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**Faith and Fortitude:  
Understanding Malay Muslim Widows in Brunei  
Through Their Embodiment of *Redha***

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to gain a deeper understanding of the sociocultural context surrounding the lived experiences of widowhood among Malay Muslim women in Brunei. Beyond a widow's grief, influences outside their control, such as culture, religion, and broader societal factors, also shape their experiences of widowhood. It is based on primary qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with twelve widows who generously shared their insights. Drawing on their stories, the adversities they face are narrated and illustrate how ethnoreligious factors influence their experiences of widowhood. Findings suggest that Malay Muslim widows in Brunei embody *redha* in their hearts, minds, and bodily actions to navigate spousal loss and reconstruct their lives. *Redha* carries Islamic connotations, referring to submission and acceptance of Allah's preordained destiny, despite its regrettable outcomes. While acceptance can come begrudgingly to widows, a sense of religious command gives them strength of resolve. Resilience follows the acceptance of loss, and *redha* facilitates their actions of enduring and moving through the changes and challenges of widowhood. Lastly, the paper shows how they move beyond resilience, thrive in remembrance and create a meaningful life in the present, reflecting the lasting influence of *redha*.

**Keywords:** Brunei, Malay-Muslim; widows; widowhood; *redha*; acceptance; resilience; thriving

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## **Introduction**

*“Semenjak Babah nada, I lost the motivation for cooking bah lai...”*<sup>1</sup> My mother replied when I asked her why she had stopped cooking regularly. She had a profound enthusiasm for cooking. She was renowned among family and friends for her culinary talents. Many eagerly looked forward to visiting our ‘open house’<sup>2</sup> during Hari Raya to enjoy her signature dishes, especially her *lontong* and *ayam masak merah peanut butter*. However, after my father’s sudden passing a few years ago, it was as though her passion had come to a halt. My mother often buys cooking ingredients to this day, but most remain untouched and expire in the pantry because the other members of my family do not cook. Somehow, the absence of my mother’s cooking in my daily life became a significant part of my grieving experience for the loss of my father, too. This made me realise my interest in learning how different individuals cope with the death of a loved one. Through my ethnographic exploration of lived experiences among Malay Muslim widows in Brunei, I intend to understand my mother better, along with other widows who share the same position.

The status ‘widow’ is given to women whose spouse has died, and ‘widowhood’ refers to the state of being a widow or widower (Bennet, as cited in Carr, 2008). According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, only 3.5% of Brunei Darussalam’s population of 440,715 was estimated to be widowed (Ministry of Finance and Economy, 2021). This small

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: “Since your father passed, I lost the motivation for cooking dear...”

<sup>2</sup> Hari Raya open houses are events hosted by Malay Muslim households to celebrate Eid al-Fitr.

number should not undermine the importance of understanding their experiences. Widowhood is a life-changing experience that encompasses not only the devastating loss of a spouse but also the immediate change in their status from being a husband or wife to becoming a widower or widow. This transition is influenced by a complex dynamic between their emotional distress and other external forces such as their culture, religion, and social surroundings. It also affects their roles and purpose in life. As Kleinman (2012) puts it, experiences of loss are never devoid of context. It is always shaped by meanings and values, which are determined by what is happening in one's life and the wider world.

This paper explores the central inquiry of how Malay Muslim women in Brunei embody *redha* to navigate spousal loss and reconstruct their lives. It illustrates their changes and challenges, and examines how ethnoreligious factors influence their experiences of widowhood. Findings suggest that Malay Muslim widows in Brunei embody *redha* in their minds, hearts and bodily actions to navigate spousal loss and reconstruct their lives.<sup>3</sup>

The paper is structured across three main sections to highlight the elements of a widow's embodiment of *redha*, namely acceptance, resilience and thriving. The section on, '*Acceptance*,' establishes a widow's first step to embodying *redha* by accepting their fate and new identity. The second section on '*Resilience*,' demonstrates how widows endure and move through their changes and challenges after experiencing spousal loss. The final section on '*Thriving*,' shows how widows thrive in remembrance by embodying *redha* and share their responses to the question of remarriage.

This paper goes beyond filling a gap in the scarce literature on widowhood in Brunei, in that it helped the author understand their mother better and hopes to inform readers the same way. The study

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<sup>3</sup> *Redha*, a Malay word with Arabic and Islamic origins, connotes the acceptance and contentment with God's destiny, despite its regrettable outcomes. Muslims must submit to their preordained destinies, *qada* and *qadar*, as decreed by Allah.

gave voice to Bruneian Malay Muslim widows and offers a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural context that surrounds their lived experiences of widowhood.

