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INSTITUTE OF
ASIAN STUDIES

Ageing and Malay Muslim Women in Brunei

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University of York

Working Paper No. 48

Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Gadong 2019

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Abstract:

This paper examines woman (gender), Muslim (Orient) and elderly (age) from a postcolonial perspective. It highlights the relevance of spirituality to ageing, which is currently under-studied in sociology. Ten Brunei Malay Muslim women aged 60 - 76 were interviewed, with the aid of photo-elicitation method, about their experience of ageing. All interviewees perceive ageing as a gift from God and should be embraced wholeheartedly but this is not necessarily translated into practice. Nonetheless, spirituality remains prominent and heightened as one grows older. This study also demonstrated how these women's ageing experience is mediated by structural influences. They include ongoing Islamisation discourse, strong Malay cultural and Islamic values, interdependence of family structure (social expectation of filial piety) and social rapport and network. Their experiences reveal a nuance understanding and diverse narratives of ageing. These findings open up new possibilities of understanding ageing in non-Western contexts.

Keywords: *Malay, ageing women, postcolonial, spirituality, Brunei, Islam*

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Ageing and Malay Muslim Women in Brunei

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INTRODUCTION

From 1889, Brunei Darussalam was a British Protectorate until she gained her full independence in 1984. Located in Southeast Asia on the island of Borneo, it occupies a total area of 5,765 square kilometers with a population of 417, 200. Islam is the national religion while Malay is the national language. The Malays make up the largest contributor to Brunei's population (66 percent) which is constituted by seven indigenous groups: Brunei Malay, Kadayan, Tutong, Belait, Dusun, Bisaya and Murut as defined under the Brunei Nationality Enactment of 1961. Brunei Malay represents the dominant group in Brunei, especially in the district of Brunei-Muara. The Chinese and Others comprise of 10.1 and 23.9 per cents respectively. Brunei practices two judicial systems: Civil Law and Sharia Law (for the Muslims).

As a Malay-Muslim majority populated nation-state, Brunei strongly holds the value of Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB). Under this philosophy, Islam which is integral to Malay culture[1] is the fundamental principle that underpins the national aspiration of '*Zikr* Nation'. This is a concept promoting the active congenial pursuit of social, economic and spiritual goals under the rule of a monarchy with the remembrances and blessings of God (Thambipillai, 2012). Consequently, it becomes the manual for guiding all aspects of daily lives within the socially, culturally and religiously conservative landscape of the state, much more for the predominantly Brunei Malay society. These include norms, values and attitudes such as good manners, respects for elderly, close-knitted kinship practice, and adherence to religious obligations and practices (Borneo Bulletin Yearbook, 2017). Family values are also strongly emphasized in Brunei society.

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[1] Islam acts as a central pillar and as a way of life for most of the Malays and hence, their cultural values often reflect Islamic teachings. Any form of secularisation or deviant teaching is unacceptable (Mahmud Saedon, 1997)

Apart from that, Brunei is coveted for her immense oil wealth which contributes to more than half of her gross domestic product and 90 percent of her exports (Borneo Bulletin Yearbook, 2017). As a result, the population have long enjoyed high economic and social standard of living with generous subsidies and privileges such as free access to healthcare and education. According to the Department of Economic Planning and Development (2015), over 60 years old consists of 7.2 percent of the population. However, the older population in Brunei Darussalam is projected to increase from 5 percent to 20 percent from 2007 to 2050 with a longer life expectancy for Brunei women than men (Brunei Report, 2013; Sanusi, n.d). However, little to almost no systematic research has been conducted on the lives of elderly women. They have not been documented and their implications remain unexplored. The need to examine and study these voices will be an initial step to understand the challenges and needs of these elderly women.

Furthermore, sociologists argue that age as a concept is gendered as well as sociologically and culturally constructed (Andersen and Hysock, 2008; Biggs, 1997, Covan, 2005; Twigg, 2013; Wray, 2007), which incorporates a spiritual one that is heightened as one reaches later life (Manning, 2012, Atchley, 2009). This suggests that the process of ageing is active, dynamic and embodied within the individual identity. Yet, the spiritual aspect of ageing through a sociological lens is still an under-researched area.

This study explores the gendered and spiritual dimension of elderly women in Brunei. This involves examining the gendered embodiment of ageing and the perceptions and attitudes towards religious and moral values as well as death and after life (Rochat et. al., 2014). With the declining fertility rate and increasing significance of feminization of ageing, an understanding of the spiritual process of ageing is relevant to Brunei (Piri, 2015; Borneo Bulletin, 2013).

On the other hand, female ageing (see Cumming and Henry, 1961, Laslett, 1987) remains under-theorised (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012), with lack of support from empirical data, and has predominantly been Western-centric. Hence it is an opportune time to develop a new understanding which is different from the West-centric context to avoid generalization of female experience from an unfamiliar culture (Al-Sarrani and Alghamdi, 2014). In addition, this research

brings in a postcolonial feminist[2] stance into the study by focusing and understanding the lived and subjective experiences outside Western contexts through the perspective of Brunei Malay Muslim women. This study seeks to generate a more in-depth understanding of women's ageing experience including religious and spiritual issues in Brunei.

Ageing: Postcolonial turn

Many Western theoretical positions (such as: Berk, 2010; Chatzitheochari and Arber, 2011, Cumming and Henry, 1961, Laslett, 1987) on the study of ageing and later life have predominantly focused on White female ageing and neglected those from a different culture, ethnicity and religious background. The impact of this is the muted voices of the female elderly that may not correspond to the Western experience.

Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961), for instance, asserts that disengagement is universal among the elderly and is inevitable until one dies. The study is insightful in presenting ageing as a subjectively defined, socially constructed phenomenon. Nonetheless critiques reject this as a universalistic and ethnocentric assumption which is silhouetted against the biases of Western contemporary industrial societies (Moberg, 2001). Notwithstanding, it also often ignore the gendered impact in one's ageing experience. In addition, death-denial thesis (Aries, 1974; Becker, 1973; Mellor, 1993; Wink, 2006) suggests ageing as a disease and discomfort while old age is an era of decrepitude which is being anticipated with fear of death. Western popular media are also dominated by ageist images of 'agelessness', hence the elderly are prone to become the subject of stigmatisation and often situated at the "periphery" of cultural and capitalist globalisation (Neuberger, 2009; Kunow, 2016). Arguably, this suggests old age is an exclusive rather than inclusive experience. The aesthetical exploitation to promote 'agelessness' can be perceived as a covert strategy to reproduce and institutionalise an implicit form of ageism (Zhang, 2013). Furthermore, negative stereotypes of old age imply a deviation from the appreciation of diversity in individuals' ageing experience.

