

***Humanizing the Sacred: Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Gender Justice in Malaysia.* By Azza Basarudin. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016. Softcover: 330pp.**

Sisters in Islam (SIS) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that advocates for Muslim women’s rights in Malaysia. The NGO works within an Islamic framework, reinterpreting sacred texts through a feminist lens. Members of SIS have been labelled as deviants by Islamic authorities, have had their books banned, received threats and had a fatwa issued against them. *Humanizing the Sacred* is a richly detailed ethnographic account of this path-breaking organization.

Basarudin’s book has two goals. The first is to examine “the possibilities and challenges of translating feminist interpretations of Islam into grounded activism to effect change in social mores and legal codes, and to illuminate how women’s activism within Islam is a space of dissent and of remaking ‘Muslim’ self and identity” (p. 5). The second is to “to explore activism as space for women to transform themselves into political actors and visible women subjects in the public sphere” (p. 6). The work of SIS in understanding primary sources of Islam, such as the Quran and sunna (practices of the Prophet that include hadith, traditions/narrations) through a feminist reinterpretation allows for a vision of Islam that is kind, compassionate and compatible with human rights values of equality and justice. This new form of knowledge-making challenges patriarchal interpreters and traditional religious institutions. This book examines SIS’ struggle to “reclaim women’s human dignity as believing Muslims and to call on their communities to re-evaluate communal and moral obligations, as well as to ensure that Islam remains a ‘living’ religion” (p. 5).

Carefully researched and thoughtfully written, the author’s writing style draws on Kirin Narayan’s “enactment of hybridity”, interspersing narratives with analysis as a strategy that problematizes “the dichotomies of theory and praxis, personal and professional, insider and outsider, and authentic and inauthentic knowledge” (p. 27). This strategy works well, and makes for an engaging and lively book.

Chapter 1 provides the cultural and political context by describing the history of British colonial intervention and the institutionalization of Islam in national laws and policies after independence. Chapter 2 introduces the reader to the life histories

of SIS' founding members, their personal trajectories and struggles, and how their understanding of Islam informs the organization's vision of equality and justice. Chapter 3 examines the strategies employed by SIS by looking at specific advocacy campaigns and other activities such as study sessions and workshops, illustrating the process of translating feminist interpretations of sacred texts into grounded activism. Chapter 4 examines state power and the religious authorities' "invalidation techniques" to silence alternative discourses. Chapter 5 discusses how SIS members provide an alternative model of female leadership by showing that women can be powerful knowledge producers and transmitters. Chapter 6 assesses the impact of SIS' activism at the international level and vice versa. Here the author focuses on Musawah, a transnational initiative spearheaded by SIS, highlighting the NGO's global success but also the impact and repercussions it has within Malaysia.

Humanizing the Sacred joins a line-up of innovative studies on Muslim women's participation in faith-based movements that extend our understanding of agency and resistance, such as Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), Lara Deeb's *An Enchanted Modern: Politics and Piety in Shi'i Lebanon* (2006) and Sherine Hafez's *An Islam on Her Own: Reconsidering Islam and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (2011). Basarudin's book also builds upon the work of feminist scholars such as Lila Abu Lughod and Chandra Mohanty in illustrating the need to understand women's lives and struggles within specific historical contexts and intersecting complexities. Lughod reminds us that we should respect "everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworking of historically changing structures of power" (Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women", *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 53, cited in Basarudin, p. 188). Chapter 2 was particularly successful in illustrating this point because it captures poignant life histories of SIS founders that highlight their personal struggles, the excitement of new discoveries as they first read the Quran through a feminist lens, the friendships they formed, and the differing of opinions on strategies and the challenges they continue to face.

Beyond Chapter 2, the life narratives of other SIS members are interspersed throughout the book, showcasing the strength of this ethnography and illustrating how the activists draw upon their

own life experiences, family values, and cultural and religious influences in shaping their own notions of rights and equality in Islam. On this issue, this reviewer found Azza Basarudin's discussion of her own positioning particularly interesting. As a Malaysian woman and a US-based scholar, her "insider-outsider" positioning is evident throughout the book. As described by one of her interlocutors, there is Azza the friend and Azza the researcher (p. 191). Azza Bassarudin writes "Although the Malay and Muslim portions of my identity and my interest in their struggle allow me to connect of a deeper level with many SIS members, the researcher status constrained relationships formed in the field" (p. 191). It is a dilemma many anthropologists, particularly ones studying their own community, can relate to, and this honest discussion is refreshing.

While the book stays focused on its "studying up" project by mainly interviewing SIS members (seen as representing an elite, middle class, grouping) and also other activists in this circle, it would have been valuable if the author had also examined how SIS is received among the grassroots women's movement such as the many single mothers' associations that the NGO has had a long-term relationship with. Here, their allies come from a very different background than SIS members; yet there is a common basis for collaboration on issues relating to Muslim women's rights. This could perhaps allow us to understand better how lived realities and feminist interpretations of Islam mutually reinforce one another in shaping a just framework for the rights of Muslim women, particularly in Malaysia.

Overall, *Humanizing the Sacred* is a welcome addition to the study of women's movements and Islamic feminism. Close to thirty years after it was founded, SIS continues to play an active role in the women's rights discourse in Malaysia. This book is therefore a timely and important read. Its accessible language makes it suitable not just for undergraduate and postgraduate students alike, but also readers who are interested in understanding issues of feminism, rights and equality in Islam, especially in Malaysia.

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