## **Methodology**

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Employing an ethnographic approach, the study focuses on the lived experiences within the Brunei Malay Muslim cultural context. Twelve widowed Bruneian Malay Muslim women were recruited for the study via snowball sampling and qualitative data were gathered via semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted in person, allowing for close observation of facial expressions, intonation, and body language. Interviews were emotional, and interlocutors often regarded them as sessions of *curahan hati* (pouring one's heart out). Consequently, the amassed data are sentimental, extensive and rich. The author did not consider them as just fieldwork data; they were conversations that stayed with the author. The emotional weight of their stories resonated with the author's own loss deeply. Data were evaluated through interpretive and thematic analysis to construct meanings, themes, recurring patterns, and categories.

Table 1 below shows participant demographics. Their names were changed to protect their privacy and their participation and trust is truly appreciated.

## Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Reason for the late husband's death	Occupation	Number of kids and their age range	Relationship Status*
Hayati	52	Cardiac arrest	Civil servant	4. All adults.	Single
Halimah	63	Heart attack	Retired	5. All adults.	Single
Basmah	47	Cancer	Civil servant	3. All adults.	Single
Latifah	48	Cancer	Housewife	6. All adults.	Single
Aminah	57	Cancer	Housewife	5. All adults.	Single
Mastura	55	Cancer	Teacher	6. All adults.	Single
Rashidah	38	Hypoxemia/ Hypoxia	Civil servant	3 children aged 12 & under.	Single
Hanan	38	Tuberculosis	Cook	2 children aged 5 & under.	Single
Jamilah	30	Cardiac arrest	Civil servant	5 children aged 8 & under.	Remarried & divorced
Sa'diyah	32	Asthma	Teacher	4 children, aged 6 & under. Sa'diyah was also expecting her 5th child.	Single
Farah	28	Car accident	Housewife	2 children aged 3 & under.	Single
Laila	43	Cardiac arrest	Security guard	5, aged 8 to 20.	Single

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics

*Note.* The information shown above pertains to the time when my interlocutors became widowed, except for their most recent relationship status\*.

## **Situating the Study**

As previously noted, widowhood experiences are embedded with context. Reviewing existing scholarship from different disciplines enables identification of key insights that situate and underpin the findings of the paper. Firstly, the existing ethnography of Malay Muslim widows is examined, followed by conjugal roles in Malay Muslim households and lastly, how *'redha'* can be mobilised as a coping mechanism. In doing so, the subtleties of widowhood and its implications for understanding the lived experiences of Malay Muslim widows in Brunei are highlighted.

### ***Ethnography of Malay Muslim widows***

The study of widows' experiences plays a significant part in explaining the challenges different segments of society face and their social behaviours (Karupiah, 2020). Widows are considered a vulnerable group in society. One of the most traumatic life events a person can experience is spousal loss, which is linked to an array of psychological, economic and social problems (Wilcox et al., 2003, as cited in Momtaz et al., 2009). However, ethnographic literature about widowhood among Malay Muslims in the Malay world has been scarce. In Brunei, existing literature addressing widows has primarily focused on their financial challenges associated with single motherhood (Affandy, 2023) and their position within Islamic law (Ibrahim, 2024), rather than their experiences of widowhood. The lack of relevant literature regarding the lived experiences of widowhood among Malay Muslims in Brunei and the Malay world indicates an underexamined topic.

Apart from the work of Parker, Riyani and Nolan (2016) that explores the stigma of *'jandahood'* in the Muslim communities of West Java and Wawonii Island in Bandung, Indonesia, limited ethnographic data on Malay Muslim widows is available. Initially, there was some confusion because *'janda'* refers to divorced women in Brunei, while *'balu'* refers to widows. As it turns out, in Indonesia, *'janda'* refers to both widows and female divorcees - in particular, *'janda mati'* refers to widows, while *'janda cerai'* refers to female divorcees. Their study revealed that widows were perceived as 'sexually available,' making them victims of accusations and gossip. The assumption is that widows have developed *nafsu* (lust) after their sexual experience with their late husbands. Once 'single' again after their husbands' deaths, they were believed to be 'free' to express their *nafsu*. Consequently, they adopt a 'de-

stigmatising strategy' by engaging in religious gatherings and community-focused initiatives to regain social respect.

While Parker et al.'s focus on stigmatisation provides a valuable framework for analysing experiences of widowhood among Malay Muslim women in Brunei, stigmatisation did not emerge naturally as part of the findings. Their study also fails to address iddah, an aspect that is particularly relevant to Muslim widows. In Islam, a widow is required to complete her iddah. It is a 'waiting period' that allows widows to grieve the death of their husbands and to determine the paternity of the child if a pregnancy is discovered after the spouse's death (Elbashir, 2024). For non-pregnant widows, the iddah period spans up to four months and ten days. During iddah, they are subject to certain expectations and restrictions, which may suggest that their social surroundings and social norms influence their experience of widowhood. According to the State Mufti of Brunei, some limits on widows include avoiding adornments on their clothing and bodies, staying in their homes throughout the period, and a prohibition on travelling (The State Mufti, 2021). The requirement of iddah was explored in the interviews; however, findings did not align with the narrative presented in this paper. In the pursuit of thriving and reconstructing their lives, data revealed that Bruneian Malay Muslim widows tend to sidestep these restrictions which suggests iddah is not as significant to Brunei widows as initially presumed.

