, M. Fudoli Zaini, and Abdul Hadi W.M., actively engaging in the discourse through their writings. In Singapore, we had figures such as Suratman Markasan and Masuri SN who penned their ideas and thoughts on this concept.

These intellectuals defined Islamic Literature differently, and certainly each writer would have their own preference. I, for one, resonate strongly with the understanding of Indonesian intellectual, Kuntowijoyo, and Malaysian intellectual, Shahnon Ahmad. Kuntowijoyo in the discourse of Islamic Literature during the seventies, advocated for what he termed as *Sastera Profetik*, or Prophetic Literature. He defined Prophetic Literature with three elements; 1) Humanisation, 2) Liberation, 3) Transcendence.[1] Shahnon Ahmad, on the other hand, held a more theological view of Islamic Literature, in which it is essentially another form of worship to obtain the pleasure of God. He held the view that literature is a process of creation and writing that revolves around belief in Allah, evoking a high level of devotion by the writer to delve into the concept of Islamic Creed and translating it with wisdom to readers, in line with their abilities as a writer.[2]

In the discourse of Islamic Literature, much has also been said regarding its need and importance for Muslim societies, specifically as a mode of religious advocacy (*dakwah*) that protects Muslims from contents that are of harmful and negative influence. For example, the prominent Syrian scholar, Muhammad Sai'd Ramadan Al-Buti, in his essay titled 'Islamic Literature: Retrospection and Vision', argued that Islamic Literature should be utilised as a psychological tool to inspire and educate the masses, especially youths, regarding what is right and wrong. In the essay, he addressed the existence of works that consist of contents that may intellectually and ideologically harm readers and called for better quality and higher quantity of Islamic Literary works that are emotional and sentimental in nature. It is telling that though the essay was written in 1968, he criticised those who disagreed with the usage of sentimental concepts such as 'love', 'beauty', and 'heart', saying that Islamic aesthetics should not be defined by 'turbans, robes, long beads.'[3]

Hence was the discourse of Islamic Literature, which revolved around its conceptualisation while simultaneously advocating its usage as a tool and catalyst for goodness within Muslim societies. From the writings of the intellectuals mentioned above, one will conclude that there is no dearth of materials and writings that can inspire current and future generations of writers who wish to produce good works of Islamic Literature. The aforementioned writers have presented their own different understanding and philosophies of Islamic Literature, and though they were formed based on the realities of their time, they are nevertheless of much value and should ideally be familiarised by future writers. In the context of this article, I would say that there is a need for any Singaporean Muslim writer who wishes to produce Islamic literary works to form their own unique understanding and philosophy so as to achieve clarity and purpose in their works. This can only be achieved by studying the writings of past intellectuals.

With Muhammad Sa'd Ramadan's Muslim-centric definition, Kuntowijoyo's concept of Prophetic Literature, and Shahnon Ahmad's understanding of literature as a form of worship (*ibadah*), therein lies a few important elements that I believe should be factored in by present and future English Islamic Literature writers in the context of Singapore. First would be the primary audience and readers that they are addressing through their works. In other words, though the artistry and aesthetics can be inclusive of and sensitive towards various traditions, the essence of Islamic Literature should be a work primarily written for the local Muslim community, addressing its problems, advocating for relevant reforms, instilling hope and courage. Such an aim should not be deemed as exclusive, as it does not necessarily mean that such literary works would only be relevant and understandable for Muslims. But rather, the objective of the work is to primarily resonate with the local Muslim community, with the purpose of advocating for morals and values rooted in Islamic tradition, which would be inherently universal. I believe this should be of priority, as works that are both localised and Islamic are in short supply as compared to the contrary.

However, with the local Muslim community in mind, the understanding of its context, dynamics, and demographics, is crucial as well. This brings me to my second point, which is the need for writers to adopt a socio-historical approach to identify the trends and challenges facing

[1] Majid, M. Y. A., Toklubok, P., & Musa, M. F. (2017). Gagasan sastera Islam (profetik) oleh Kuntowijoyo. *Jurnal Sultan Alauddin Sulaiman Shah*, *4*(2). Retrieved from https://jsass.uis.edu.my/index.php/jsass/article/view/117/99
Yaacob, A. B. (2017). Konsep Sastera Islam Oleh Shahnon Ahmad (Shahnon Ahmad's Concept of Islamic Literature). *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development, 2*(4), pp.66-93. https://academicinspired.com/jised/article/view/864/864

[3] Al-Buti, M. S. R. (2021). *Sastera Islami: Retrospeksi dan Visi (Islamic Literature: Retrospection and Vision)* (M. Syafiq Ismail, Trans.). Kuala Lumpur: pp. 27-28.

the community so as to enlighten and resonate with the current generation of readers. In today's case, the understanding that Islamic Literature is synonymous with Malay Literature is misplaced, sidelining the experiences of minority Muslims, including converts. The diversity of the Muslim community should ideally be represented and acknowledged in Islamic Literature, taking into account the various ethnicities and identities within the community. In this regard, Islamic Literature writers should also embrace the unique plurality and cosmopolitanism that surrounds the Muslim community in Singapore, which should present an array of current relevant themes, depending on the focus of the writer.

Nevertheless, while I advocate a strong and firm grasp of Islamic Literature discourse, I must acknowledge from both observation as a literary advocate and personal experience as an author, that producing novels in current context encompasses several challenges. To elaborate substantially requires more space and a specific article of its own, though I will share some. The first point that I would raise, in the context of publishing English Islamic Literature works in Singapore, would be the challenge of finding suitable publishers that are able to give the necessary support in editing, printing, marketing, and publishing. This challenge is of course related to economic factors, where the financial incentives of publishing Islamic Literature works is considerably lower as compared to other genres of literature. In this regard, I do believe that the resources and capabilities exist within the Muslim community, though it remains to be seen how such a business model can be sustainable.

On the other hand, we would also have to acknowledge the challenge that comes from producing creative Islamic literary works itself. Sustainability is also dependent on whether there will be a consistent supply of such works, which as we can observe in recent years, has been quite low in quantity. This, however, as aforementioned, does not necessarily translate into lack of demand. Nevertheless, here I would propose the need to mobilise and pump in resources to first develop a supply of English Islamic Literature. A case in hand that we can learn from is regarding the number of Malay novels written by Singapore writers over the decades. A simple online search will show us the following statistics: 1965–1970 (20 novels); 1971–1980 (29 novels); 1981–1990 (12 novels); 1991–2000 (18 novels); 2001–2010 (77 novels); 2011–2015 (14 novels). The jump in numbers between 1991–2000 and 2001–2010, from 18 to 77 novels can be explained with writing competitions organised by ASAS'50, which were then published by Pustaka Nasional. Here, we see that organisational support is crucial, especially in local context. It is possible that such efforts can be replicated.

In his monumental work, *Islamic Literature Discourse in Malaysia and Indonesia*, Mohd Faizal Musa observed the different factors that allowed Islamic Literature to flourish in the two countries. The main one being that in Islamic Literature in Malaysia was very much supported by the state as compared to in Indonesia, where the grassroots institutions such as *pesantrens* played a significant role in advocating Islamic Literature. He outlined the benefits of both efforts.[4] In the context of Singapore, much can be learnt from the two cases in how we can uplift Islamic Literature discourse and improve its output. Acknowledging our local context, the basis of any initiative must come first from the ground, i.e. the *asatizah* fraternity, literary advocates, etc, though I would say the task should primarily fall upon the religious fraternity. As mentioned in a previous article I wrote, titled *Literature and Singapore's Islamic Fraternity*,'[5] the mission to elevate the quality and quantity of the fraternity's output is possible due to the existing strong literary tradition that exists within. What is needed currently is to direct resources and discourse towards developing potential writers and nurturing current ones.