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[2] Postcolonial feminists are relevant in Brunei context as they informed us about the intricate complexities and diversity in female ageing experience.

In ageing studies, the idea of old age and ageing is essentialised into a universalistic definition which is based on the Western experience. Constructed in the niche of frailty, disengagement and isolation, arguably these narratives overlook the multi-dimensional experience of ageing in different ethnic, religious and cultural landscapes. They assume that the women's experience is homogenous and mirrors Western women's ageing experience as the 'standard'. It reiterates what the postcolonial and oriental theorists argue as the dichotomy of West and the Other. The omnipresence may be implicit but inferable.

This is supported by Bahira Sherif Trask (2003) who discusses the ageing of Muslim women in Europe as bounded by the religious contexts of Islam itself. Although her discussion reflects a rather dated and traditional view of Muslim women[3] due to modernisation, it highlights differences in priorities and privileges associated within the generations and it shows the diverse experience of ageing within Muslim women in Europe. Similarly, Zubair, Martin and Victor's (2012) fieldwork study on the identity work of older Pakistani Muslim women highlights how the female ageing experience vary even though they were in a western setting. Their experiences were significantly affected by their migration and cultural contexts. These studies have also presented how age and ageing is a socially and culturally inter-subjective phenomenon.

In addition, Kok and Yap (2014) conducted a cross-comparative study of the ageing experience of Malaysian Chinese and Japanese women aged 65 - 75. Despite having a similar culture of communal and familial interdependence, the ageing experiences of women are affected by different socio-economic environments such as the differential access to pension system and medical insurance plans. Nonetheless, both groups embraced an optimistic perspective of old age through 'ageing gracefully', which promotes reverence of and honour towards the elderly. Similarly, other studies (Devasahayam, 2014; Musaiger and D'Souza, 2009; Tsuno and Homma, 2009) on non-Western societies also paint positive views of ageing. These studies present how

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[3] In fact ageing on Muslim women in non-Arab societies is currently a poorly documented research area whereby studies has been heavily oriented in Christian perspectives. This has also contributed to the misleading of representation of Muslim women.

diverse contexts in which individuals live in, the socio-cultural beliefs as well as the value systems that shape one's ageing experience.

Biggs (2004, p. 103) refers to the hegemony of 'age imperialism'. This is an interesting postcolonial turn in the study of ageing. This concept attributes the expression and imposition of agendas and priorities of a dominant age cohort onto the lives of other age cohorts. This leads to the hierarchical disposition of young and old age. In order to effectively challenge this disposition, the alleged purity of a binary conception needs to be deconstructed (van Dyk, 2016). On the other hand, postcolonial discourse may have exaggerated the essentialist agenda. The dualistic old-age distinction should not merely be treated in a simplistic way. Conceivably, without this basic distinction, research on old age may not be possible. (Zimmermann, 2016)

Nonetheless, postcolonial discourse remains important to critically consider the diversity and alterity submerged in studying old age. A micro-person-centred approach (for example: Cole et. al, 1993) has been at the heart of many ageing studies. This provides opportunities to place their voices outside of the peripheral discourse. Gilroy (2005) enunciates that postcolonial critique can contribute in prescribing a mature outlook to plurality and diversity rather than a convergent and diluted smokescreen. Against the backdrop of contemporary globalisation, the social and cultural subalternity are highlighted as otherness (Kunow, 2016). Thus, with its central focus on disjuncture and difference of the dominance and periphery, postcolonial theory contributes to the analysis and the diversity of female ageing experiences.

In Simone de Beauvoir's "The Coming of Age" (1972), the alterity of old age and its manifestation in the lived experience of senior people is analysed. She found that otherness in old age is more of the battle within one's concept of self[4]. She contends that the refusal to perceive oneself as becoming old reflects alterity and otherness in old age. Meanwhile, 'subaltern' is one of the conceptual scaffoldings for postcolonial studies that may also be applied to ageing studies. It discusses the duality of centre and periphery, power and powerless, hegemony and subjection. Arguably, the dichotomy of old and young can be seen as derivative of this concept (van Dyk, 2016). Spivak (1999, p. 270) reprises the compelling concept of subaltern as the 'irretrievably heterogeneous' whose spatial difference is a subordinate against those in the power of hegemony.

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[4] 'I' become 'Other' to myself.

Evidently, the main contribution of postcolonial studies is the enticing focus on daily practices that undermine the hegemonic standard and legacy.

To conclude, the dominant western theoretical and conceptualisation of ageing may potentially reinforce and institutionalise a form of racist discourse that is potentially ripe with West-centric bias. Therefore, there is the need for more empirical research that are sensitive towards the diversity of elderly women's ageing experience. This is imperative to avoid slipping into fallible standardisation which entails an application of Western culture and understanding of ageing. This research brings in a postcolonial turn into the study of ageing by exploring the negotiation of old age identity and subjective experiences outside Western contexts through the perspective of women of colour, the Brunei Malay Muslim women.

Conceptualising spirituality

Previous studies (Atchley, 2008; Koenig, 2006; Krause, 2004; Mohan, 2003; Nygren et. al, 2005) have discovered that spirituality is heightened as one is advancing in old age. Additionally, growing spirituality has paramount importance to the subjective dimensions of self-identity (Flanagan and Jupp, 2010; Gall, et al. 2011; Manning, 2012) and one's well-being (Atchley, 2008; Koenig, 2006; Krause, 2004). However, the terms spirituality and religion are often not unproblematic, subject to open contestation and debate. Scholars who argue that religion and spirituality are synonymous view both as arising from a search for the sacred which corresponds to the presence of Divine Being or Ultimate Truth (Hill et. al, 2000). Walter (1983) framed this as closely related to Christianity. By contrast, for scholars from the other end of the spectrum, religion and spirituality are distinctively separate (Schneiders, 2003). In a secular society like the United States, religion and spirituality hold different meanings[5]. The Western concept of spirituality is likely to be divorced from organised religious frameworks (Schneiders, 2003). This suggests that the way spirituality is interpreted is closely related with one's cosmic view, often tied to religious

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[5] The notion of spirituality in many contemporary Western contexts has been shifted to a secular concept that is detached from religious institution.

and cultural traditions (Aguilan, 2013; Varga, 2010) and cannot simply be reduced to the realm of private religiosity (Chamber, 2010).