### ***Contextualising widowhood through conjugal roles***

Among many other factors influencing widowhood, conjugal roles may offer the most effective context for understanding the challenges of losing a spouse. Although it may seem straightforward, it accounts for the domestic changes that occur after the death of a spouse. These changes may prove difficult for the widowed. In Brunei, the roles of wife and mother, as well as those of husband and father, are culturally prescribed. Ho (2019) examined the racial representation of women in Bruneian texts. She observed that performing housework and submitting to the Malay husband are everyday doings that inscribe Malay identity on the female body. In other words, Malay women are often expected to carry out domestic tasks such as cooking and washing.

On the other hand, Fadzillah and Hoon (2021) studied masculinity among young Malay men in Brunei. Their findings suggest that young Malay men are expected to become leaders, protectors and providers for their families, fulfilling religious obligations and family responsibilities. This includes becoming the breadwinner, providing advice and leading their daily prayers. A shared perspective emerges from these studies, highlighting the relevance of patriarchy in ascribing dominant roles to men and subordinate roles to women in Brunei Malay Muslim households.

Nevertheless, in contemporary society, it is essential to recognise that housework can be shared between husband and wife. Razif (2017) studied the legality of love and marriage in Malaysia. She observed that the state is complicit in encouraging ‘the companionate marriage model’ in which ideal Malay marriages are seen as a joint endeavour of care and conjugal concerns. The state encourages this through public campaigns (e.g., *Dasar Keluarga Mawaddah Kelantan*) that promote gendered but complementary roles between spouses. Wives are encouraged to be their loving, caring helpers in this endeavour, while husbands are designated as the family's moral and spiritual leader and economic provider. Similarly, this can be observed in Brunei, where the state mandates couples to undergo pre-marriage courses.<sup>4</sup> These courses convey similar sentiments about conjugal roles, grounded in Islamic beliefs and the prophetic practice.

The studies above illustrate how conjugal roles are performed in Malay Muslim households. Having said that, the aim of this paper is not to inquire about the division of roles between husband and wife, but rather about what happens after one loses their spouse. Upon the loss of a spouse, they become solely responsible for all living expenses, housework, childcare and decision-making — “*all the thinking and doing... I am the mother but I became the father too,*” per the words of the author’s mother - often managing everything alone. This is a change that impacts them greatly and enduringly. Of course, these roles may be filled by close family members, friends, and even children who offer support. But in the end, it is the widowed who bear the overwhelming responsibility of navigating these difficulties. Upon

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of registering for a marriage in Brunei, couples are obliged to attend pre-marriage courses facilitated by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. For more information, see <https://www.mora.gov.bn/SiteCollectionDocuments/BKKNK/Perkhidmatan%20Permohonan%20Kursus%20Pra%20Nikah.pdf>

studying the challenges of divorced and widowed single mothers in Brunei, Affandy and Ahmad (2024: 124) articulate it succinctly; “achieving harmony in the preservation of her well-being and that of her family requires constantly fighting a precarious battle on a day-to-day basis, dealing with the dual pressures of emotional turmoil from responsibilities of caregiving and work” - and grief too, for widows.

### *Coping through ‘redha’*

Exploring widowhood experiences among Malay Muslim women in Brunei highlights the pertinence of ‘redha.’ It was brought to light by all of the interlocutors. According to Kamus Al-Munawwir<sup>5</sup>, redha is derived from the words Radhiya (رَضِي), Yardha (يَرْضِي) and Ridwanan (رَضْوَانًا), and they imply feelings of acceptance, willingness and contentment (Tafsir Alquran ID, 2021). It demonstrates the individual’s capacity for patience in accepting Allah’s decrees, despite the difficulties and calamities that come from Allah (Munir & Amin, 2012, as cited in Saputra et al., 2024). To illustrate this, Izharuddin’s study on Malay forced marriage narratives has identified that Islamic virtues such as redha and *sabar* (patience) are mobilised through personal lenses by which individuals experience and interpret their struggles (2021). Extending on these insights, this paper underlines redha as a conceptual framework for understanding widows through three defining elements: *acceptance*, *resilience*, and *thriving*.

The first element, acceptance, is fundamental in allowing the bereaved to endure loss. Wong et al. (1994) suggested that death acceptance is multi-dimensional:

The first dimension, neutral acceptance, refers to viewing death as a natural and inevitable part of life. The second dimension, approach acceptance, is related to religiosity; a person with an approach acceptance attitude regards death as the beginning of a happy afterlife. The third dimension, escape acceptance, refers to the view of death as an escape from suffering that results from intolerable living conditions. (as cited in Boyraz et al., 2014: 2)

These psychological dimensions, particularly the neutral and approach acceptance were prevalent in the findings.