Here, organisations and institutions – be it existing or potential new ones – must be willing to step forward in advocating Islamic Literature discourse and encourage creative writing. I cannot help but to think of the upcoming Singapore College of Islamic Studies (SCIS) as a possible institution that can spearhead such an effort. While these are still early days, I hope that the institution will focus on nurturing the Islamic Arts and developing a tradition of Islamic literature rooted in Singapore's context. For example, it is plausible for the institution to have a Writer-In-Residence to encourage and inspire the students and the fraternity. For this to happen, there must be widespread realisation and consciousness towards the importance and relevance of Islamic Literature, both in English and Malay. The Indonesian scholar and intellectual, Sahal Mahfudh, wrote that Islamic advocacy has a symbiotic relationship with arts and culture, in which through its utilisation, it may elevate a community's awareness towards the importance of religiosity in a way that does not cause social unrest, but rather strengthen social development.[6] It is my hope and wish that there will be writers in the upcoming generations who are committed to publishing works of Islamic Literature. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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[5] Ubaidillah, A. (2024). *Literature and Singapore's Islamic Fraternity*. Retrieved from https://ahmadubaidillah.com/2024/04/15/literature-and-singapores-islamic-fraternity/
[6] Majelis Ulama Indonesia. (2021). *Prinsip dan Panduan Umum Seni Islami* (Principles and General Guide on Islamic Arts). Jakarta: BukuRepublika. pp.22.

Normalisation of *Ujub* in the Contemporary World:

A Personal Reflection

BY ARIC HIDIR AMIN

Ujub, an Arabic term that can be translated to vanity, self-admiration or self-conceit, denoting a spiritual ailment when a person becomes excessively impressed with their own abilities, accomplishments or status. A sickness pertinent to someone like me, who works in the entertainment industry. As I navigate life in the entertainment business, one that is performative on television and on the silver screens, I can't help but to notice the changes in my behaviour throughout my 18 years of career. One that I wish to share, in hopes that I can enlighten hearts and minds alike with this humble read. The world today is more connected and more visible than ever before, largely due to social media. Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and X allow myself and millions of others to showcase curated snapshots of our lives – a social practice I had to get acquainted with. I still remember the days when I was pursuing my diploma in the arts back in 2005, where social media was not as pervasive as it is today. Then, for one to be recognised in the field, you need to be exceptional in your craft. That, however, has changed. The amount of visibility attached to one's name in the online space can pretty much secure contractual gigs due to the perceived value one has to offer.

While there is nothing wrong with sharing joyful moments like achievements, talents, travels and experiences on social media, I often found myself seeking validation through likes, comments and shares. I noticed how these external validations would feed my ego and inflate my self-importance. For each time I received praise, I felt a rush of pride and satisfaction. I came to realise how this pursuit of approval can transform into a

form of *ujub*. Social media encourages constant comparison, creating an environment where self-promotion becomes a norm. I've observed and admittedly, sometimes, participated in the 'competition' to present oneself as the most successful, attractive, or talented. The result is often an overemphasised personal image and a tendency to measure worth based on digital reactions. The attention I received became addictive, leaving me vulnerable to pride and self-centeredness. Social media's role in normalising *ujub* is undeniable as it amplifies our need to be seen, celebrated, and envied. The more I invested in crafting my online persona, the more I fell into the depths of self-admiration. The worst part of it, when our worth is tied to numbers on the digital space, we unknowingly subscribe to a lifelong endeavour which has no cap.

Beyond social media, the culture of self-branding permeates many aspects of modern life. In professional settings, I'm constantly encouraged to "sell myself" – highlighting my strengths, successes and unique qualities. This very culture of self-branding requires me to focus intently on my accomplishments and build a narrative of success. On one level, this can be empowering, helping me to develop self-confidence and assert my capabilities. However, it can also foster a sense of entitlement and superiority, especially when I compare myself with others. I've caught myself, on more than one occasion, feeling a sense of pride and even disdain for those who I perceived as less accomplished. This kind of thinking I truly believe is a manifestation of *ujub* and it contradicts the principles of humility and empathy that I strive to uphold.

Materialism and individualism further complicate the picture, as society often equates success with wealth, status, and worldly possessions. I was constantly bombarded with "advice" that urged me to "stand out", "be the best", etc. In this environment, my self-worth became tied to what I've accomplished and what I own. When I focused on these outwardly markers of success, I started to believe that I am inherently better than others who may have not achieved the same. It was all in my head. This sense of superiority, it was all *ujub*. The heart of it. It blinded me of my flaws, making me less likely to engage in self-reflection and spiritual growth. Consumed by self-admiration, I failed to recognise the source of my blessings and began to attribute my successes solely to my own efforts. This mindset led to a lack of gratitude and made me forget my dependence on the divine. It prevented me from acknowledging my shortcomings as I was too constantly focused on how great I am, and not seeing the areas I needed to grow or repent.

Combating *ujub* requires ongoing self-awareness and effort. One of the practices that has helped me resist this tendency is by cultivating gratitude, although sometimes it's hard to do so. This is especially when the situation and circumstances do not favour us. By regularly reflecting on my blessings, I remind myself that all my talents, successes, gifts and opportunities are from Allah SWT. This reminds me of my dependence on the Creator and humbles me in the face of his infinite wisdom and mercy.

I remember a suggestion by an acquaintance to do community work that was not related to the media. I tried to be part of the grassroots team and even ran speech and drama classes for special needs children. It helped. When I focus on serving others, collaborating, and supporting those around me, I'm less likely to become preoccupied with my own ego. Building authentic connections based on empathy and mutual respect reminds me that I am not in the centre of the universe. This perspective really helped me maintain humility and recognise that my worth does not come from my accomplishments alone.

Mindful engagement with social media is another important exercise I do. I've started to question my motives each time I share or post content. Am I seeking validation from others? Am I trying to boost my own ego? If the answer is yes, I take a step back and reconsider uploading anything on the digital space. These days, my newly created social media accounts are merely a digital portfolio of my past works and I try my best to keep it at that. By approaching these platforms with intention, the least I can do is minimise the risk of falling into *ujub*.

The normalisation of *ujub* in this contemporary world we live in is a complex and pervasive issue. From social media and self-branding to materialism and individualism, the forces that drive us toward self-admiration are many. However, I believe it's possible to resist these pressures. It's no easy feat, but it is a journey worth taking.

In the end, *ujub* is not just about self-admiration; it's about losing sight of what truly matters. When I focus on myself at the expense of my relationship with the Divine, I miss out on the deeper connections and spiritual growth that life has got to offer. By striving to recognise and counter the *ujub* in my own heart, I hope to walk a path of humility, sincerity and service to others. It is a lifelong endeavour that requires me to stay vigilant and committed to self-improvement – one I am still struggling with. In doing so, I aim to transform not just myself, but also contribute to a culture that values humility, empathy and collective well-being over self-glorification. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg

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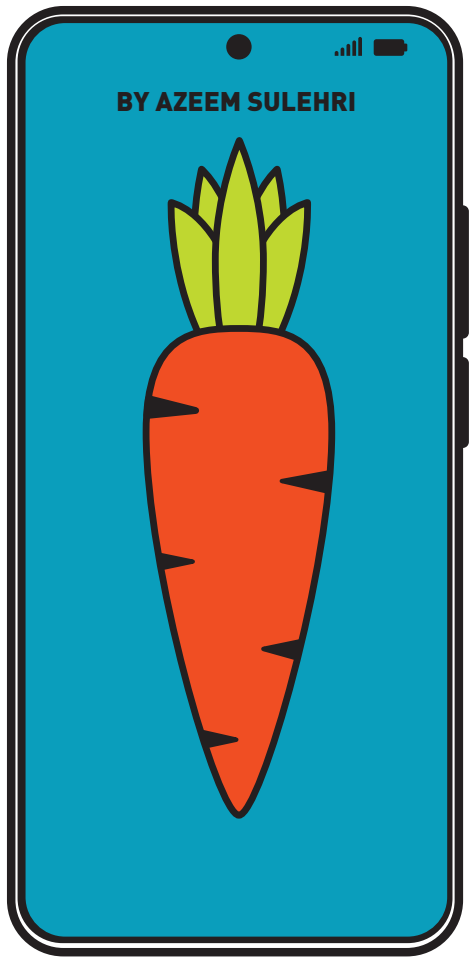
Smartphones and the Hedonic Treadmill of the Digital Age



It isn't easy to imagine modern life without smartphones. For many of us, particularly young people, these devices are almost always within arm's reach, with messages and updates that seem impossible to ignore. They have changed how we talk to friends, learn, and even spend idle moments like waiting in queue for coffee.

