

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Making of A Gay Muslim: Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Malaysia and Britain* by Shanon Shah. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 354 pp.

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**Published online:** 30 April 2020

**To cite this article:** Chua, H-K. 2020. The making of a gay Muslim: Religion, sexuality and identity in Malaysia and Britain (Book review). *Kajian Malaysia* 38(1): 173–175. <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2020.38.1.9>

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.21315/km2020.38.1.9>

It almost goes without saying that being gay and Muslim are perceived as two “incommensurable” (Boellstorff 2007) identities, where one is seen as the antithesis of the other. Gay is often associated with the West, liberalism and secularism; while Muslim is commonly related to the East, conservatism and fundamentalism. Shanon Shah’s *The Making of A Gay Muslim: Religion, Sexuality and Identity in Malaysia and Britain* juxtaposes two countries, one from the East where Muslims are the majority and one from the West where Muslims are the minority, to investigate this “incommensurability” through an ethnographic approach. Adapted from Shanon Shah’s doctoral thesis, the book offers readers literary and ethnographic insights into the many dimensions – historical, political, social and spiritual – of the making of gay Muslim identities.

Retaining most of the structure of his thesis, Shanon Shah divides the book into eight chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the aforementioned incommensurability in Malaysia and Britain, the theoretical frameworks and the scope of the book. In the second chapter, Shanon Shah outlines his research approach, settings, challenges and his researcher reflexivity as a gay Malay Muslim Malaysian expatriate and an active member of Imaan, a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (LGBTQI) inclusive Muslim organisation in Britain. Chapters 3 and 4 are two extensive literary research chapters focusing respectively on homosexuality in Islam and Muslim society, and the legality and politics of Islam and homosexuality in Malaysia and Britain. The subsequent three chapters offer ethnographic insights into the lived experiences of 29 gay Muslim Malaysian and British men and women at three different social levels. First, personal meanings of Islam and sexuality; second, social meanings of Islam and sexuality,

and inter/intragroup dynamics; and third, interaction with the state, media and wider society concerning religion and sexuality. Chapter 8 concludes that his interlocutors “come to identify as ‘gay’ and ‘Muslim’ through distinct personal trajectories” (p. 300) shaped by personal reflections and social interactions happening at the second and third social levels mentioned above. The conclusion also challenges the notions that Islam is inherently homophobic, and that the two identities are incommensurable.

Shanon Shah has strategically juxtaposed the two different cases – Malaysia and Britain – throughout the book to demonstrate the contingency of the Islamic institution, its attitude towards homosexuality, and the religious and sexual identities of gay Muslims and former Muslims. Informed by social constructionism, the book argues that the perceived and contingent incommensurability of Islam and homosexuality and gay Muslims’ identities are interpretive categories, whose meanings are subject to the trajectories of various discursive dialogues over time and at various levels: the intercultural dialogues among Islam, Christianity and gay culture in a globalising world (Chapter 3); the colonial and postcolonial dialogues between the coloniser/governor and the colonised/governed (Chapter 4); the political dialogues between the state, the media and civil society (Chapter 4 to 7); the debates within the Muslim, gay and gay Muslim communities (Chapter 3 to 7); the negotiations between gay Muslim individuals and their surrounding social agents (Chapter 5 to 7); and individual’s reflections, including Shanon Shah’s own reflections (Chapter 5 to 7). Adding to the complexity of these discursive dialogues are factors intertwining with the said interpretive categories; these include ethnic identities, social class, majority-minority dynamisms, and national as well as transnational identities in the two nations.

I personally find the literary research on the history of the shifting meanings of and attitude towards homoeroticism in Islamic civilisations and Britain up to the early 20th century, and in Malaysia and Britain in the 20th century in Chapters 3 and 4, to be of particular interest to scholars interested in the historical contexts of contemporary understandings of Islam and homosexuality in Malaysia and Britain. Shanon Shah has systematically unpacked and argued how early cultural exchanges and “cultural wars” (p. 66) between the Middle East and Europe, particularly with their Victorian morality, had resulted in Islamic civilisations reducing their tolerance towards homosexuality. Shanon Shah then methodically compares how the British (and the colonial power then) and the Malaysian states manage Islam and sexuality, and how these influence public policies, majority-minority relations and expressions of religious and sexual identities. He argues while the British state directly and indirectly tries to foster expressions of Islam and sexualities that ostensibly match the values and ideologies held by the majority of Britons; the Malaysian state politicises Islam and sexuality to fashion a particular set of ethnoreligious nationalism seemingly held by the

Muslim (read Malay) majority. Either way, these official interpretations of Islam and sexuality are often in competition with those of the civil society, including gay Muslims, under the influence of bigger aspects of Orientalist stereotypes and self-stereotypes, Islamophobia and homonationalism.

The key strength of this book is its comparative approach that demonstrates the constructive nature of faith and sexuality through different historical, political, social and demographical contexts, within which gay Muslims make sense of, receive/reject, negotiate, express/suppress their faiths and sexualities. Furthermore, Shanon Shah narrates these identity makings of gay Muslims through ethnographic storytelling that captures their concerns and hopes, adversities and blessings in everyday lives with humility and warmth. In the interest of Malaysian studies, however, the book assumes that gay Muslims in Malaysia are a uniform ethnic group, i.e., Malay; and gives no attention to the ethnic diversity of Muslims in Malaysia. Although Shanon Shah does point out the unifying effect of Islam upon Malay ethnic identity, he does not explain how the ethnoreligious nationalist continues the colonial logic in conglomerating a diverse group of people into a seemingly uniform Malay-Muslim identity for political strength, which Anthony Milner calls “top-down ideological work” (2011, 207). In this ethnoreligious construct, depending on the circumstances, the Chinese Muslims (see Ma 2005) and the Indian Muslims (see Stark 2006) and Muslims of other ethnic minorities are excluded from the Malay-Muslim category. Perhaps as a result of this shortcoming, the depiction and analysis of inter/intraminority dynamics in Malaysia are not as rich and intriguing as those set in Britain; and there appears to be no cases of gay Muslims from other ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia.

Nevertheless, given the continuous politicising of Islam and homosexuality in Muslim majority as well as minority countries worldwide, this book certainly serves as a great reference to interested scholars and gay Muslim individuals in understanding these two seemingly “incommensurable” identities in Europe and Southeast Asia.

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