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<sup>5</sup> Kamus Al-Munawwir is an oft-cited Arabic-Indonesian dictionary that translates and interprets Arabic and Islamic texts in Indonesian language.

Following acceptance, *resilience* further illustrates the experiences of widows in withstanding grief. Resilience to loss and trauma is the capability to keep a stable physical and psychological functioning after disruptive events such as the death of a loved one (Bonanno, 2008). As such, a resilient individual may occasionally experience emotional distress but continue to show a stable trajectory of functioning over time and experience positive emotions. Resilience indicates the widows' determination to not only function or survive but also *thrive* after the loss of their husbands.

Beyond the elements discussed above, the paper contends that *thriving* offers further nuance to the experiences of widowhood. It portrays not only the widows' acceptance and resilience but also a comprehensive depiction of how they embody *redha* to live life well, even after losing a life partner. Standridge (2020) suggests that widows realise new identities through social leisure, sometimes referred to as 'blossoming' (Lopata, 1973, as cited in Standridge, 2020). It is a phenomenon in which widows appreciate a new reality that allows them to have a socially engaged, fulfilling life due to the spontaneity available to them as single women.

By examining how widows practice acceptance and resilience through *redha*, the paper provides a novel perspective on how widows navigate their widowhood journeys and thrive even after losing their cornerstones.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### ***Acceptance***

Acceptance is the primary meaning of *redha*, which connotes accepting Allah's destiny despite its regrettable outcome. In Islam, a person's destiny is written in *qada* and *qadar*. A Muslim is obliged to believe in *qada* and *qadar*. This section evaluates how a widow's acceptance of their *qada* and *qadar* is the first step to embodying *redha* and coping with the death of their spouse. There are two interrelated parts: accepting fate and accepting their new identities as widows.

## *Accepting fate*

Acceptance is the first step to redha. Farah shared her immediate response to her late husband's unexpected passing. With her hand held to her heart, Farah emotionally recounted:

*When the ambulance arrived and I saw his lifeless body, I said to myself, 'Ya Allah... this is real. I am accepting this. Just give me the strength to accept it... this is it. I'm standing on my own now. This is my fate, according to Your qada and qadar.'*

Farah expresses her acceptance of divine will and asks God for the strength to accept what He has written for her. Her husband died in a car accident only six years after they were married, when she was only 28 years old. In Islam, divine acceptance of fate involves instilling and practising a belief in *qada* and *qadar*, as well as submission to God's will. Qada and qadar encompass the eternal knowledge of Allah inscribed in the Preserved Tablet (*Luh Mahfuz*), in which Allah has written the decrees and destinies of all creations before bringing them into existence (Yahya & Akib, 2024). Belief in qada and qadar is also the sixth and final pillar of faith every Muslim must believe in, forming the core of their Muslim identity.

Farah had no idea the goodbyes she exchanged with her late husband that morning were their last. Although his passing was shocking to her, Farah remained true to her faith. Hayati, who lost her husband suddenly in his sleep after 28 years of marriage, shared similar sentiments:

*I was really devastated, but I had to accept... I had to accept. I cannot turn back time, and I have no control over what happens. Indeed, one of our pillars of faith is to believe in Allah's qada and qadar. It is a belief we have to hold onto. So, whatever happens, we must accept it.*

Drawing from Farah and Hayati's replies, acceptance does not come naturally to widows. Although acceptance conveys their submission to what has been predestined for them, acceptance is a state of mind that widows cultivate with much effort and strength. This is evident when Farah asks Allah to grant her strength and when Hayati expresses that acceptance is her obligation as a Muslim. Accepting fate, then, can be seen as a form of worship for Malay Muslim widows to fulfil the Islamic pillars of faith and surrender themselves to God.

As voiced by Hayati, the death of a loved one is devastating. It can trigger emotional turmoil. This can be disruptive and overwhelming to widows. When the author's own father passed, her mother was overcome with grief, and she could not stop crying. Family members

and friends alike offered words of condolences and consolation, a call to *redha* and acceptance. However, being told ‘we should not cry too much’, can grate, as if this reaction to a father’s death was wrong. Having experienced this too, Hayati remarked in exasperation:

*“Bukan aku inda redha, aku rindu bah! Aku paling suka orang diam sama gosok belakangku saja.” (It’s not that I am not accepting [his death], I just miss him! I prefer it when people don’t say anything and just rub my back.)*

Her remark struck a chord. It offers a glimpse into the grievance that only those who have experienced loss can truly understand. To accept the passing of someone dear was something we always knew we had to do. But when one is met with the harsh reality of death, especially of a loved one, it is easier said than done. Consequently, Hayati felt bothered when others reminded her to *redha*. She was aware of her obligation, but she was emotionally struggling and just needed time. Hayati’s responses, in contrast to that of Farah, also shed light on begrudged acceptance. There is a reluctance to her acceptance, demonstrating the pain of loss.