In many ways, smartphones behave like a "hedonic treadmill" for the digital age. Each ping provides a brief jolt of novelty or validation, yet that feeling fades swiftly and leaves us wanting the next notification. Jonathan Haidt, known for *The Coddling of the American Mind*[1], has examined how this constant chase for digital rewards influences younger generations. This article is a closer look at the main issues associated with smartphone use – from mental health challenges to academic distraction – and how more conscious choices can help us embrace the advantages of technology without relinquishing genuine human connection.

[1] Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin Press.

GROWING MENTAL HEALTH PRESSURES

Data from the American College Health Association shows that anxiety among undergraduates has risen by 134% since 2010, while depression diagnoses have increased by 106%. Although many factors are at play, researchers point to smartphone use as a key contributor. Sohn et al. report that around 23.3% of children and young people fall into the "problematic smartphone use" category, where individuals are significantly more likely to face depression, anxiety, chronic stress, and disordered sleep[2]. Goswami and Deshmukh further argue that smartphone addiction can lead to loneliness, exposing the paradox of a device meant to connect people but isolating them instead[3].

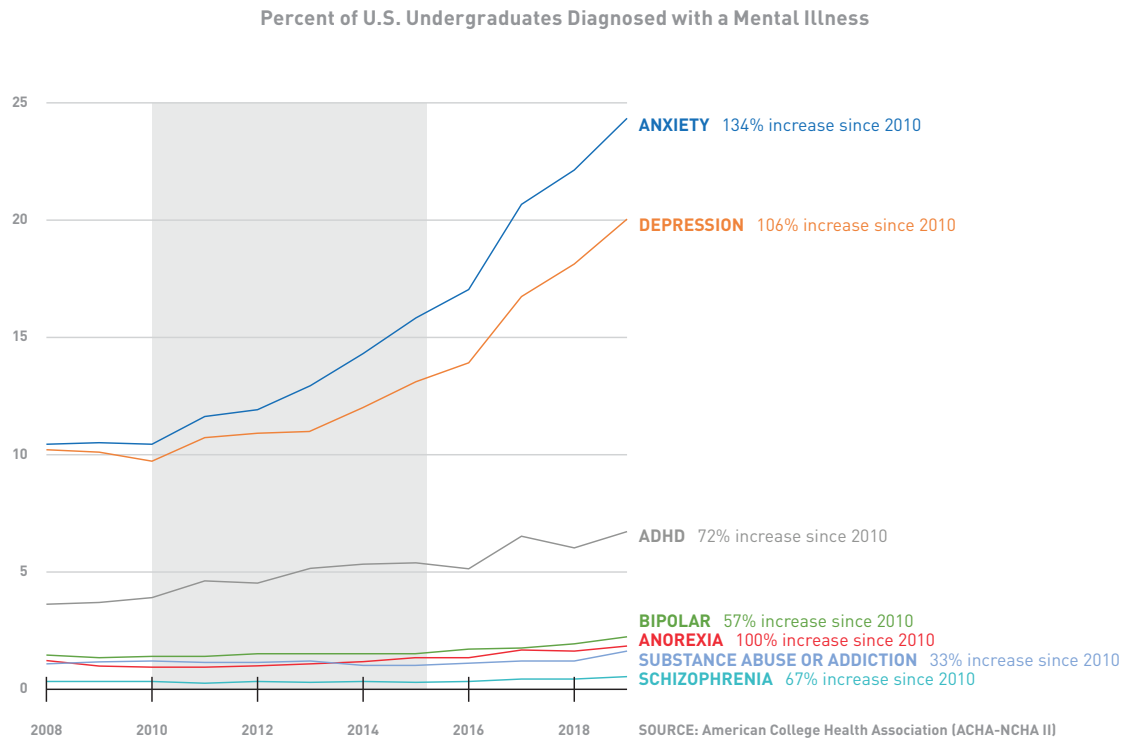
Haidt claims that the device-in-hand model magnifies social media's damaging effects. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok encourage endless scrolling and constant check-ins, which can steer users toward social comparison. Adolescents still forging their identities are especially at risk. Haidt and Lukianoff note that around 2010, younger teens swarmed these platforms, and at the same time, youth mental health indicators began to dip sharply[4]. The stream of stimulation, the pursuit of "likes," and the performance mentality can erode self-esteem.

Although we may blame our phone habits on personal willpower, design features embedded in apps and devices also play a significant role. Elements such as infinite scrolling, intermittent notifications, and autoplay videos are not accidental – they are carefully engineered to keep us engaged. Social media platforms often use the same psychological principles found in gambling, where users pull down to refresh in the same way slot machines are pulled for the chance of a reward.

A well-known case involves the introduction of infinite scroll by software designer Aza Raskin, substantially increasing time spent on news feeds. Another example is the autoplay function on platforms like YouTube or Netflix; viewers often let multiple episodes roll by without consciously deciding to continue. These "sticky" design elements can intensify the "hedonic treadmill" effect as we search for the next small burst of satisfaction.

Constant connectivity can create what is described as heightened vigilance and "fear of missing out" (FOMO). Adolescents who form excessive phone habits often report high-stress levels and difficulty "switching off," missing out on genuine mental downtime. Haidt links social media use to anxiety by noting how each post can become a public measure of popularity and approval. When the online response falls short, self-doubt can spiral.

Research from the US National Survey on Drug Use and Health reveals that between 2010 and 2020, anxiety levels



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[3] Goswami, S., & Deshmukh, A. (2023). Effect of Smartphone Addiction on the Mental Health of Adolescents: A Literature Review. *Mind and Society*. https://doi.org/10.56011/mind-mri-124-20235

[4] Karabey, S., Palanci, A., & Turan, Z. (2023). How does smartphone addiction affect the lives of adolescents socially and academically?: a systematic review study. *Psychology, Health & Medicine, 29*, 631–654. https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2023.2229241

among 18–25-year-olds soared by 139%, while those aged 26–34 saw a 103% jump. By contrast, adults aged 35–49 experienced smaller increases, and some data indicate that those over 50 may have slightly lower anxiety rates now than a decade ago. Many point to tech habits as a prime reason – people who grew up immersed in smartphone culture appear more prone to digital overload.

SOCIAL DISCONNECT IN A HYPERCONNECTED WORLD

Smartphones have broadened our social reach far beyond what was possible two decades ago. Users can stay in touch with distant relatives, join online groups, and discover new interests. Technology can boost "digital competence," helping less outgoing teens find friends or explore niche pursuits. At the same time, too much reliance on digital platforms can carry psychological drawbacks[5].

