



Serina Rahman

*The Hand that Rocks the Cradle:  
Nurturing Exclusivist Interpretations of  
Islam in the Malaysian Home*

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reviewed by Richard Gehrmann

It is nearly 25 years since the events of 11 September 2001 focused global attention on the struggle between Muslim and western values, but while novel to some in the west, the roots of this cultural division and the affirmation of a more Islamic identity were long obvious to Muslims living in Muslim countries, and in particular to women. Since the 1970s, Muslim Malay middle-class families of Malaysia who expected their daughters and sons to return from university imbued with the modern values they had absorbed a generation earlier were disconcerted to find their children instead influenced by the messages of Islamic renewal rather than messages of westernisation. Such influences shaped middle-class Muslim Malays, while at the same time traditionalist rural working-class Muslim Malays were also undergoing a similar cultural reorientation. These Islamic renewal messages emphasised the dominant position of a literal interpretation of Islam, a return to patriarchy and a less liberated place for Malaysian women. There is an irony that Malaysia was developed and modernised as Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed repudiated British economic and social hegemony with his 1982 Japan centric 'Look East' policy, to be followed in 1991 with the Malaysia developmental dream of an industrialised

self-sufficient Malaysia *Vision 2020*, while at the same time the socio-cultural conditions for Muslim women throughout Malaysia were shifting towards more Islamic and patriarchal norms.

Serina Rahman engages directly with the currents of thought shaping this changing role of women in the domestic sphere in her book *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle: Nurturing Exclusivist Interpretations of Islam in the Malaysian Home*. In this short, accessible and highly readable work she engages with the socio-cultural shifts in Malay Muslim value systems and links gender issues to wider political and security concerns. She examines the growing significance of patriarchal values both within rural and urban spaces in Malaysia as conservative and exclusivist interpretations of Islam grow in strength. While once such changes were informed by visiting preachers and those returning from pilgrimages to Mecca, now Facebook and YouTube shape the worldviews of her informants.

To set the parameters of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, it is necessary to understand the basic components of Malaysian demography and faith, a topic that could have been included for readers unfamiliar with this. The majority 68.8 percent of Malaysians are *Bumiputras* (indigenous to Malaysia), while 23 percent are Malaysian Chinese, and 7 percent Malaysian Indian. Of the *Bumiputra* indigenous population, those in the Malay ethnic group constitute 58 percent of the total population, and this Malay group is the focus of Rahman's work. Critical facts are that they are almost all Muslim and are the dominant element in a multiethnic population. Rahman divides her informants within this ethnic group into those who match the progressive / liberal as distinct from conservative / literal cohorts. The traditional Sufi school of thought contrasts with the Salafi variation that emphasises what many call a puritanical Middle Eastern variant of Islam. This Salafist tradition developed in the nineteenth century with the desire to return Islam to a more pious past, and it has been particularly strong in Malaysia. While nineteenth-century Malaysian Islam was characterised by a diversity of perspectives as to how Islam should be followed, there was a tendency for Malay women to be socially and economically active, and highly independent in accordance with Malay *adat* (custom). This was a feature throughout the Malay Peninsula and was notably even more significant in central Malaya where communities such as the Minangkabau adhered to matrilineal cultural traditions. However, by the twentieth century once dominant local village *adat* traditions had been submerged by a more Middle Eastern structure

of belief and practice. Rahman identifies the ongoing 'Arabization' in Malaysia since then (p. 12) and notes Middle Eastern variants of Islam have made women's lives more restricted in accordance with conservative Middle Eastern traditions. A variety of wider political forces have shaped this transition, one being the political contest between the dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and Parti Islam Se-Malaysia or Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS). This is a political dimension that Rahman mentions but could have explored in more detail to situate her work on gender within a wider context and also to inform those readers unfamiliar with the ongoing competition between these two Malay Muslim parties. In recent decades each party has attempted to attract the same voting bloc by competing to show how Islamic they are, proposing or passing Islamic laws at a provincial and national level.

