

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue “Marriage, Intimacy, Gender and Islam in Southeast Asia”

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The topic of gender and Islam in Southeast Asia has been much studied. It is a field that has explored how gender inequality is entrenched through Islamic marriage—with its institution of polygamy (Nurmila 2009; Nurul Huda 2021), its persistent history of child marriage (Wu 2017), and its sanctioning of informal marriage and divorce today (Smith 2014; Platt 2017). Questions are asked on how moral conceptions of Islamic masculinity and femininity have shifted over periods of national political transitions (van Wichelen 2010), and on how these reconstituted gender orders and norms are religiously legitimized (Schroeter 2013). An extensive focus on the Syariah law in modern nation-states has also situated its crucial role in defining a resurgent Islamic family as being anchored upon men and women differentiated in their roles, rights, and obligations (Esposito and Bas 2001; Nik Noriani 2003; Maznah 2011). This field of observation is widened by also looking at how everyday notions of gender inequality are transmitted through the media of popular Islamic sex advice magazines (Lulu and Alkaff 2018). Other significant works have added to our knowledge on how the Islamic gender project is brooked through new and evolving modes of sociability that challenge erstwhile notions of liberal modernity. Contemporary Islamic youth and gendered lifestyles are richly captured in the following studies—of Indonesia by Smith-Hefner (2019) and Nisa (2013, 2014, 2021); of Malaysia by Müller (2014), Nawrotek and Mehan (2020), and Nisa (2021); of Singapore by Nurhaizatul (2019) and Kamaludeen (2016).

This Special Issue of *Religions* addresses the question of marriage, intimacy, gender, and Islam in Southeast Asia by expanding the field of observation on gender and Islam to include hitherto unexamined textual materials, which have some powers to induce, sway, contemplate, or compel the exercise of certain gendered norms and behavior among Muslims. Moving away from the more predominant focus on Syariah laws, Islamic movements and Islamic lifestyles, authors of this Special Issue study textual materials to explore how gender dynamics in Islam are sustained through the discursive medium of written documents, published literature, manuals, transcriptions, and letters of the law. Literary works, romance novels, sex manuals, marriage preparation handbooks, legal documents, and transcripts of qualitative interview data are used to examine how orders and norms of gender and sexuality are shaped in the social consciousness and popular imagination of Muslims. The contributors ask questions, such as the following: How have religious systems, religious symbols, and religious narratives shaped the idea of gender through texts, language, and even mythologies around marriage and sexuality? How and why does “Islamic marriage”, constitute the core and distinct identity of being a modern Muslim? Are there sacred rules and techniques of intimacy within an Islamic union? Has there been room for expressing defiance, irreverence, and sacrilege against predominant patterns of marriage and conjugal unions in the Islamic world? Authors try to find answers to these questions in each of their studies.

Studying old, pre-twentieth Malay manuscripts, Maznah Mohamad discovers that sex is valorized not just for bodily pleasure but also in the validation of a divine faith. The contents of two turn of the twentieth century published texts from the Indonesian



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island of Riau, containing unexpurgated, if not wayward expressions of sexual norms, are the subject of Mohd Faizal Musa's study. The continuous design of a good Muslim marriage curriculum in Singapore, which aspires to impart skills for a lasting marriage in Singapore is explored by Suriani Suratman. Okky Madasari weighs the interpretation and delimitation over what constitutes good morality and sexuality rights in Indonesia through the passage of the nation's antipornography law in the 2000s. In Alicia Izharuddin's article, she questions why there is such an allure of Islamic "forced marriage" virtues serving as a popular trope in Malaysian romance novels. Finally, medical experts, Rosediani Muhammad and her co-authors, contribute to the depth of studies on marriage and intimacy by presenting their findings from their qualitative interviews of Malay Muslim women in Peninsular Malaysia who reported on symptoms of sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction in their marriage.

A chronological and historical rendition of the above questions starts with the article by Maznah Mohamad on "Sex Manuals in Malay Manuscripts as Another Transcript of Gender Relations". By going back to some earlier Malay-Islamic sources, the article highlights the importance of a system of tutelage in all aspects of the Muslim's private life. Not only are there contractual rules on marriage, but correct ethics and techniques in performing and attaining pleasure in conjugal unions are equally and elaborately prescribed in these manuals. These pre-twentieth-century Malay sex manuals, derived from medieval Arabic or Persian sources, were part of the compendium of Islam knowledge circulated in Muslim Southeast Asia. The ubiquity of these texts in Malay manuscript collection indicates that the fulfillment of sexual pleasure was an intrinsic part of faith. However, a reading of the texts also shows the ambiguous position of women in society then. While men and women are represented as equals in the achievement of pleasure, the texts also contain misogynistic portrayals of women, which may reflect tensions and ambiguities surrounding the framing of gender roles based on religious texts on the one hand, and on everyday cultural realities, on the other.