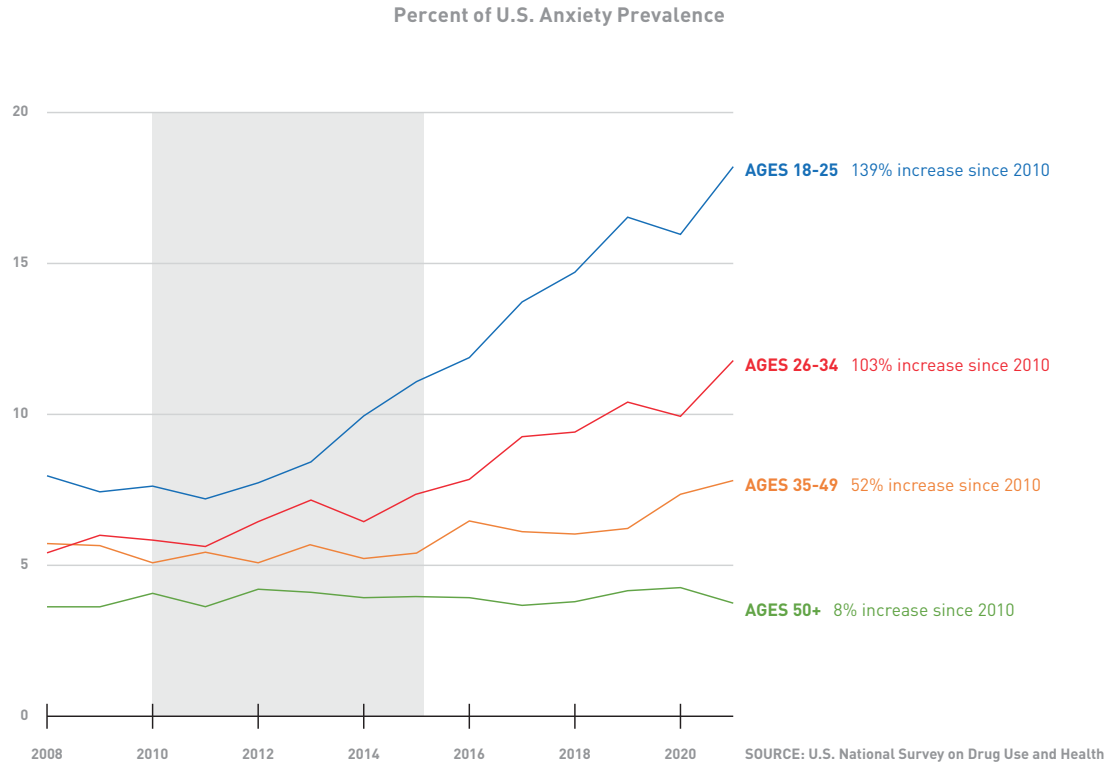
Constantly checking one's phone while talking to someone else can dilute face-to-face communication. Even when people share a physical space, their attention drifts to the screen, undermining trust and empathy. Al-Kandari and Al-Sejari discovered that when phone use becomes addictive, users report a greater sense of social isolation and less support from friends[6]. Authentic human contact fosters emotional resilience, which may not naturally emerge through online exchanges. Teenagers who have grown up with little experience of life without smartphones may miss crucial lessons about in-person communication and conflict resolution.

ACADEMIC DISTRACTIONS AND PHYSICAL EFFECTS

Smartphones also influence the classroom. Many students say they rely on these devices to stay organised, look up resources, and coordinate group tasks. However, they can sabotage academic success when distraction wins out; incessant notifications, social media alerts, and online entertainment undermine focus, sapping time and energy.

Late-night scrolling creates additional problems by disrupting sleep. Students who are short on rest find it challenging to concentrate in lectures or when studying. Ricoy et al. point out that if phone use starts early, problematic habits can become deeply ingrained when people reach university[7]. Even primary school children can develop tendencies that resemble smartphone addiction, potentially affecting emotional development and causing future academic difficulties[8].

Discussions about smartphones often emphasise mental health or social risks, but physical health can suffer as well. Prolonged neck flexion ("text neck")



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Smartphones are powerful tools that can both broaden horizons and trap users in cycles of self-doubt. To strike a healthier balance, we must be deliberate and guided by evidence on how digital behaviour becomes detrimental. By supporting real-world activities, practical device boundaries, and a shared commitment to each other's well-being, it becomes possible for young people to enjoy the best of smartphones while avoiding their most damaging effects.

results in muscle strain and reduced lung capacity – looking down at a screen for hours on end can translate into chronic neck and shoulder discomfort over time[9].

Excessive phone use also coincides with lower levels of physical activity; instead, people who might engage spend that time scrolling[10]. Pairing late-night phone sessions with early-morning commitments encourages insomnia and fatigue. Haidt observes that even small changes – like walking down the street with eyes glued to a screen – pull people out of their surroundings, diminishing awareness and spontaneity[11].

BUILDING A HEALTHIER DIGITAL CULTURE

It is impractical to expect everyone to abandon their smartphones. The goal is to use them sensibly, balancing convenience with an awareness of how overreliance can damage one's well-being. Smartphones can be indispensable for specific tasks, yet their constant presence can overwhelm them.

Haidt suggests that society has become more anxious and less resilient. Smartphones provide instant reassurance but also magnify comparison, drama, and information overload. Talking openly about these challenges can help the rising generation develop healthier coping skills.

Universities might offer workshops on digital mindfulness, and halls of residence could create communal spaces where phone use is limited. Families can agree on times to set devices aside, making room for proper conversation or shared pastimes. Friend groups might support each other by spotting signs of stress and suggesting digital breaks.

Smartphones are powerful tools that can both broaden horizons and trap users in cycles of self-doubt. To strike a healthier balance, we must be deliberate and guided by evidence on how digital behaviour becomes detrimental. By supporting real-world activities, practical device boundaries, and a shared commitment to each other's well-being, it becomes possible for young people to enjoy the best of smartphones while avoiding their most damaging effects.

Smartphones often feel like an unprecedented phenomenon, yet history is full of disruptive technologies that sparked both fascination and concern. The printing press in 15th-century Europe drastically altered the flow of information, and critics feared that easy access to books might cause intellectual laziness. Telegraph and telephone systems revolutionised communication in the 19th and 20th centuries, raising alarms about lost face-to-face interaction. Radio and television triggered new anxieties around passive audiences and family bonding.

These past upheavals remind us that while each new medium creates fears and challenges, societies adapt by developing cultural norms, regulations, or educational programmes. Smartphones stand out because they blend constant connectivity with immersive, individual screens – a combination that channels powerful forms of social influence directly into one's hand. Historical parallels show that concerns about technology are not new, but the scale and intimacy of smartphones arguably intensify the psychological and social effects more than previous inventions did. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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[10] Ratan, Z., Parrish, A., Alotaibi, M., & Hosseinzadeh, H. (2022). Prevalence of Smartphone Addiction and Its Association with Sociodemographic, Physical and Mental Well-Being: A Cross-Sectional Study among the Young Adults of Bangladesh. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19*. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192416583

[11] Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Penguin Press.

From *Gelek* to *Jedag Jedug*: The Evolution of Dangdut

BY QAMAR JANNAH FATEEN

Emerging from the vibrant cultural shifts of the 60s, dangdut is a popular and widely cherished Indonesian music genre rooted in grassroots communities. The name itself is onomatopoeic, derived from the drum sounds "dang" and "dut" — commonly heard in its music. Dangdut typically features traditional instruments like the *gendang* (a traditional wooden drum), with modern ones like the electric guitar and keyboard. The flute and violin are also frequently included, adding melodic depth. The genre has spawned numerous subgenres across the decades, including *koplo*, *gondang*, *pantura*, *electro*, *rockdut*, etc. Despite the diverse subgenres, the most important common feature across all subgenres is the drums. One of the hallmarks of dangdut is its rhythmic structure, characterised by syncopation that creates this irresistibly danceable groove. The dynamic rhythm of dangdut invokes movements and mirrors the lively energy of the genre, making it not just a form of musical expression, but a communal experience. This infectious quality of dangdut's groove will remain a central theme explored throughout the article — delving deeper into the evolution of dangdut throughout the decades and its impact on society across different eras.