As well as addressing questions of faith, Rahman explores radicalisation as a concept that shapes the world of Malay women within the home. In Malaysia, the female labour participation rate is over 50 percent and women outperform men in higher education participation. Yet Malaysian women earn less than men. They are less likely to be in positions of authority and are less likely to own a business. The relative disadvantage of Malay Muslim women is contrasted with women's sense of their own power which many readers might interpret as self-subjugation. Survey results indicate some upper middle-class women perceive men as weaker than them, more likely to not follow the Qur'an, and likely to give way to their own desires in contrast to women who paradoxically have no difficulty with self-control (pp. 14–15). Ironically this accords with the Victorian perspective of a mother dominant in the home, and matches models of idealised Malay female behaviour, models that increasingly permeate Malay Muslim popular culture. This links to the idea of women (and the mother in particular) being the bastion of religion in the home, which Rahman sees as linked to women who might nurture future extremists. It is tantalising that after her detailed explanation of these earlier matters of women's behaviour that Rahman discusses the nurturing of terrorists in the home, but given this is such a short book, she clearly could have written so much more in specific detail to significantly increase the size of the book and further develop this particular line of inquiry.

Rahman also links these concepts to politicisation and militarisation of women's spaces, advancing the proposition that women are utilising enhanced religiosity within the home as a tool

to expand their own social and personal power, and that this may have potential to foster terrorism. She proposes that as both men and women have been increasingly influenced by Salafist literal representations of Islam, this has created the conditions that have made women in the home what she calls potential ‘vectors of terror’ (p. 1), thus challenging Southeast Asian views of traditional perfect motherhood. Malaysia’s comfortable economic prosperity, like that of many affluent developed western countries, coexists with the movement of radicalised individuals to and from conflict zones. Returning Afghan fighters, individual militants travelling to Syria and other Middle Eastern conflict zones and those who travel to the Philippines to attempt to establish their own version of Islamic State in Mindanao demonstrate the significance of politicised and militant Islamists throughout Malaysia and link her work to analysis of wider political and security concerns (pp. 12–13).

As well as confronting the politicised and militant variants of Islam Rahman identifies growing misogyny in rural areas where women themselves become complicit in enhancing patriarchy by chastising other females who refuse to adhere to patriarchal norms. Rahman’s rural field work identifies mothers adopting Victorian norms of family identity and home dominance as modes to acquiring virtue among their peers, while socialising their children at the same time. These competitions of increasingly devout women both enhance their own power within the family environment through their piety, while shaping an increasingly Islamised Middle Eastern version of what was once a more open and accepting rural Malay society where women formerly had economic and social agency and independence. It is worth noting that Rahman sees a connection between her urban and rural informants, observing that it is urban women who appeared to be bringing religious traditions to women of the countryside, encouraging them to adopt a more ‘feminine interpretation’ of Islam with women leading their own study groups (p. 27).

In Australia in 2024 the national government had not yet allowed the return of some Australian citizens and their children on the grounds that these women had associated with ISIS and become so-called ISIS brides. Malaysia faced similar challenges of bringing Malaysian ISIS wives home, and de-radicalising them. While political conservatives in Australia saw the return of Australian ISIS brides as a threat to the body politic, despite its sense of panic the affluent west

was barely troubled by threats of Islamist terrorism. However, the threat of Islamist terrorism is an ongoing reality for those living in majority Muslim countries, and arrests of homegrown militants and Islamic State supporters by the Malaysian Special Branch are testament to this. For Muslims in Malaysia the terrorist threat remains significant, and for the mainstream in Malaysia the legal political actions of Islamic parties such as PAS also constitute an ongoing challenge to control of the current multiethnic state.

Rahman's research methodology and practice incorporated both long-term participant observation of rural women, and investigation of women living in the capital city and its comfortable suburbs. Her own research work is supported throughout the book through a range of independent surveys undertaken by external actors (such as Pew) and by Malaysian Government assessments of their own changing society. By incorporating these sources of information, she has crafted a thoughtful account that contributes to our understanding of gender in the Southeast Asian region while linking this to the adoption of Middle Eastern cultural values in an economically developed consumer society. All of this adds strength to Rahman's clear and effective analysis of the changing world of Malay Muslim women.