Sa’diyah demonstrated a begrudged acceptance too. In tackling her struggle with acceptance, Sa’diyah talked about how the notion of the afterlife mediated her acceptance towards her husband’s passing:

*Death is something God promised. I had to redha even though it hurt. When he was comatose, I somewhat felt redha, but I still did not want him to leave me yet. Then I thought, 'What else can I do?' I had to redha completely so that it wouldn't be painful for him. **If I don't redha, then he won't depart peacefully [to the other realm]. I do not want that for him.** I had to let go. God already promised [death].*

Sa’diyah was married to her husband for six years, and they were expecting their fifth child when her husband passed from severe asthma. She explains that she had to force herself to let him go, to ensure that he did not have difficulties departing to the next realm. The exact words she expressed were “*kalau nda redha, karang nda tenang kepergiannya*”. This directly translates to “*If I don’t redha, then he won’t depart peacefully [to the other realm]*.” It connotes a belief that one has to accept another’s passing to allow the deceased to leave this world peacefully and then easily enter the next (hereafter). To the best of the author’s knowledge, there is no Islamic doctrine that states a lack of *redha* regarding someone’s death would directly lead to a challenging experience in the deceased’s afterlife. It may be more of a cultural conviction among Malay Muslims instead. Wong et al. ’s idea about death acceptance

mentioned in the previous section is reflected in Sa'diyyah's response, where she accepts the death of her husband and regards it as the beginning of a peaceful afterlife.

### *Accepting 'widow'hood*

Findings suggest that the change in their status from 'having been' a wife to becoming a widow is hurtful and uncomfortable. Rashidah talked about her first time hearing her new identity:

*So when my husband passed away, I was numb... even when I looked at his body that was covered with the blanket, I was like, is that him? Really him? I didn't even want to peek; I couldn't bring myself to do that. I'm just going to stand back and let them do what they have to do. **And then the nurses were like, 'Kita balunya?' [Are you their widow?]** 'Balu'... that was the first word that I heard... that changed my status... **Instead of ['wife']. I was hurt.** Usually, I've heard myself being referred to as a wife, but now it's 'balu'. Like huh? What? **But I did respond, 'Yes, I'm the balu.'** They gave me all of his belongings that they had packed for me and provided me with the necessary forms to fill out. They told me, 'Once you're ready, you come over and give it to us so we can prepare his death certificate.' **So I'm like, okay. Death certificate. Okay. Balu... death. Okay.***

Rashidah's late husband passed away from critical breathing difficulties after two weeks of treatment in the ICU. They were married for 13 years and had three children, the youngest of whom was just two years old at the time. In her statement, Rashidah discusses how hurtful and foreign it was to hear herself being referred to as 'balu.' Balu is a Malay word that means widow. Rashidah knew this, but it was something she could not wrap her head around at the time. Her disbelief can be seen in her refusal to peek at her late husband's body. When she chose to stand back instead, she created a distance between herself and her husband, as well as between herself and reality. Rashidah's failure to mention her former status as 'wife' was not lost on me either; it showed how hurt and baffled she was.

Rashidah's final sentence demonstrated how becoming a widow was something they needed to realise, accept and embrace. She spoke the words as if hearing them would help her grasp her new status as a widow.

As Bennett and Vidal-Hall (2000) note, widows' narratives about the death of their husbands are crucial in widowhood experiences; the loss of their husbands brings into being their new identity as a widow, and talking about the death of their husbands establishes that

identity. Recalling the death of their husband is a storytelling strategy that allows them to define and make sense of their rapid transition from being a wife to their present identity as widows.

In realising the widow's identity, Jamilah encountered hers through a minor accident:

*On that particular day, I was driving and thinking to myself, ' Why did this happen to me? ' I did not notice the traffic... I hit someone's car. At that moment, I was shocked, but luckily, the accident was not severe. I did not have to pay anything to the person, and they were kind when I apologised. **And then, it came to my mind. I should not grieve too long. You see what happened when I was thinking [that way]. It was very hard for me to accept...Is he really gone...And then that was the cause of the accident. Overly consumed by my feelings.** So, from then on, I shouldn't grieve for too long... Should anything happen just now, what would happen to my children? Who would take care of them? I am a single mother now. So at that moment, I said, 'Stop grieving, this is for the sake of your children. Just move on.'*

Jamilah's story implicitly reveals her realisation of her new identity as a widow and new reality as a single mother. This becomes apparent when she reprimands herself for overindulging in her grief. She reminds herself to accept and move on with life for the sake of her children. Jamilah also highlights the all-consuming emotional turmoil widows go through during spousal loss.