Furthermore, spirituality in ageing studies often revolves around the Western, Christian settings (Blieszner and Ramsey, 2003; Gall. et al, 2011; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Manning, 2012; Shaw, Gullifer and Wood, 2016). According to Mohan (2003), Western secular framework on understanding spiritual dimensions of ageing may be inapplicable across non-Western cultures. As Islam is imbricated in all aspects of a predominantly Brunei Muslim society (Cleary and Ali Maricar, 2002), spirituality is framed in the context of Islam. *Taqwa*, (God consciousness) is the Islamic version of spirituality (Ahmad and Khan, 2015; Abdalla and Ikebal Mohamed, 2010; Maqsood, 2003). Subsequently, this presents a significant opportunity for insights to the different dynamic of cultural values and meanings associated with spirituality and ageing. This is a distinct gap that the research is trying to address as spirituality in the West is different from Islamic spirituality. Conceivably, this may potentially have a considerable influence on the ageing experience of Brunei Malay Muslim women.

This study aims to bring in an unfamiliar Brunei context as part of the non-western discourse. The research aims to highlight through empirical evidence that ageing is socially constructed and gendered. Additionally, this research seeks to add some complexity and contribute to the existing scholarly knowledge on the study of ageing. For the purpose of this study, an examination of spiritual growth is framed within the context of Islam.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methodology was adopted to ensure the interpretive understanding of the everyday ageing experience of women and their contexts (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995; Richie et. al, 2003). As a result, in-depth, semi-structured interviews facilitated by photo-elicitation method were conducted among ten women, aged 60 – 76, to make sense of their ageing experience. These women were purposively recruited through snowball sampling, obtained through family and

friends' networks. The age range of 60 and above was chosen with respect to pensionable age[6] and correspond to the range of life expectancy (79 years old) among Brunei women. Additionally, these elderly participants lived in the 1960s to 1980s during the earlier period of Brunei's modernisation and Islamisation, and are now pensioners. This enabled the research to explore the extent of their impact on the personal narrative of their spirituality and ageing experience.

Face-to-face, in-depth, semi structured interviews enabled the original voices of participants to be utilised to construct narratives which are substantially and relatively high in validity (Gillham, 2000). Such interviews were seen as the most appropriate for this research as they corresponded to the research aim and objective that is primarily focused on comprehending the experiential dimensions of the participants. All interviews were conducted at the residence of the participants at their comfort and convenience. Mobility was an issue for these elderly as the majority of them did not drive and needed to rely on their children or spouse for transport. Each interview session was conducted in Malay and lasted for one and a half to two hours. Interviews were recorded upon acquiring consent from the participants. Only one interviewee was overwhelmed during the interview session and the session was continued in another session as requested by the participant. The interview schedule[7] served as a mere guide to direct the interview sessions. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded, with pseudonyms assigned to each participant.

Meanwhile, photo-elicitation method enabled the researcher to gain more perspectives pertaining to the topic of discussion. Hogan and Warren (2012) used visual elicitation as one of their methods in their study on four ageing women in Britain.

Prior to the interview, participants were instructed to choose two photos they considered meaningful as they grow older. Many chose photos with their family, some presented passport photos and student cards, and others showed photos of themselves with their friends. This photo-discussion session further enhanced the rapport between participants and the researcher to which these elder women enjoyed reminiscing about their youth and narrated how they have experienced

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[6] In Brunei, it is a common consensus to associate the minimum standard of 'old' age with the entitlement to Old Age Pension[6] which is at sixty years old.
[7] The full version of interview schedule can be referred in Appendices 3 and 4.

and negotiated their changes over the years. Throughout the interview sessions, participants articulated their life narratives with little interference from the researcher.

Towards the end of the interview session, five visual images were shown to participants to elicit their thoughts and feelings on the vignettes. These images were carefully selected to ensure they are closely relevant to the Bruneian context, for example, a picture with elderly woman in a headscarf is viewed as suitable as they represented Brunei Malay Muslim women images. According to Rose (2001), visual images prompt meanings to be conveyed and explored. This study used visual stimuli as well as the photos provided by participants as windows to the rich meanings attached to their ageing experience in daily lives. They also fostered the possibility of generating unexplored or alternative views of seeing and making sense of the participants' social milieu (Harper, 2002). As a result, the study collected information which was not based on pre-conceived responses and evoked the session as a fertile ground for supplementary inquiries.

However, its effectiveness and appropriateness as a research method remain questionable. Martin (2007) viewed it as unsuitable for the visually impaired and Rose (2001) questioned the nature of the visual images being presented as subjectively constructed and can easily be manipulated. Yet, these were not problematic for the present study as participants were visually un-impaired and the socially constructed nature of the images allowed unique views to represent their daily realities. Furthermore, recognising that some people may consider some topics of discussion as sensitive, particularly death, photo-elicitation allowed this risk to be reduced as the power to interpret was given to participants (Bigante, 2010; Harper, 2002, Pink, 2007). For instance, during the vignettes session, tearful insights on their personal reflection of death as well as life and spiritual aspirations were often observed. Their emotional reference to mortality was powerful. Nonetheless, it has been a privilege to listen to these elderly women unfolding their spiritual journeys which were personally important to them.

Additionally, the researcher's familiarity with local customs and cultural values proved to be pertinent in the research. However, at the same time, the potential for undermining potential key details as taken for granted aspects may inadvertently occur. Researcher biases may also emerge. Thus, attending to reflexivity ensures the alleviation of such ethical issues (Schwandt,

2001; Walant, 2008). Furthermore, drawing and setting boundaries were at the researcher's best interest to ensure the occurrence of researcher bias or interviewer effect was minimised.