Rhoma Irama, often referred to as the "King of Dangdut", played a key role in shaping and popularising the genre. Disenchanted with Western rock music, he was on a quest to develop a new musical style by the early 1970s. His songs are more rock-oriented with an electrified dangdut style as he combined different elements that exist in Malay, Indian and

Middle Eastern music. His career trajectory and music were pretty interesting as he wrote more about love in his earlier career days. After returning from his pilgrimage, he started to write lyrics to talk about social issues and to spread the word of Islam. Subsequently, he wrote lyrics in relation to moral laxity, human rights abuses, social inequality and many more[1]. Noting that dangdut was predominantly popular within the lower and working class, the topics covered in his songs offered an intriguing perspective, which was contrary to the upper class' view of the genre as being unrefined, vulgar, and corruptive to the country's social values. This inadvertently accentuated the irony of the disparity between the rich and the poor. Consequently, the emergence of low culture versus high culture; where dangdut is a communal experience for the working class and it was important to note that it was cheap, or rather free — due to an increase of pirated VCDs back then. Dangdut being a cheap thrill was not the only reason why it was considered low culture.

As more elements of style of music were incorporated into dangdut, the dangdut *koplo* subgenre rose in popularity in the 2000s, incorporating even more influences from rock, electronica, hip hop and pop. As much as Rhoma Irama changed the dangdut scene with incorporation of rock elements, Inul Daratista was no stranger to that. She was considered the precursor of *koplo*, playing a pivotal role in this transformation with her provocative performances that challenged the conventions of 'classic dangdut'. The defining feature of dangdut *koplo* is the speed and complexity of its rhythms, which are distinctly faster than those of traditional dangdut, enticing people to move and dance along to its tunes. The genre derives its name from the slang term "*koplo*" which refers to a cheap hallucinogenic drug commonly sold in Indonesia. Since *koplo* is played at a faster tempo, it is said to make listeners feel "high", hence giving the same effect as "*koplo* pills". *Koplo* was often distanced from traditional dangdut practitioners.

Even Rhoma Irama expressed his own concerns about Inul Daratista, particularly her signature dance move known as "*ngebor*" or "drill". He asserted that it was inappropriate and could degrade moral values in Indonesia, especially owing to the fact that Indonesia is a predominantly Muslim country with conservative cultural norms. Evidently, Inul's performances sparked significant media attention and public discourse. It was to the point that Inul's dancing became a focal point in debates surrounding religion, culture and politics — sparking conversations about how human bodies imbued with various meanings and values have powerful implications for discourses about Islam, pornography, women's bodies and changing forms of media[2].

On top of that, dangdut experts mentioned that Inul's performances are far from what 'real' dangdut is, as performed in rural East and Central Java. However, there are anecdotes from Indonesian locals who mentioned that singers who perform in small towns and villages tend to use erotic and sexy moves. With that in mind, dangdut performances were a hit at Indonesian weddings, local markets and informal gatherings, where the whole neighbourhood would turn up to see the show and young children were allowed to stay up late to watch[3]. This is where the distinction between low culture and high culture comes to play again — dangdut was something that could appeal to the masses in villages and was heavily scrutinised by more conservative and elite segments of the society due to the 'vulgarity' of their performances.

Despite the concept that dangdut is 'sinful' and that one should not indulge in the genre, dangdut *koplo* can also be seen as a celebration of Indonesian culture and heritage. Through its lively performances, it honours the rich traditions and spirited essence of the nation. It didn't take long until dangdut also swept the feet of their neighbouring countries — Malaysia and Singapore. In Singapore, dangdut's presence first emerged around the late 70s and 80s. Back then, dangdut in Singapore was popularised through social gatherings, live performances and nightclubs that catered to the Malay community. Local events featuring dangdut bands or singers became a common way for fans to enjoy the genre. Singaporeans often consumed dangdut music through radio broadcasts, cassette tapes, and later CDs, many of which were imported from Indonesia and Malaysia.

Similarly, conservative segments of the community sometimes criticised dangdut performances for their perceived sensuality, reflecting similar tensions seen in Indonesia. Gathering anecdotes from the older generation, it seems that dangdut had a negative stereotype as it was associated with Malay men going to nightclubs to enjoy dangdut — a term I would hear often was '*pakcik menggatal*' (which translates to flirty uncle). Fast forward to today, dangdut in Singapore remains a niche genre, enjoyed mostly by the Malay community and often celebrated during cultural events or private gatherings. It also maintains a presence through modern digital platforms like Spotify, YouTube and even TikTok. Early last year, there was a "Dangdut Koplo Extravaganza!" concert by Ochi Alvira and Syahiba Saufa at Esplanade, and tickets were sold out. This is all thanks to their immense following on various media platforms. With a combined following of over five million followers on TikTok and Instagram, international viral hits like *Rasah Nyangkem 3*, and millions of views on YouTube, Ochi and Syahiba have cemented their status as stars with distinct appeal. Their musical chemistry has undoubtedly established them as iconic figures in the current dangdut scene.

As the genre continues to evolve constantly, this is where we are able to observe dangdut being more receptive and we are now in the *Jedag Jedug* era.

The turn of the 21st century saw another significant shift in dangdut's evolution, marked by the influence of electronic dance music (EDM) and modern pop. This period, often referred to as the *Jedag Jedug*

[1] Gorlinski, V. (2024). Rhoma Irama, *Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rhoma-Irama
[2] Weintraub, A. (2008). 'Dance drills, faith spills': Islam, body politics, and popular music in post-Suharto Indonesia, *Popular Music*, 27(3), pp. 367-392. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143008102185
[3] Vaswani, K. (2012). Raunchy dangdut music stirs debate in Indonesia. *BBC News*.

era, introduced more fast-paced beats, electronic synths, and a greater focus on digital production. Artists like Inul Daratista and Nella Kharisma (dangdut and *koplo* singer) began incorporating electronic elements, creating a new, electrifying sound that appealed to younger generations. Indonesian DJs like Alva Kenzo, DJ Jedag Jedug, and Maman Fvndy have curated their own playlists of remixed tracks. With the incorporation of auto-tune, drum machines, and electronic beats, they have transformed dangdut into high-energy, crowd-pumping anthems.

According to my readings of both academic and non-academic articles, it seems like dangdut is gaining an increasingly better reputation, owing to the fact that the stigma associated with listening to dangdut or watching a dangdut performance has dissipated, contributing to a cultural rejuvenation. On the flip side, going back to how the old stereotype of dangdut was about '*pakcik menggatal*', it has now evolved to the younger generations, where mostly '*mat and minah*'[4] listen to the genre. As TikTok videos and Instagram reels continue to rise in popularity, thanks to their short video format, many creators can be seen dancing to trending or indie songs, sharing memes, posting short holiday vlogs, and showcasing their talents, among other content. In relation to dangdut, *jedag jedug* was first popularised on TikTok, with social media users showcasing their motorcycles in CapCut[5] edited videos — users would use *jedag jedug* music to edit their videos in a unique way, syncing the photos with the beats of the music. It then expanded to dancing, showing a compilation of selfies, celebrity fan edits, promotional videos and many more. Some would find these videos fun and cool, and some would find the editing and song choice to be awfully tacky. Regardless, it is inevitable to acknowledge that these TikTok videos are increasingly making dangdut popular among the younger generations. In a study that was done in Indonesia, it was found that TikTok actually plays an important role in making *jedag jedug* popular. Comments presented in the study vary from "loud and enjoyable", "the remix is interesting", "Indonesian people are creative, they can remix all the songs, even sad songs" to "I associate jedag jedug with *jamet*"[6]. *Jamet* is an Indonesian slang that is usually associated with people who are weird and tacky. This is where we observe similar tensions when it comes to stereotypes surrounding *jedag jedug*.