Some of the emotions described during interviews include feelings of *keunjaran*, a Malay word that encapsulates both grief and longing. Keunjaran is often associated with long-term absence. Hayati shares another story that conveys *keunjaran* and a realisation of her widowed identity:

*One day, at the office, I was seated indoors facing the window that overlooks the parking lot. My colleagues were asking me, "You haven't left yet, Boss?" and I unconsciously replied, "**Not yet, I'm still waiting for my husband.**" I remember them responding.. "**Boss, did you realise what you said? Your husband is not here anymore, there's your car,**" while pointing at my late husband's car parked outside[...] From there, I forced myself to accept reality and be self-aware. I have to fight the feeling of *keunjaran*, so I am always aware he is not here anymore. **This is the new me.***

Once again, similar to Jamilah, Hayati also shared a moment of sobering realisation about her widowed identity. These moments once again demonstrate that acceptance comes begrudgingly to widows. The passing of a partner frequently triggers overwhelming emotions that blur loss, memories, and sense of self. They must confront these emotions and accept them,

thereby embracing their new reality. Despite these intense and all-consuming emotions they feel, they still push themselves to accept their unfortunate destiny and their new identity as widows.

Redha, a contentment with preordained destiny, begins with acceptance. The stories shared above have highlighted how acceptance comes begrudgingly to Malay Muslim widows in Brunei. Accepting their fate is facilitated by their obligation to believe in qada and qadar, as well as cultural beliefs that their husbands would have a hard time departing this realm for the hereafter. Accepting their widowed identity also involves sobering realisations filled with emotional turmoil that enable them to accept, realise and embrace their new identity.

### ***Resilience***

Acceptance is the first step to redha, and resilience follows. This section explores how widows demonstrate resilience as they learn to accept their destiny and *endure* the changes and challenges that arise from spousal loss. It also shows how their embodiment of redha has facilitated their resilience, helping them to *move through* these changes and challenges.

### ***A widow's endurance***

Gerontology studies on widowhood consistently argue that the age at which a person becomes widowed is crucial in understanding their struggles. Age is a significant feature of widowhood because the age at which a person experiences spousal loss may influence how their lives are intertwined with other social roles at the time (Martin-Matthews, 2011). For instance, women widowed at a younger age are vulnerable to economic hardship after widowhood, as they struggle to bear the brunt of raising children alone (Sevak, Weir & Willis, 2003, as cited in Gerona, 2021).

The stories of Laila and Hanan illustrate the above. They were in their late 30s and early 40s when they became widowed, which may be considered middle-aged. Although it is difficult to decipher a strict age range between 'young' widows and 'old' widows, a way to distinguish between 'young' and 'old' widows is by identifying whether they had young children at the

time of their husbands' passing. It serves as a better indicator of prospective challenges and endurance.

Laila became a single mother to five kids at the age of 43. Her husband died from a cardiac arrest while he was at work. She talked about her struggle with monetary issues and raising her five children alone, who were aged eight to 20:

*After he passed, I had to quit my job. Otherwise, my kids wouldn't be able to attend school, get fed, or receive proper care. Since then, I had to rely on welfare. At the time, our total welfare was only \$400 monthly, while my eldest daughter was receiving \$358 from her university allowance. So, we only have \$758 per month for the six of us. I also had to settle my husband's car loans at the time. It was really difficult. I even had to appeal to some organisations if I could get more.*

Hanan echoed her financial struggles and expressed her gratitude towards her extended family members for their generosity. Hanan became widowed at 38 years old with a son who was seven and a daughter who was three, when her husband passed from tuberculosis.

*Honestly, even if it is difficult for me financially, sustenance always comes unexpectedly. Especially from extended family members. They help me a lot. They somewhat understand my situation. They contribute to my finances often. Even when it's not much, it's still something for me to feed and provide for my children. Frankly speaking, just their food expenses alone would reach \$300, but thankfully, they are still fed. Despite being kids, my children understand that when I can afford it, I will give it to them. Every time I receive \$20 or \$30 sedekah (charity), I keep the money for their needs and wants. 'Mummy, I want Jollibee, KFC...' and I would reply, 'We had that yesterday, let's just eat cheap and have your favourite Nasi Katok today,' and they would be understanding. I especially feel the burden of their school fees, but I don't care too much. As long as I can endure it, I will do my best, insha Allah.*

Laila and Hanan's challenges reflect the absence of an economic provider role often ascribed to men in a patriarchal Malay Muslim society. As previously mentioned, in contemporary society, there is an increasing practice of joint endeavours in conjugal concerns. Laila revealed that she was working as a security guard to financially support her family, alongside her husband, who had been the breadwinner for a while. After his passing, she had to sacrifice her job to care for her kids and rely on welfare and her eldest daughter's university allowance. When asked how she managed with limited funds for her family, Laila was unsure how to respond. Her only reply was, **"I am not sure... I just endure. I think about my kids."**

The motivation behind her endurance and resilience then becomes clear: her children. The same can be said about Hanan as well. Their children become their primary source of resilience. When their husband died, widows naturally assumed both the roles and responsibilities of a mother and a father. They are determined to make sure their children are well cared for. Like Hanan, many other interlocutors were also grateful when their children were understanding, as it made it easier for them to endure their changes and challenges.