Thematic analysis (Patton, 1990; Braun and Clarke, 2006) was employed in correspondence to the guided research questions. It enables the data to be systematically illustrated in a broader context and is useful for data interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). Furthermore, the freedom of flexibility of thematic analysis ensured a rigorous and detailed presentation of the data. Generation of codes were viable through re-reading and familiarising with the data transcription which was admittedly the most difficult phase. During coding, the data were reflexively interpreted to identify distinctive elements of meaning to allow generation of preliminary themes. The preliminary themes were then revised until they were condensed to three major themes. These themes encapsulate the gendered constructions of ageing and the development of spirituality as the participants grew older.

Overall, the research recruited ten participants aged 60 - 76; six were married, one was married but separated, two widowed and one divorced. The participants came from different stratified backgrounds[8]; with an equal number of homemakers and retirees. More than half of the participants were affiliated with *Kumpulan Muslimah.* A substantial majority of the participants relied on the government pension allowance as their primary source of income. Only one participant has a Service Pension Allowance, which entitles her to receive half of her monthly salary after her retirement. Another one participant has side income from her rental houses. Nine out of ten participants co-resided with their children. Interestingly, some of their narratives challenge Western understanding of ageing.

Gendered Discourses of Ageing

The use of photo-elicitation methods has provided flexibility and feasibility to this study. They enable the elderly to narrate as well as visually represent the diverse meanings of their ageing, especially on the sensitive and less tangible aspects of their everyday lives and practices. Throughout the photo-elicitation interviews, participants talk about their transition from

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[8] The detailed biographical data of every participant can be found at Appendices 7.

childhood, single life to marriage, and motherhood to family, old age and grandparenthood. They encapsulate how their youthful aspects and social relationships accumulated over time (being wife, mother and grandmother) are pertinent to the ageing discourse of their daily lives. In fact, social connections (Wieneke et. al, 1999) are very important to the empowerment of elderly women as well as in shaping their ageing experience. Evidently, participants also often engaged in inter-generational discourse to distinguish and negotiate their social identity as elderly women.

A 76-year old homemaker and the eldest child in her family, Pg Hjh Mastura chose a group family photo of 300 members of her extended family (including children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren) taken back in 2012. She reckoned, 'I feel really happy looking at it. I recognise everyone in the picture.' Similarly, Dyg Zainab, a 60-year old homemaker was explicit about her insights into her own life. She also chose a family group photo which was particularly meaningful to her to represent her elder years and reflected how much she enjoyed grandparenthood.

This is my favourite because I'm sitting next to my first grandson. I feel so happy being seated next to him… He is 4 years old now, this was when he was 2 years old (looking at the picture). I'm most cheerful around my grandchildren…most happy..I love my grandchildren because I struggle to take care of them day and night…even when they are sick…I really love them so much.

Arrival of a grandchild (Devi and Bagga, 2006) or grandparenthood is seen as a social and cultural marker of old age. For Pg Hjh Mastura, the strong value of extended family was very apparent. Meanwhile, for Dyg Zainab, her grandchildren are the love of her life. Heelas and Woodhead (2005) contended the family as a proxy of women's primary identity. Hence, it was not surprising that these women chose family photos with their grandchildren and extended family as representation of their old age. In fact, the family is the heart of many women in Asian societies (Devasahayam, 2014; Kalyani, 2005). Inevitably, this showed that childrearing and familial roles are not necessarily devaluation for women as purported by many Western feminists, instead they act as an empowerment to them. Contributing towards informal caring and nurturing their grandchildren enabled them to contribute to the social and economic well-being of the family. Conceivably, this may be an outlet for them to negotiate their 'old' identity. This highlights how ageing is a gender-specific phenomenon.

By contrast, as much as Hjh Timbang appreciated the experience of grandparenthood, the label 'grandma' did not impress her. Although she repeatedly admitted to her acceptance of old age 'as a gift from God', this seemed not to be internalised wholeheartedly. In fact, she asserted: '*I don't want to be called 'nini' (grandma) by my grandchildren, it would be weird*''. In this respect, she openly admitted how the status of grandma is seen as being 'old', thus by not bearing the label, she was 'othering' herself from the social identity 'old' associated with grandparenthood. This according to Simone de Beauvoir (1972) reflects a blatant example of alterity in old age. Evidently, being 'old' does not always coincide with chronological age, but rather one engages in inter-subjectively contested and negotiated meanings with regard to the 'old' identity.

Meanings are also often implicitly conveyed through how people view their own lives. A middle-class homemaker, Hjh Fatimah, aged 74 years, found her significant other as a fundamental part of her life. When asked to present two photos of her choice, she showed her wedding photo and the couple portrait displayed in her living room. Due to the patriarchal norm of a Brunei Malay society, the husband is usually regarded as the symbol of authority and leadership in many Brunei Malay families (Haji Dayang Haji Kassim, 2005; Ramlee Hj Tinkong, 2009). Hence, it is not uncommon to hear the women, especially homemakers, frame their old age experience as relative to their husband. For Hjh Fatimah, her following narrative reflects her emotional and physical dependence on her husband which she saw as an empowering and meaningful representation of her ageing experience.

> *I married my husband since 1958, we never had disagreement for a long time. As we grow older, we grow fonder with each other. We are still in love with one another; I take care of his food and drink. Wherever I go, he will be my company. He drives, we shop together. He does not even know these things, he would not know what are needed in the kitchen [laugh]. If I want to shop for clothes and scarves, he accompanies me. Yes only two of us. It's a pity actually, only two of us. So… it is just like this, always with my husband [laugh]. Go to the market, with my husband, then go grocery shopping, with my husband. [laugh]*

Disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry, 1961) implies that social isolation and disengagement are seen as two interrelated 'natural' outcomes of old age. However, this theory overlooks the effect of a combination of certain social practices and cultural values of a particular

society (Barry and Yuill, 2008, p, 216). The narratives of Hjh Fatimah, Hjh Timbang, Pg Hjh Mastura and Dyg Zainab's challenge disengagement. As illustrated, due to their strong social network and role as informal carer for their grandchildren and devoted partner, these women experience a relatively higher social reverence and cultural visibility. They see family whether at the giving or receiving end as empowering and fulfilling of their ageing experience and ultimately shape their concept of selfhood. Evidently, the gendered meanings and perspectives were central to their daily experiences of growing older.