Through conversations with the younger generation and 'doom scrolling' of TikTok, it seems like *jedag jedug* is considered low culture, due to the perceptions of who would upload a *jedag jedug* video. In a recent *jedag jedug* video that was circulated on TikTok, two students were seen dancing to *jedag jedug* in their uniforms. Unfortunately, due to the distinctive nature of their uniforms, people were commenting on the irony of students from a prestigious, elite school engaging in activities typically associated with neighbourhood school students. Some even commented, '*mat minah dah pandai seh*', which translates to 'mat and minah are already clever people'. This reflects the stereotype that in Singapore's youth culture, dangdut/*jedag jedug* is associated exclusively with a particular subculture — a subculture that is usually associated with certain styles, attitudes, or behaviours that some perceive as less polished or mainstream. This incident underscores the broader stereotype within Singapore's Malay youths, where jedag jedug is often exclusively associated with a particular demographic. Such associations perpetuate a class divide within the Malay society, where certain forms behaviours or self-entertainment are seen as inherently tied to socioeconomic or educational backgrounds. While some may view this stereotyping as harmless and humorous, it accentuates the deeper societal biases that exist within the Malay community. The irony of elite school students engaging in this form of entertainment forces a reexamination of these cultural hierarchies and challenges the idea that certain forms of expression belong exclusively to any one group. This is where labelling theory comes into play where these stereotypes instil a stigma to a subculture, leading them to experience social withdrawal and low self-worth.

The evolution of dangdut from Gelek to Jedag Jedug reflects the genre's adaptability in the face of shifting cultural, technological and social influences. From its roots in traditional Indonesian music to embracing electronic beats, dangdut has consistently mirrored the changing tastes and identities of the masses in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and maybe even other countries. Although some purists argue that the incorporation of electronic and pop elements dilutes dangdut's traditional charm, dangdut is still able to symbolise Indonesia's rich heritage and its ever-changing genre that flows with the times. I for one believe that the genre's ability to evolve and adapt suggests a promising future.

On the argument that *jedag jedug* should be a fun thing, and not a catalyst to stereotyping people, I honestly am a proponent of the notion that music knows no boundaries and that it should not be a genre that creates these stereotypes amongst the Malay community. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg

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[4] Colloquial terms of a Malay youth subculture
[5] CapCut is a mobile video-editing app with various templates to choose from
[6] Tiantini, W. B., Afdholy, N. & Puspita, Y. M. (2023). Jamet stereotyping in jedag-jedug music: An analysis of jedag-jedug music stereotype. *Jurnal Seni Musik, 12*(2). https://journal.unnes.ac.id/sju/index.php/jsm/index

FROM CALLIGRAPHY TO THE METAVERSE: **DR NOOR HASBI YUSOFF**'S JOURNEY THROUGH MEDIA AND DESIGN

BY IRDINA AISYAH MOHD IMRAN

In the ever-changing landscape of media, technology and communication, few academics and artists embody the synergy between tradition and innovation as seamlessly as Dr Noor Hasbi Yusoff. Currently an Assistant Professor at the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD), Dr Hasbi's academic journey spans continents – from Singapore and Australia to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Nevertheless, much of his work is rooted in his Malay-Muslim heritage and upbringing in Singapore, which profoundly shape his perspective on education, identity and the arts. Dr Hasbi bridges the worlds of visual communication design and user experience with deep cultural and artistic roots through his work, which include calligraphy, calligraffiti and other forms of interactive media. Beyond his artistic endeavours, Dr Hasbi's commitment to fostering inclusive and critical learning environments can also be seen in his global endeavours to contribute to the growing world of social semiotics and visual cultures, in his conferences in Finland, Japan and Spain.

In this interview, Dr Hasbi shares insights into his multifaceted career, the motivations behind his global journey, and thoughts on the intersections of culture, technology, and education. From mentoring students across diverse cultural contexts to navigating the challenges and opportunities of a digital age, Dr Hasbi offers a compelling narrative of resilience, adaptability and innovation.

Dr Hasbi unveiling the potential of AI in cultural storytelling at the Museum of the Future, Dubai

Q: Could you tell us more about yourself and your family?

Dr Hasbi: I come from a family of educators in Singapore, where education and *adab* (etiquette) were deeply emphasised. As a Malay Muslim, I grew up deeply rooted in traditions and religion. My maternal grandfather, a respected religious teacher and social activist in the Arab Street/Masjid Sultan area, profoundly influenced my worldview, demonstrating the balance between consistent religious practice and impactful worldly endeavours, particularly in the visual arts. My journey spans diverse artistic expressions, from punk rock and street art to traditional Malay arts like dance, *dikir barat*, calligraffiti, and art installations. My educational experiences shaped my appreciation for the learning process, emphasising growth over grades. These experiences have taken me across continents as both an academic and artist. The unwavering support of my family, particularly my wife, has been instrumental in shaping my values and achievements.

Q: What does a day in your life look like?

Dr Hasbi: A typical day begins with quiet meditation and reflection. I dedicate my mornings to reading and writing, engaging with thought-provoking ideas on media, culture, and creative practice. My academic role as an assistant professor and practice-based researcher occupies much of my day, where I explore sociocultural meaning-making through digital tools to enhance artistic expression and teaching strategies. The evening is reserved for family time, reconnecting with my roots, and maintaining the balance between professional pursuits and personal growth.

Q: What motivated you to pursue opportunities outside Singapore?

Dr Hasbi: There were many motivations, but primarily, I wanted to challenge myself and step outside my comfort zone. Working and living abroad allowed me to broaden my perspectives and gain invaluable experiences, particularly through interactions with diverse cultures. These experiences helped me rediscover my *jati diri* (identity) as a Malay and a Muslim. It also gave me the opportunity to bring my unique identity into international conversations, fostering cross-cultural understanding.

Q: What are some of your favourite career highlights?

Dr Hasbi: One of my most memorable moments was my first solo exhibition at the Frankston Arts Centre in Victoria, Australia, in 2006, which led to my PhD scholarship at RMIT University. I curated and presented a mixed-media digital exhibition that transformed the calligraphic works of Qais Al Muhib into an interactive multimedia performance, bridging the traditional and spiritual aspects of Malay arts with modern techniques. I revisited this experience as a finalist in several international arts competitions in Dubai and the metaverse in 2022.

Another highlight was mentoring students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, guiding them through projects that challenged their worldviews and perceptions. Lastly, completing my PhD after 10 years – a study highlighting the intersection of identity, culture, and technology – stands as a testament to my commitment to meaningful and impactful scholarship.

Q: How do you think living and working abroad has enriched your life, both academically and personally?

Dr Hasbi: Living and working abroad has significantly broadened my worldview and deepened my appreciation for Malay culture and its values. Academically, it exposed me to innovative methodologies and practices, some rooted in religio-cultural traditions, which I have applied in my teaching and research. Personally, it has taught me resilience, adaptability, and the beauty of embracing diverse identities, all of which shape how I approach challenges and opportunities.

Q: Do you have any experiences where your background as a Malay Muslim from Singapore provided a unique perspective in your career and/or your everyday experiences?

Dr Hasbi: Certainly. While at RMIT as a PhD candidate and academic staff, I worked on projects addressing cultural representations in interactive media. My background allowed me to bring an authentic voice to these discussions, ensuring nuanced portrayals of minority communities, particularly Malays in Singapore and Australia. In everyday life, my identity bridges gaps and fosters dialogue, as demonstrated when I wore traditional Malay attire – *Baju Melayu*, *Sampin*, and *Tengkolok/Songkok* – to lectures and presentations, sparking meaningful conversations about culture and tradition.

Dr Hasbi and his family, whom he describes as his pillars of support and his heart

Q: As an artist and educator, how do you balance traditional calligraphy and modern digital techniques, and are there any cultural aspects that influence your work?

Dr Hasbi: I see tradition and technology as complementary rather than opposing forces. My work often begins with traditional techniques in Malay and Arabic calligraphy, preserving its rich heritage, and evolves through digital tools and generative AI, making it relevant to contemporary audiences. Cultural elements, such as harmony and community values, are intricately woven into each piece, reflecting my identity and inspiring others to embrace their roots while innovating.

Q: Having worked in Monash University and RMIT, how did your experiences there prepare you for your current role at UOWD?

Dr Hasbi: Both Monash and RMIT shaped my ability to navigate multicultural and multireligious academic environments. At Monash, I honed my research and teaching skills, while at RMIT, I developed a creative pedagogy and practice-based research approach. These experiences prepared me to lead innovative projects and teach complex sociocultural subjects at UOWD, where I mentor both tutors and students in a rapidly evolving global media and design landscape.