In both conversations, Laila and Hanan described a childcare 'routine'. This includes their school runs, preparing meals, assisting with homework, and planning weekend activities, among other tasks. These routines seem to provide structure and continuity to their days, especially at a time when they are emotionally distraught by their husbands' deaths. They continue to shoulder this responsibility despite their challenges, relying on the stability of routines. This is a testament to what a widow's resilience looks like in practice.

Informal support from their families has also facilitated their resilience. Hanan stated that she receives financial support from her extended family to help with her children's needs and wants. She mentions receiving *sedekah* (charity) for her orphaned children, an action that is highly encouraged and rewarded in Islam. Additionally, there is a majority consensus among the interlocutors that families provide solace. Jamilah shared that on weekends, she would bring her children to visit her sibling's house. Sometimes, she felt as though she could not stay in her house, as it held too many memories of her late husband. It should be noted, though, that not all interlocutors could rely on their families, Laila being one of them. She explained that her family could not afford to help her, and she did not express any resentment about this matter.

Older interlocutors, whose children are grown up, shared different concerns. When asked to share the changes and challenges of widowhood, their reticence to respond was evident. Most of the time, asking them to recall a situation where they felt the loss of their husbands the most, elicited replies.

Basmah became a widow at the age of 47 after her husband passed from cancer. Basmah shared how *sunyi* (quiet) her house has become:

*I just miss spending time together at home, **talking with each other**, and having someone lead my prayers. I also **miss his boisterous laugh**. When he was around, his laughter would fill the house as he watched TV. He stayed at home all the time after we discovered his illness. I **miss hearing him sing his favourite songs**, too. His favourite artist was Jamal Abdillah, and his favourite song was "Sendiri," which is also his ringtone. **When I hear that song, I feel a sense of sadness. Our house is quiet now.***

Basmah's description of her quiet home offers a glimpse into what loneliness following loss might feel like. The echoes of a formerly shared life linger within the walls of their home at any time of day, turning ordinary moments into poignant reminders of who and what are no longer there. Rashidah shared how much she missed her pillow talks with her husband. While her children would always ask how she was doing, it does not compensate for the loss of the constant companionship, unwavering understanding and shared routines that widows built with their husbands over the years.

Mastura became widowed at 55 after her late husband died from cancer, too, just three weeks after his diagnosis. She related to the same struggle and mentioned how she got sick often after her husband's passing:

*My husband passed when I had three months left until I retired from teaching. We dreamed of many things, such as doing groceries together and going on umrah (pilgrimage). I've always wanted to join him at the markets, but I was so busy with teaching and sewing that I rarely had the chance to. After he passed and I retired, I felt very lonely and very bored. **I grieved for the things we had planned to do**, and the house felt eerily quiet as well. I really missed him. Five of my kids had moved out by then, and only my youngest stayed at home with me. **I started getting sick often, I had high blood pressure, and I would get headaches to the point that I was referred to the neurology department.***

The work of Jaidin (2023) on ageing and Malay Muslim women found that Bruneian Malay Muslim women often analogise their experience with old age to growing old alongside their husbands. Mastura's statement captures not only the grief of her husband's passing but also the grief of the dreams they shared, from something as mundane as getting groceries together to something memorable, such as performing the umrah pilgrimage together.

She was also affected by her empty-nest syndrome, where only her youngest son was left to accompany her while the other five had moved out to their own homes. Her loneliness and empty nest syndrome affected her significantly; it manifested into physical sickness.

Another interlocutor, Halimah, became widowed at 63 after her husband suffered a heart attack. Halimah used to go everywhere with her husband and talked about how restricted her mobility had become. This has strained some relationships in her life:

*It's hard for me to go anywhere now. After he retired in 2005, he drove me everywhere. At any time of day, and anywhere I wanted or needed to go. He accompanied me all the time, too. So, I didn't drive at all. After he passed in 2015, I became fearful of driving. It's difficult for me to go anywhere now. Now, when I hear news about a friend or relative's passing, I can only listen to it. I can't even come to their funeral to pay my final respects. It's hard.*

Along similar lines, Aminah discusses not having anyone help her with home repairs and maintenance. She was 57 when she lost her husband to cancer:

*He enjoyed decorating our house, frequently changing it. He was also very diligent with cleaning the house, the ceiling fan never gathered dust. My children are not like him. Sometimes, I would even tear up because of how difficult it is to ask them for help. Even the grass outside would grow tall and unkempt.*

Again, both Halimah and Aminah's accounts exemplify traditional gender roles, and in their cases, their husbands were responsible for driving and performing household repairs and maintenance. As established in the preceding section, conjugal roles among Malay Muslim households in Brunei are often patriarchal and gendered. This is further reflected in the fact that informants struggled to respond to questions about the changes and challenges they faced.