On the other hand, some participants viewed retirement and receiving pension as the objective marker of old age. For a homemaker, Dyg Junaidah echoed, '*The thought of being a sixty reminds me that I have become an old person, because only at 60, you will receive your Old Age pension allowance*'. Meanwhile for a retiree like Hjh Rosmah, reaching age 55 is considered old. She claimed, '*When you reached 55, you retired, you are old already. Your service is no longer needed*'. Chronological age serves as a significant means to categorise the self and others throughout one's ageing experience (Nikander, 2009). Thus, entitlement to old age pension based on chronological age has created an objective reality for these women; the identity of '*warga emas*'[9] as proclaimed by the state. This is seen as more congenial than the blatant term of '*orang tua*' (old person), which reflects the value of politeness embedded in Brunei Malay society. Simultaneously, it is a gesture to preserve the elderly 'face' in the hierarchical nature of Brunei society, where status matters.

Concomitantly, they praised the old age pension scheme as a gracious gesture from the government. Inherently, the scheme reinforces the 'differentiation' of old age. Elderly is viewed as the 'object' rather than subject of governmental development policies within the pervasive notion of 'good ageing governance'. Such construction of senescence categorises the elderly as a group of population that is 'characterised by its neediness and poverty' (Katz, 1996, p. 8; Katz and McHugh, 2010, p. 270). As Kunow (2016) coined it, such a congenial term conveys a 'publicly mandated age identity' (p. 4). In reality, the term promotes affinity towards this differential identity in the public sphere which subsequently disguises the ageist attitude presented by the state.

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[9] loosely and congenially translated as golden citizen referring to old citizen.

Similarly, mandatory retirement may reflect an institutionalized ageism (Gillian and Klassen, 2000). Retirement from paid work is a major life change and it has been suggested that, self-identity is strongly associated with paid work (Wythes and Lyons, 2006; Mussaiger and d'Souza, 2009). Although they acknowledge their leisure time, few participants do not see retirement as favourable. They viewed themselves as still healthy and able to contribute to society. Western stereotypes of old age suggest old people as dependent beings who are biologically, socially and psychologically limited in their daily lives. As a result, they are assumed to lack the agility and capacity to participate in the productive workforce. This conceivably draws the elderly citizen onto the map of subalternity within political and governmental landscapes (Estes and Phillipson, 2002, p. 281). On a macro context, retirement age and pension schemes are 'ideological state apparatuses' of socio-economic and political subalternity which structure and systematise people of a specific age (elderly) at the periphery of political and socio-cultural participation.

Overall, the gendered discourses of ageing were articulated rather subjectively among the elderly women within the multi-layered alterity of their social identities. These involve grandparenthood, retirement (age 55) and entitlement to the Old Age Pension scheme (age 60). Their narratives suggest that the negotiation of identity pertaining to age and ageing involved a complex combination of selfhood, experiential mode of the lived body and interrelated perceptions and discourses of embodied 'others' within the social circles of the participants – which is fluid and dynamic.

Holistic Acceptance of Ageing

Mohan (2003) argued that understanding the spiritual dimension of ageing through a Western framework of spirituality divorced from organised religion may be inapplicable in non-Western culture. During the interview, hints of spiritual development and the implication for their ageing were observed. Concurring with Mohan's work, this study found that participants framed Islamic spirituality of *Taqwa*[10] (God-consciousness) as a central element in their ageing discourse. Some

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[10] *Taqwa*, (God-consciousness) is the Islamic version of spirituality (Maqsood, 2003, p. 1)

of the elements of Islamic spirituality's *Taqwa (Redha, Syukur* and *Ikhlas*) were paramount to their understanding and acceptance of spiritual concepts of ageing.

Redha:

> *We shouldn't care of things that have passed. We **redha (content)** and accept our ageing moments that have been written by God. Because in the Quran, it has stated the process of ageing, from baby, youth and to old age. Live it with a content heart. There is no need to worry about being old*. - Hjh Rosmah , 60, Retired Religious Officer

Syukur:

> *Whatever God has given to me, I am being '**bersyukur' (feeling of gratitude)** for my good health. What is the point of being young if you were only to waste your time with worldly things? What God has decreed to you, be**rsyukur**. Accept the fact that we are going to be old and we are old.* - Hjh Aspalela, 62, Retired Clerk

Ikhlas:

> *The truth is **Ikhlas,** (sincere). Have a sincere heart. Once you're old, then you're old. Take it as it is whatever Allah has given to you. If he gives you old age, then accept it with an open heart.* - Hjh Timbang, 66, Retired Senior Architecture Officer

Throughout the interview, all participants acknowledge ageing and old age as 'a gift of God' that should be positively embraced. They believe that trajectories of time are constructed in the realm of Divine power and humans should not contest such fate. Conceivably, the pervasive institutionalisation of Islamic spirituality[11] as a way of life (politically, economically, socially and culturally) in Brunei may contribute to influence such holistic acceptance of ageing.

Interestingly, while ageing is often conceptualised in the discourse of avoidance and fear in Western settings (Higgs and Gilleard, 2015; Kunow, 2016; Neuberger. 2009), ageing in the Brunei context was seen as a Divine 'gift' that needs to be responded with profound gratitude. In

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[11] In Brunei, spirituality is not a detachment from religion but rather induced by the attachment to it. This suggests context matters in defining spirituality.

other words, it is evident that their religious beliefs enabled them to embrace their identity as an ageing woman. Nonetheless, conceptually it is idealistic but in practice, some participants particularly the early 60s cohort presented a rather reluctant acceptance of their ageing. For instance, the excerpt on *Ikhlas* is drawn from Hjh Timbang who previously rejected the label 'grandma' in her narratives to distance herself from 'old age' identity.