Q: In the rapidly evolving fields of media and communication, what do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities for your students and your own research?

Dr Hasbi: The biggest challenge lies in addressing ethical dilemmas in AI and media, such as misinformation and representation. However, these challenges are also opportunities to foster critical thinking and creativity. The rise of immersive media and generative AI offers exciting possibilities to explore culturally responsive storytelling, bridging cultural and technological narratives. These endeavours have allowed me to present my research and practice globally, from the UAE and Japan to Finland, Malaysia, and the metaverse.

Q: What emerging trends in media, communication, or education do you think the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore should embrace to remain relevant and empowered?

Dr Hasbi: The community should prioritise digital and AI literacy, leveraging these tools to amplify their voices and share their stories. Platforms like social media and AI-driven storytelling through reels, podcasts, and films can connect with global audiences while showcasing heritage. Malay Muslim writers and directors, such as Muhammad Mahfuz and Razi Salam, exemplify how to balance tradition with global relevance, demonstrating the power of storytelling.

Q: Lastly, do you have any advice for Singaporean Malay-Muslims who are considering working and/or studying abroad?

Dr Hasbi: If given the opportunity, step out with confidence and an open mind. Celebrate your unique identity while embracing new experiences. Prepare thoroughly by seeking mentors, researching opportunities, and building a strong support network. Remember, each challenge abroad is a chance for growth and an opportunity to offer a fresh perspective to the world. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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Book Review:

Imperialisme Intelektual

by Syed Hussein Alatas

BY HAZIQAH BINTE RAFIEE

Imperialisme Intelektual written by Professor Syed Hussein Alatas is a profound piece of text which highlights the dangers of intellectual imperialism that one unknowingly adopts in their pursuit of knowledge. This book was written with the purpose of criticising the phenomenon of intellectual imperialism and highlighting its implications. First published in 2000, the book dissects the definition, traits and problems associated with intellectual imperialism. Within the context of Southeast Asia, the book also provides insights into the relationship or parallels drawn between political imperialism (involving the control of Southeast Asia by the West) and intellectual imperialism.

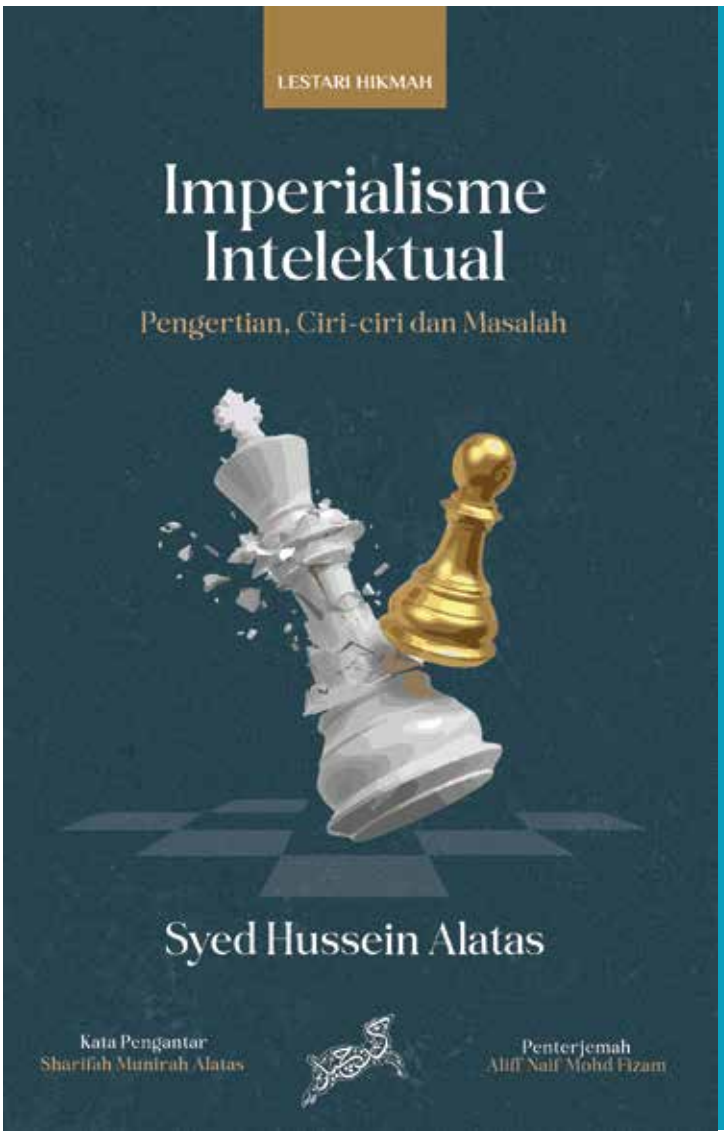
This review seeks to explore the definition, characteristics of the phenomenon of intellectual imperialism along with the problems that arise from it, strengths and limitations of *Imperialisme Intelektual* and its relevance to the Malay community in Singapore. Alatas' work resonates deeply with the Department of Malay Studies in Singapore, with it being one of the alternative discourses created on Orientalism as part of the department's tradition.[1] Similarly, Professor Farid Alatas from the department publishes articles revolving around academic dependency, intellectual decolonisation and the tradition of autonomous knowledge, thus proving how the discourse of academic imperialism is deeply rooted in the department.

DEFINITION OF *IMPERIALISME INTELEKTUAL*

In the introduction to the theory of intellectual imperialism in his article on academic dependency, Alatas includes that the phenomenon was defined by Johan Galtung as "that process whereby the centre of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself".[2]

CHARACTERISTICS OF *IMPERIALISME INTELEKTUAL*

Imperialisme Intelektual is structured around the six characteristics of intellectual imperialism and the two problems perpetuated from it. Alatas identifies the six characteristics as:



[1] Alatas, S. F. (2018). "Silencing as Method": Leaving Malay Studies Out. In Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, *Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore* [Report]. https://fass.nus.edu.sg/mls/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2020/07/Alatas.SilencingasMethod-2-4-13795-Final1.pdf

[2] Alatas, S. F. (2022). Political Economies of Knowledge Production: On and Around Academic Dependency. *Journal of Historical Sociology, 35*(1), 14–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/johs.12362.

1. ***Exploitation:*** colonial powers exploit the intellect of the colonised community; data or knowledge is collected or gained by foreign scholars then processed and transcribed into books or articles back in their home country (in other words, in the country of the coloniser)
2. ***Guidance:*** there are certain guidelines that the people from less developed countries have to follow, and are organised into the goals set by the colonising powers
3. ***Compliance:*** the dominant power expects the subjugated people to comply to certain aspects of its life, organisation and regulations
4. ***Secondary role:*** the subjugated people will not be given priority but rather play a secondary role in the control of international publications and in international conferences for example, with the excuse that it is 'expensive' to involve them in creative research
5. ***Rationalisation of the civilising mission:*** there are discussions on developing science in less developed countries according to the model being set by the dominant powers
6. ***Imperialist rulers/governors:*** those who govern colonised nations are of lower standards than those in their home country, but are still looked upon in less developed countries for they gain knowledge in the aforementioned country and eventually act as experts in the field.

Alatas too, identified two problems that arise from intellectual imperialism:

1. ***Academic dependency:*** The methodologies used by scholars in less developed countries are just mere rituals, without any innovation made on their part for they imitate the topics researched thus limiting their audience with the publication of repetitive papers or journals revolving around the same topics repeatedly. This is seen as intellectual servitude and dependency. As for intellectual bondage, one would believe a certain stereotype without any research done on their part, thus restricting their intellect. Imitation comes in the form of writing and the choice of topic, making one estranged from their own intellectual traditions and experiencing the lack of interest and confidence in the past. This, therefore, leads them to perceive that there is no value in learning from Asian countries.
2. ***Intellectual comprador and the need for a separation:*** Local scholars are deemed as 'traitors' for they are paid to provide data to foreign scholars, who would then process and publish the aforementioned data in a form unrecognisable to the 'traitor', who, in turn, neither has any idea of the presence of the end product or get involved in the writing or publishing process; Alatas provides examples which highlight the main idea of one's own country's history being seen and written from a different lens. This, however, is not seen in Western countries as a Japanese or Indian will never be seen paying an American scholar to provide them with data which they would then transcribe into an end product distributed in Japan or India respectively. A notable example given by Alatas is the fact that Americans write their own history while Southeast Asians do not.

