

*Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia.* By Sylvia Frisk. Copenhagen: NIAS (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies). 216 pp.

Today, scholarship on women and Islam, largely framed from a postcolonial-feminist lens, is well established as subjugated feminist epistemologies in privileging the standpoint of Muslim women. Scholarship on women and Islam in Malaysia is steadily strengthening through notable research by, among others, Norani Othman, Salbiah Ahmad, and Zainah Anwar of the Sisters in Islam and Aihwa Ong, Judith Nagata, Maila Stivens, Susan Ackerman, and Wazir Jahan Karim. Whilst continuing this rich tradition, Sylvia Frisk's ethnographic study that accords epistemic privilege to urban Malay-Muslim women's everyday religious practices within the metropolis of Kuala Lumpur, aims to fill gaps in existing scholarship.

The identification of these gaps in scholarship on women and Islam in Malaysia has in fact served as the genesis for her doctoral thesis and this book that emerged from that project. Through fieldwork conducted in 1995–96 as data for her doctoral thesis and subsequently extended to her last field trip in January 2009, Frisk's stated thesis is to illustrate that, "*women's religious practices as produced within an orthodox model of Islam do not necessarily, or in any simplistic fashion, challenge, oppose or resist, at least not as these terms are usually understood within a Western, feminist discourse*" (Frisk's emphasis; pp. 14–15). Notwithstanding the postcolonial-feminist theoretical framework implied in her articulation of research aims, in moving away from a "*Western, feminist discourse*", Frisk draws instead from Lois McNay's "generative logic for a theory of agency" (p. 11). Frisk argues for a reframing of women's agency on two levels: firstly, beyond resistance to male-dominated discourses and practices to better account for Muslim women's submission to God not man; and secondly, beyond effects of Islamization (i.e. Dakwah or reformist movement) to better account for "women's Islamization" (p. 15).

The agency of selected urban Malay-Muslim women based in Kuala Lumpur as researched by Frisk is based on narratives of becoming gleaned from informal and non-structured interviews and participant observation through Frisk's participation in religious talks

and classes (those conducted in English) organized and facilitated by women for women in their homes and neighbouring mosques. Frisk's organization of material and critical analysis of her data are integral to the realization of research aims in reconfiguring women's agency. In this regard, as presented in the four core chapters on research findings, Muslim women's agency is manifested through thirsting for and proactively acquiring religious knowledge (that include learning to read the Qur'an in Arabic from beginning to end or *khatam* Qur'an, with proper pronunciation) where women are also recognised and valued as religious teachers; gendering public-private spaces through religious activities conducted in mosques and *majlis doa* (collective prayer ritual followed by shared meals) in homes; performing religious duties enshrined in the "five pillars of Islam" (p. 99 — declaration of faith, ritual prayer, fasting during Ramadan, paying a yearly tithe or almsgiving, and, if it is within one's means, performing the pilgrimage to Mecca) and acts of worship (i.e., personal prayers and commendable fasting) in realising "Islam as a way of life" (p. 134). Doing piety in these ways culminates in becoming *mukmin* (true believer) through one's wholehearted submission to God, that for most women is signified by their choosing to veil.

Agency as embodied by the Muslim women interviewed and/or observed, as theorized by Frisk, throws into relief several dialectical tensions: Malay *adat* (custom) versus Islamic practice, orthopraxy versus orthodoxy, Great versus Little faith traditions, and *akal* (reason and self-control) versus *nafsu* (desire and animality). Frisk's gendered analysis of Muslim women's agency persuasively unsettles these binaries. The *majlis doa* exemplifies both effects of "'*adatising*' Islam" and "Islamising *adat*" (p. 155). The shared meal, often home-cooked, that concludes the gathering of women in prayer is customary as a small-scale *kenduri* (a feasting or communal rice meal that is connected to a ceremonial event). Yet the religiosity of the session is apparent as the two-hour-long *majlis doa* "contains an element of prayer (*doa*), reading of the Koran, and the repetition of God's name (*tablil*)" (p. 147). The acquisition of piety through knowledge of the Qur'an as the Source (involving reading, interpretation, and application) and manifold daily acts of worship performed by

women, blurs the distinction between the primacy of praxis deeds (orthopraxy) versus the primacy of knowledge (orthodoxy). Where faith for these women infuses ritual prayers and personal prayers, formal with informal religious education in public and private spaces, the unreflective alignment of “official” Islam with “male” and “popular” Islam with “female” (p. 155), is challenged. The everyday religious practices of Muslim women are not reducible to either “Great or Little traditions” (p. 100) as their faith is manifested through particularized rituals and universalized truth of the Qur’an. Becoming *mukmin* or a true believer provides a further space for gender contestation — the mind and body of the believer — when a woman holds herself accountable to God for her actions and is not reliant on men to do so (men are deemed to have more self-restraint as *akal* is masculinized whilst *nafsu* is feminized). In recognizing that she embodies both *akal* and *nafsu* in being created equal, a woman claims individual responsibility to God and develops a “desire to live according to God’s will” (p. 162).

Although I would have preferred more occurrences of a first-person point of view (evident only on p. 124), Frisk has understandably opted for the predominant third-person point of view in presenting the narratives of these female *mukmin*, in the interest of confidentiality (she had also changed identifying details related to her respondents). In negotiating meaning to states of piety such as submission and veiling where these have been trivialized by both Western and postcolonial feminists as “false consciousness” (p. 12) and moving beyond defining women’s agency as resistance per se, Frisk offers a reflexivity that is welcomed.

*Submitting to God* will undoubtedly be used as a reference by other scholars in the field as it shows how faith and subjectivity are mutually constitutive and, crucially, how this is “understood in these women’s own terms — as active submission and as a way of life” (p.190).

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