Growing Spiritual

Previous studies (Manning, 2012; Mohan, 2003) have discovered that spirituality is heightened as one is advancing in old age. Growing spiritual is central to their concept of self (Gall, et al. 2011; Manning, 2012). This was also agreed by Flanagan and Jupp (2010) who stipulate that spirituality illuminates the subjective dimensions of self-identity. Subsequently, spirituality gives a much meaningful existential living which induces one's wellbeing. During the reflection of their old and youth aspects of self in the photos they have chosen, a growing sense of spiritual affinity as they aged was noted. They started to adopt headscarves, wear loose clothing, endorsing extra spiritual practice (such as *Tahajud, Dhuha*), go to mosques and become more informed about religious teaching. Thinking about death was also common. In many ways, this growing consciousness of God and one's own mortality demonstrated by these women is supported by existing research (Atchley, 2009; Koenig, 2006; Krause, 2006; Manning, 2012). Ageing can arguably be an invitation for deeper contemplative[12] activities, and hence, this indicates that age may be a factor that stimulated spirituality.

However on closer inspection, death awareness was not only mediated by increasing age. The study found that Islam as a religion plays a significant role in spreading awareness about death as it is a concept that is encouraged in Islam as stated by Dyg Junaidah. From the standpoint of postcolonial feminists (As-Sarrani and Alghamdi, 2014; Mohanty, 2006; Spivak, 1978), fear of death may suggest a Western construction incorporated as part of female ageing experience.

As much as age may influence spiritual growth, conversations with the participants suggest that the process is more of a combination of both personal and relational. Arguably, spiritual affinity is not only induced by chronologically growing older, but also through circumstances one

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[12] Enhancing one's spirituality is seen as *raison d'etre* and rites of passage. It is the time where these elderly persevere to race towards the higher purpose and being.

experienced while growing old. Drawing from a 63-years old retiree-turned-businesswoman, Hjh Maimunah's narrative on the third and fourth vignettes, she talked about how the death of her mother partially triggered the pursuit of a more emotional and spiritual engagement with God.

> *My mom passed away when she was 50+, so I thought to myself, 'hmm will I die at 50+ too?' But thank god, God gave me longer life and He keeps on adding the number to my age. So as my age increases from time to time, I am becoming more concerned about myself and death. Ironically, I never thought of this before. I am more concerned about my deeds and prayers. I don't want to sin anymore. I'm scared already to do bad things. I just want to do more good deeds for myself. I also do more almsgiving to people. I want to collect as many deeds as I can.*

The death of Hjh Maimunah's mother caused her to contemplate deeply about life and deepen her spiritual understanding. This suggests death awareness was also mediated by loss of loved ones regardless of one's chronological age. Geertz (1973) once conceptualized death as a part of the 'limiting experience' that invokes the search for meaning. It is a concept that is so foreign yet familiar, precisely because of one's limited knowledge and lack of spatial and temporal control of death. For all the interviewees, discussion of death is often extended to the spiritual narratives of afterlife. For instance, when shown the last vignette, Hjh Timbang (66, Retired Senior Architecture Officer) shared about her previous fear of the sight of graveyards. She recalled, "*I used to be so scared every time I pass by this place (grave). I felt it was a scary place. I was worried about my sins, I was worried if I am prepared to go 'there' and see Him [to die]*." Photo-elicitation method helped to gather and interpret such unexpected data that would have been 'silenced' during oral interviews.

The last vignette also often induced a saddening image of the loss of their loved ones. For example, Hjh Rogayah shared how much her husband's death has had an emotional and spiritual impact on her. She would send her prayers and recite words from the Holy book of Quran to comfort herself whenever she is reminded of her late husband. High death awareness among the participants can be attributed to the Islamic framework of afterlife. Becker (1973) perceived those who believe in the existence of afterlife may have lower potentiality for death-anxiety. This may promote their acceptance towards ageing and mortality overall.

In both Hjh Timbang and Hjh Rogayah's accounts, spirituality acts as a coping mechanism for sadness and negative events conflicted upon individuals (Atchley, 2009; Manning, 2012; Woodhead, 2008). Religion was seen as their comforting shoulder to come to terms with death, and the rewards of afterlife surpassed the pain of the trials and challenges they are facing. Spiritual values give comfort and ensure the feeling of security and safety. As a result, growing spirituality made their life challenges during ageing more bearable. Overall, the elderly narratives of high death awareness and Islamic spiritual affinity appear to undermine the hegemonic Western standard of understanding mortality (Becker, 1973; Aries, 1974; Mellor; 1993). The conceptualisations of death and ageing among these Brunei Malay Muslim women were influenced by Brunei's strong socio-religious context.

Kumpulan Muslimah (KM)

The study found that more than half of the participants (n=6) in the study joined *KM*. *KM* is a religious-spiritual community for women, an initiative introduced by the Brunei's Ministry of Religious Affairs to empower Muslim women and impart Islamic knowledge and skills. Many mosques in Brunei have their own *Muslimah* groups. Their activities include religious classes run by qualified religious female teachers, mass prayers, reaching out to community, charity runs, Quran recitation and delegation or exchange visits with other *Muslimah* groups from different districts. Most members of this group are often home makers and retired elderly women.

KM was not a foreign term to all participants of the study. They revealed they are either members of the group or had heard about it from their friends or relatives. Interestingly, mobility was an influencing or hindering factor of one's enrolment to be a KM member. Hjh Rogayah talked about her desire to join the group whenever her relatives talked about the upcoming exciting activities in KM during wedding gatherings. However, mobility was an issue; she can only go to places depending on her son's availability (due to work commitment) as she does not drive. Similarly, Pg Hjh Mastura also voiced similar concern and preferred to use her free time with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren instead. For the more middle-class women such as Hjh Timbang and Hjh Rosmah, mobility is not a problem. They have the luxury of domestic helpers, a car provided by their children and own a driving license; it was easier for them to join KM activities anytime.

Woodhead (2008, p. 157) argued that the preponderance of old women in the social milieu enhances the traditional feminine values it offers to these women. Analogously, it ensures an autonomous mode of personhood outside the familiar context of family and workplace and potentially promotes means for subjective wellbeing. For the previously working women, exclusion from paid employment means that they are further isolated from their accustomed social networks and relationships and redirects them to another unfamiliar social setting with plenty of time to spare. This was not conducive to their mental and health well-being. Therefore, those who enrolled themselves in *KM* view it as a vital part of their positive and healthy ageing strategy.