Alatas' analysis spans several chapters, each focusing on specific themes:

1. ***The parallels between political imperialism and intellectual imperialism:*** The six characteristics of intellectual imperialism are linked and related to political imperialism.
2. ***The two problems that arise from intellectual imperialism:*** (a) intellectual servitude and dependency, bondage and imitation and (b) intellectual comprador and the need for separation
3. ***The continuity of intellectual imperialism:*** intellectual imperialism is not a new phenomenon but rather one perpetuated by the imperialistic practices adapted to the modern age
4. ***Intellectual imperialism and the captive mind:*** The captive mind is a product of the mind that seeks knowledge from institutions that breed its students to imitate others and are controlled by the Western way of thinking, hence resulting in a non-creative mind equipped with the inability to produce an original problem. The intellectual dependency on present-day stereotypes and the inability to separate the specific course of things from the general is also a characteristic of a captive mind. Other forms of the captive mind include: seeing things in fractions, being alienated from the bigger problems of society and separated from his own intellectual goals, ignorance towards its own captive state of mind, incapability to be examined quantitatively but rather in an empirical way and last but not least – it is the product of the dominance of the Western powers over the entire world. In this chapter, Alatas also provides salient examples that highlight the importance (for the colonial powers) of academic imperialism as a force that moulds and shapes peoples' way of thinking according to the imperialists.
5. ***Intellectual emancipation:*** one has to free their mind from the shackles of intellectual imperialism to exponentially develop the tradition of creative and free social sciences in a developing nation.

There's an overarching theme of historical journals and articles at the heart of intellectual imperialism. Alatas effectively conveys the peculiarity in allowing one's mind to be dominated by the West, as it results in one's own history being rewritten and published by the West.

STRENGTHS OF *IMPERIALISME INTELEKTUAL*

Concrete solutions to solve the problem of the lack of drive or motivation that stems from intellectual imperialism are provided. Such solutions are listed as follows:

1. Being critical towards writers in general, including foreign writers
2. Shifting one's attention to individual research topics
3. Not evaluating oneself according to foreign standards
4. Instil individuality and independence in oneself

Secondly, *Imperialisme Intelektual* has relevance to postcolonial studies. Alatas provides insightful and profound links to postcolonial studies. Last but not least, Alatas' provides emphasis on intellectual dependency, where he emphasises the danger of intellectual imperialism on local scholars as it diminishes their creativity.

LIMITATIONS OF *IMPERIALISME INTELEKTUAL*

The book, too, has its limitations. There is limited focus on non-Western intellectual traditions. The idea that the Western powers collect data from less developed countries, process the data into journals or

publications in their home country then distribute and sell them in the respective country they made their research in is often repeated throughout the book. Additionally, the concept of individuals from less developed countries (who possess knowledge in their area of expertise) not having the knowledge to write essays or publish their own articles is repetitive. Focus on non-Western intellectual traditions such as methods non-Westerners use to do their findings or research are limited.

HOW THE POTENTIAL OF *IMPERIALISME INTELEKTUAL* CAN BE FURTHER STRETCHED

As someone deeply impressed by Professor Syed Hussein Alatas's extensive knowledge and masterful writing, I approach this with great respect for their scholarship. As a Gen Z currently undertaking pre-university studies, something I had hoped to see in *Imperialisme Intelektual* is solutions on how today's youths can tackle the challenge of preserving or enriching one's creativity in the pursuit of knowledge amidst the rise of technological advancements, but it is not to be fret upon since the book was published in the year 2000. Hence, I opine that the potential of *Imperialisme Intelektual* can be further stretched by inviting prominent scholarships (that have been influenced by Alatas' School of Autonomous Knowledge) such as Professor Farid Alatas, Dr. Azhar Ibrahim, Noor Aisha and Shaharuddin Maaruf to write an excerpt or two at the back of *Imperialisme Intelektual* on how today's seekers of knowledge can dismantle the captive mind and strengthen their creativity despite the rise in technological advancements such as AI. Such applications, namely ChatGPT, MetaAI and many more have provided users with shortcuts to problems, whether it be in academic fields or not. This is not to say that I completely discourage the use of AI in one's studies since I implement it in my own learning, but rather, I believe that students of this age have the potential to outdo these artificial minds. AI provides lengthy paragraphs rich in vocabulary when one seeks for it to write an essay for them, thus setting a 'standard' to the user, leading them to think that their own work can only be deemed good when aligned with the standards set by AI. Alatas emphasises in *Imperialisme Intelektual* that a written piece of work is good, regardless of whether it is published in the West or not. In a similar vein, one should not heavily rely on the use of AI, because their work has its own uniqueness and does not need to conform to the standards set by AI. However, with the acceleration of the pace of life, AI has been central in our lives such that its use is inescapable. Hence, having the input of the aforementioned scholars could provide valuable insights on how youths can prevent their minds from being overcome by AI and discuss the problems and ethical aspects of the use of AI as well as the importance of maintaining intellectual integrity.

RELEVANCE TO THE MALAY COMMUNITY IN SINGAPORE

Imperialisme Intelektual is relevant to the Malay community in Singapore as the phenomenon impacts cultural and language preservation. The choice of English as the lingua franca relegated Malay to a secondary position such that the Malay language has limited prominence in public life (despite it being the national language of Singapore), impacting cultural identity and self-esteem within the community. In addition to that, Alatas' critique further proves the need for the Malay community in Singapore to reclaim their intellectual and cultural agency, by promoting Malay studies and fostering a deeper appreciation for the language among Malay youths in Singapore and appreciation for Malay contributions to Singapore's history and development. Malay scholars, writers and educators should be given support to ensure that the community's perspectives are represented and considered in national and academic discourses, thus challenging intellectual imperialism.

MY PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON *IMPERIALISM INTELEKTUAL*

During my immersion trip in Sarawak as part of my Malay Language Elective Programme at the Pre-University Level (MLEP-JC), I was exposed to the culture, language and literature of the different ethnic groups in Sarawak – Iban, Melanau, Orang Ulu, Bidayuh, etc. On one of the nights, our teachers debriefed us, relating the activities for the day to the concept of 'the captive mind', and the thought of Alatas' ideas in *Imperialisme Intelektual* came to mind. It was beautiful to see the pride the different ethnic groups had of their identity, and how their respective languages are still entrenched in their day-to-day lives – an example would be the Berita Iban segment on the TV Sarawak channel, i.e. news documented and relayed in the Iban language. Our teachers taught us that this was only possible because they had freed themselves from the captive mind, thus enabling them to preserve their cultures, language and identities. This, therefore, serves as a reminder that we, as Malays, should free ourselves from the captive mind, in order to truly preserve our culture, language and literature, for it to remain deeply rooted in the lives of the generations to come.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Imperialisme Intelektual* by Professor Syed Hussein Alatas is an essential contribution to understanding the pervasive issue of intellectual imperialism, particularly in the postcolonial Southeast Asian context. By dissecting its characteristics, implications, and continuity, Alatas not only critiques the dominant paradigm but also offers actionable solutions to empower local scholars and resist the pervasive influence of Western-centric intellectual traditions. It is a compelling call for intellectual liberation, urging scholars and communities to reclaim their agency, celebrate their heritage, and chart an independent course in the global landscape of knowledge and culture. ■

This article is also available on karyawan.sg.

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