Much later from the above manuscripts, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were the literary works on sexual behavior and sexual advice by Raja Ali Haji and Khatijah Terung, respectively. The two authors were prominent Malay religious and literary personages from the Indonesian island of Riau, who approached sex as a literary or religious theme in an unreserved way. Mohd Faizal Musa's article on "Transcripts of Gender, Intimacy, and Islam in Southeast Asia: The 'Outrageous' Texts of Raja Ali Haji and Khatijah Terung" uncovers the contents of these two published works and discovers some surprising exposition and disposition on sexual portrayals and practices among Malays. The "outrageous" sexual depictions in the texts are discussed and analyzed, in part to debunk the idea of a "sexual revolution" or "sexual licentiousness" as emanating from an external culture.

The intimacy between nation and body can be inferred from Suriani Suratman's article on "Skills for "Marriage of a Lifetime": An Examination of Muslim Marriage Preparation Handbooks in Singapore, 1974 to 2018". Her study of four Muslim marriage preparation handbooks over four decades illustrates the Singapore state's role in directing and prescribing how and why a long-lasting and companionate marriage should be the aspiration of modern, marriageable Muslims in its population. However, much as the contents and approaches of the marriage workbooks have changed in accordance with the socio-economic imperatives of the times, the achievement of gender equality as a principle in Muslim marriage is approached with reservation. The overriding concern for protecting a minority community within their cultural-religious bounds has made the norms of gender equality in marriage a delicate terrain for state intervention.

During the mid-2000s, in the period of Indonesia's post-Suharto democratization, the body and sexuality as a trope of Islamic morality was openly brought out into the public sphere for political discourse. In her article, "Shall We Dance? Defining Sexuality and Controlling the Body in Contemporary Indonesia" Okky Maddasari highlights political contentions around the promulgation of Indonesia's antipornography legislation in 2008.

The article explicates how this space was dominated by Islamic political groups who are identified as hardline and conservative in their outlook on gender rights and identities. In the contest for authority over laws controlling the integrity of the body, this political faction prevailed in their interpretation of Islamic morality over all others. Control over the body by this stream of religious force, through secular legislation, subsequently led to strictures and curtailment of popular culture and the flourish of artistic creativity.

As the above articles show, sexuality and gender relations can be variously outlined, first by informal texts, then by state-sanctioned manuals, and then by way of formal statutes. At another stage, in the late 2000s, in a Malaysia that was by then “hypermodern and global”, Alicia Izharuddin probes into the reasons as to why popular romance fiction with themes of “forcible” marriage situations had struck an appeal among middle-class Muslim women’s readership. In her article on “‘Redha tu Ikhlas’: The Social-Textual Significance of Islamic Virtue in Malay Forced Marriage Narratives”, the theme of marriage and intimacy is taken at another level, through a study of authors, publishers, and readers of this genre of a romance novel. Marriage is presented as a religious obligation that even if one is compelled into accepting a match not entirely of one’s own choice, the marriage will prevail—as emotional virtues of submission and patience are the ideal of modern Muslim femininity. Dominant values of wifely obedience and heteronormative relations are repurposed for contemporary relevance through the romanticization of “forced marriage”, an alluring melodramatic trope in these works of fiction.

Finally, much as any nation state or capitalist interest can try to socialize the ideal proscription and prescription of a permissible and perfect union, intimate relations are ultimately individualized as a private matter. In this regard, medical observations have shown the other side of marital bliss—sexual dissatisfaction. In a study presented by medical scientists, Rosediani Muhamad and her co-authors, on “Transcripts of Unfulfillment: A Study of Sexual Dysfunction and Dissatisfaction among Malay-Muslim Women in Malaysia”, women in their research have self-reported to be suffering from female sexual dysfunctional (FSD) symptoms. The study found that these are the probable narratives and factors which underpin the problem—“sex is taboo and culturally unacceptable”, “self-ignorance about sex”, and “lack of husband’s role in mutual sexual enjoyment”. The absence of knowledge and recourse to remedies have impaired sexual satisfaction and positive coupling relationship. The study recommends that a formal, culturally sensitive, and comprehensive sex education program incorporating both medical and Islamic knowledge be implemented to reduce FSD among women.

The above spectrum of topics and discussions will inform readers on the role and influence of religious rules, scripture, and texts in containing, as well as empowering women to navigate their lives around faith and functionality in their everyday lives. Given their emotive aspects, the realms of intimacy, beyond just the dictates of public law and authority, can equally shape, as well as disrupt gender identities.

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