Similar sentiments were echoed among the participants being studied. Hjh Aspalela (62, retired clerk) referred *KM* as her *'outside world'* after retirement in order to have a balance between her domestic identities with a more public one. In this respect, *KM* can be seen as an extension of women's sphere to explore another form of identity beyond the traditional domestic and workplace identities, aside from a platform to enhance one's spirituality. Similarly, Hjh Seri (69, retired chef) admitted the positive impact of *KM* on her, particularly in getting more informed about Islam, which will help her to foster greater spiritual connection with God. Her narrative suggests the symbolic enhancement of one's spirituality,

> *I gained so much knowledge from KM, knowledge for the next life most importantly. I learned about how to conduct prayers properly, read Quran. I feel happy and my heart is at peace. Even when you feel not happy, but when you get to see your friends and gather around, you feel happy. You get to exchange your thoughts, make new friends, from being illiterate to literate of Quran. I feel happy. I get to learn something new, I get to go for trips overseas, visit so many places. All these make me happy. I know about tahajjud, Dhuha, sunnah prayers and etc, so with all this little knowledge I gained, I get to also teach my young grandchildren a little bit.*

Apparently, although there is a notable development of affinity towards spirituality, some participants agreed that spiritual growth needs to be facilitated earlier. In fact, spirituality among Muslims should be harnessed throughout life regardless of age. Hjh Rosmah, a 60-year old retired Religious Officer elucidated how spiritual enhancement among elderly women at a later age may

be seen as culturally-mediated. Some women purposely postponed their spiritual connection with God, but the extent to which age contributes to such attitude remains questionable.

> *Well from what I see among the ageing members of KM, most of them are those women who weren't concern for their spiritual connection with God until at their later life. They were like, 'wait till I get old'. So when you delay it until at the later life, they were clueless on how to do the proper prayers and what not. Even through my observation, they were still ignorant of spiritual-religious knowledge from the questions they asked me in classes. Prayers should be our daily routine and daily obligation; there should be no excuse for us as Muslims to neglect it until later life.*

Arguably, *Kumpulan Muslimah* is seen as the manifestation of the state's aspiration to be a *Zikr* nation (a nation that remembers God). Since Islam helps to shape the way of life in Brunei, so spirituality as a religious discourse is very relevant. Hence, KM reflects the state's initiative to promote an inclusive positive ageing platform among the female members of the elderly community through institutionalising spiritual and religious values. Simultaneously, this illustrates the concern of the state pertaining to the spiritual aspects of Brunei Muslim women. On the other hand, it is fair to argue that being members of *KM* does not only serve as the women's commitment to enhance their spirituality, but also serves as an expression of their identity as practicing Muslims[13] as well as identification with the community of faith.

(Re) Imagining Future Ageing: Needs, Aspirations and Expectations

Filial piety and elderly care are two interrelated yet convoluted themes of the participants' narratives in their ageing experience especially when discussing vignette number two. In Brunei, respect for elderly is one of the core values being instilled since early age, which is viewed in accordance to Islamic teaching. As a result, this has been institutionalized socially, culturally and religiously. The culture of interdependence and strong sense of community exists in Brunei society

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[13] *KM* challenges the assumption of universal oppression of Muslim women in an inadvertently Islamic system by Western lense. As a matter of fact, what is patronizing is the social and cultural mores – not Islam as the religion itself (Al- Sarrani and Alghamdi, 2014). In essence, the submission to God in the Islamic sense is seen as particularly liberating because it does not promote conformity to men, instead to submit solely to the Creator of both men and women.

and shape women's ageing experience. During the interviews, most participants voiced their aspiration to be taken care by their children as they grow older.

> *We wish that one day, our children would also do the same to us, taking care and loving us when we're old. She seems to love her mother so much. I feel touched. It reminded me of my late mother. I am grateful I am able to take care of my late old mother, fed her and the likes, I hope my children will also do that to us.* - Hjh Aspalela, 62, retired clerk

Hjh Aspalela's narrative encapsulates the traditional caring roles associated with being a woman. She talked about how she felt honoured to be given the opportunity to take care of her late mother when she was old and expected the same experience from her children. This suggests how the concept of filial piety is being passed from one generation to another. Kendig (1992) argued that major religions shape the basic norms and values and respect for the elderly. As a matter of fact, Islam has a major influence in directing and formulating how the elderly should be treated. The opportunity to serve and care for parents and the elderly is considered a great honour and blessing[14]in Islam. This is clearly enunciated in the Quran (17: 23 – 24):

> "*Your Lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and be kind to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, do not say 'uff' to them or chide them, but speak to them in terms of honour and kindness. Treat them with humility and say 'My Lord, Have mercy on them, for they did care for me when I was little*"

The idea of femininity is also very apparent in their discourses. Most participants admitted they prefer to be cared by daughters than sons. In Brunei society, women are often prescribed with the responsibility as nurturer and care-giver. Admittedly, it is conceivable that such gender preference came from many of the participants. Furthermore, it can be deduced that family is a major priority in these women's lives, especially much more for the homemakers. They devoted their lives to caring and nurturing their children and evidently, they expect their care to be reciprocated by their

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[14] Spiritual Islamic also play a role here. They believe pious children can be an asset for them in their graves to supplement and send their prayers to them when they died. Rights of parents such as elderly care have high premium in the eye of Islam (Abdullah, 2016, p. 384)

adult children. This shift in responsibility represents the importance of filial piety in most Asian and Eastern societies (Devasahayam, 2014).

On the extreme, Western feminists have more often than not viewed family as a key site for women's oppression[15]. They argue domestic and care giving labour provided by women in essence only position women as 'hidden labour' within capitalist society (Abbott, Wallace and Tyler, 2005; Oakley, 1974). Paradoxically, in Brunei Malay society that strongly values the concept of 'filial piety' and community, reciprocal care, assistance and affection from the children towards elderly parents are expected. This informal social contract between the elderly parents and their adult children serves to benefit elderly women in return. Thus, Hjh Aspalela's narrative also reflected how care of the elderly in familiar surroundings with emotional ties would be an ideal setting for life in a close-knit society like Brunei (Musaiger and D'Souza, 2009).

Arguably, isolation and disengagement are not much observed. Brunei's prevalent practice of interdependent living with children, strong cultural expectation of filial piety and family value may be the contributing factors. This study found that nine out of the total participants co-resided with their children. The exchange of intergeneration living in a family-oriented society reflects material reciprocity as well as social support between ageing parents and their children. The adult children act as a fundamental source of informal elderly care, physically, financially and emotionally. They are their 'assurance of care' (Devasahayam, 2014, p. 14). As much as co-residence benefits the elderly women, their children are also able to capitalize on their elderly mothers as informal carers[16] for their children. Often when it was the elder who owns the house, the children are able to maximise this as an economic opportunity for survival in an increasingly capitalistic world.

Nevertheless, both homemakers, Hjh Rogayah who has no biological children and Hjh Fatimah who lives independently from her children, felt rather isolated to some extent. This suggests that disengagement is 'unnatural'. The concern and fear of isolation and abandonment by

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[15] The term oppression is widely convoluted within the Western narratives towards the 'Others' especially of Muslim women. Thus, rearticulating the experience of Muslim women by bringing in Brunei context especially at this heighten Islamophobic climate serves as an empowerment in unpacking the pervasive hegemonic ideologies (Collins, 2000). It is a discourse that moves away from the characterization of Muslim women as oppressed that derives from the generalisation of one or few experiences of Muslim women in other parts of the world.

[16] For instance, as these children often depend on their mothers to take care of their children (grandparenting role), at the same time they are also supporting their mother.

their children in times of potential vulnerabilities remain apparent in the majority of their narratives.

I'd ask myself, how would I die? How would I look like? Especially remembering I am alone. If I am sick who would take care of me? Who would feed me? It has been playing on my mind as I grow older. If there is someone who would take care of me, Alhamdulillah [all praises to God]. – Hjh Rogayah, 70, Homemaker

The biggest challenge during old age is health. Imagine, if I were to fall sick, I will be just there lying on my bed, I need somebody to accompany me when going to toilet, feeling all weak and have to be dependent on others. Oh noo..please God I don't want that to happen to me. I wish I would never have to trouble a soul for this. The last thing I would like is troubling others, even when they are my children. - Hjh Timbang, 66, Retired Senior Architecure Officer

These narratives reflected the two contradictory aspirations among the many participants being studied; to remain independent (self-reliant so as to not be a burden, good health) and at the same time, maintaining interdependence (being taken care of by children and social network). It is important to note that in Brunei society, the idea of 'old folk's home' is inconceivable. In fact, due to the strong sense of community, collective identity and expectation of filial piety (Hj Harun Mat Piah, 1992), Brunei Malays view such concept as culturally taboo and intolerable as it is inconsistent with local beliefs and practices. Hence, the family remains an important institution for elderly care. In fact, such strongly ingrained cultural values of familism is a contrast to the Western context (Tsuno and Homme, 2009). This suggests that how cultural context provides significant influence in perceiving old age among these women. Deductively, co-residences are good for elderly wellbeing as they have emotional, physical and generational support from their family members especially their grandchildren.

On the other hand, the awareness about eating right to ensure a healthy and active body was also prominent throughout the interviews with the participants. As some of the participants talked about eating right, they brought a sense of informed and educated empowerment to their lives. Conceivably, these women negotiate their ageing by taking care of themselves which shows

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respect for their selfhood and wellbeing. This suggests healthy ageing seems to be another aspiration and the direction that elderly women persevere in.

CONCLUSION

The research has presented how the construction of old age identity and ageing does not occur in a social vacuum and that meaning in itself is a multivalent concept. Some women viewed old age through grandparenthood, retirement at age 55 and/or receiving entitlement towards old age pension scheme at age 60. The gendered discourses of ageing among these women involve a diverse articulation of meaning within the multi-layered alterity of their social identities such as mother, wife and grandmother. The study also presented how familial pursuit is seen as very important among the participants being studied. Brunei Malay Muslim women visibly and practically maintain their feminine differences through the roles they play within the family setting. This shows that the gender dimension of ageing is a domain that should not be overlooked as it impacts the lived experience of older women (Krekula, 2007).

Evidently, elderly women are actively participating domestically and outside of their traditional roles. Some joined Kumpulan Muslimah, while most others invested their time with their social networks and actively engaged in grandparenthood. Arguably, Brunei Malay Muslim women inherently reject the particular ideal of death fear by engaging in holistic acceptance of ageing promoted by Islamic teaching. In this respect, women also viewed old age as a time to reconnect with the Divine Being. Subsequently, these diverse meanings presented by the elderly offer alternative avenues for contesting against the Western conception of ageing such as fear of mortality and disengagement.

Spirituality, in the frame of Islam is interesting. It is also clear Islam often configured into their narratives despite the variation in which they experienced their spiritual growth. Their religious identity was so prominent, and it intersected with different structural factors involving age, gender, class and ethnic-cultural values. The study also confirms that personal meaning of old age is not only gendered but also involves a spiritual one. Coupled with Brunei's pervasive

Islamisation policy, arguably, the political and religious factor in Brunei have significant influence in inducing their growing affinity towards spiritual values in old age.

On the other hand, the aspiration for elderly care within the family is prominent in the research. This is induced by the strong expectation of filial piety and respect for elderly which are not only guided by Islam but deeply reflects Brunei's stratified and close-knitted society. The conformity towards Malay values and Islamic teaching underlie the core social character of the Malay elderly women who still hold strongly onto their religious and moral values. Drawn in Brunei's strong Malay Islamic social foundation, this study has demonstrated how female ageing is experienced and negotiated by many social-cultural factors. This includes an ongoing Islamisation discourse, strong Malay cultural and Islamic values, interdependence of family structure (social expectation of filial piety) and intense social rapport and network.

Most importantly, the study sheds light on the diversity of female ageing experience that is apparent within the cultural context of Brunei. Additionally, it reveals that the intersectionality of age, gender and religion as well as race and ethnicity are relevant to elucidate and comprehend women's ageing experience. It is important to note that every elder woman may have a different set of priorities and values between and within societies. Therefore, in order to counter potential 'euro-centrism' (Mishra, 2013) in the study of ageing, a new conceptual frame of intelligibility that embraces the diverse ageing experience of women that cut across cultural and ethnic backgrounds is preferable.

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