Age and life circumstances shape the different kinds of adversities that older and younger widows endure. Younger widows like Hanan and Laila may struggle with the dual burden of grief and single parenthood. In contrast, older widows like Basmah, Mastura, Halimah and Aminah grapple with the loss of companionship, profound loneliness, declining health, and even drifting relationships with friends and relatives. The nature and intensity of their challenges are deeply influenced by their stage of life and the roles they once held.

### ***Resilience in moving through***

The resilience widows demonstrate in moving through their struggles is driven by Islamic virtues like *redha* and *sabar* (patience), as well as their emotional state. Moving through, in the context of this paper, means widows moving through life, with all that needs to be lived, celebrated or endured even without the physical presence of their late husbands. This section considers how their embodiment of *redha* contributes to their ability to endure and their resilience in moving through.

Interlocutors were asked about how they cope with their changes and challenges. Farah noted:

*Whatever falls to you, sabar is very important, **we would not be given these challenges if we weren't capable of overcoming them.** I always make doa, ya Allah, provide me with sabar, not just the usual sabar but the beautiful kind of sabar, **so I do not question why!** We have to have faith.*

Farah talks about having beautiful *sabar*. *Sabar* means patience. Yet, Farah highlights that to move through, she needs Allah to provide her with a stronger level of patience to cope with spousal loss. As explained before, *redha* shows the widow's capacity for patience in accepting Allah's decrees, despite the difficulties and calamities that come from Allah. Therefore, both their acceptance and resilience are motivated by a submission to God's will. This is supported by Farah's exclamation that, by having beautiful *sabar*, she would not question why things had happened.

Aside from having *sabar*, Rashidah drew attention to numbness as part of resilience. Listen to the first prayer she made after her husband's passing:

*Ya Allah, I know that You are the creator of everything. You also created emotion; **can You please grant me not just strength but numbness for now? So I can move forward, take care of the boys, take care of my family with a rational mind?** Because if I have strength but I don't have numbness, I don't think I will be able to do so.*

It is a surprisingly moving and insightful do'a. Rashidah was not the first interlocutor to bring up numbness. Other interlocutors stated they felt 'numb' during their bereavement, but none of them were able to describe the feeling further.

Rashidah consistently rationalised her grief. While grief can be disorienting, it is thwarted through numbness. If they do not have numbness, meaning they feel less intensely, then they would be vulnerable to the emotional turmoil of spousal loss.

Again, Rashidah's response also indicates submission. There is passive conformation in the way she made her do'a; she demonstrated acceptance. At first thought, this might contradict the idea of resilience. But in a sense, the *faith* and submission widows practice in their embodiment of redha have contributed to their ability to endure and resilience in moving through, with *fortitude*.

The resilience of widows is evident in the ways they endure and move through the challenges they face. Islamic virtues, such as *sabar* (patience) and a numb emotional state, facilitate their resilience. At the core of these facilitators is a submission to God's plans, redha. Additionally, the phrase '*moving through*' is intentionally used instead of 'moving on.' Interlocutors did not move on from their love for their husbands; they only move through their lives despite their absence. This is further detailed in "*Thriving in Remembrance*."

## **Thriving**

Beyond the actions of accepting, enduring, and moving through that have been demonstrated by the widows, there is a prominent indication of *thriving* in the findings. This section further elaborates how widows *thrive in remembrance*. They thrive by living life well, taking it upon themselves to reconstruct and create a meaningful life in the present without the physical presence of their late husbands. The question of remarriage is also examined.

### ***Thriving in remembrance***

As noted earlier, Farah suddenly became widowed at 28 years old after six years of marriage. Farah was a housewife, and her husband was the sole breadwinner of the family. Farah knew she had to find a job immediately to support and care for their children. She ended up achieving the unexpected:

*Farah: "A few months before he died, he wanted to withdraw from the military to become a Safety Officer."*

*"Oh, the job you have now?"*

*Farah: Yes. I wasn't planning for that, I was a full-time housewife. So, **I'm living his dream.** And I didn't know that I had that in me! **I didn't know I had that in me. The courage that I have now, I dedicate to him.** Actually, before becoming a Safety Officer, I took the NEBOSH course. And the money I used to take that course was from the money he had saved so that he could take it. I didn't pass right away. I had to retake it three times. **There is wisdom in His fate; Allah arranged it beautifully.***

Farah's job-hunting journey after becoming a widow was challenging. She worked as a technical assistant for a while but had to quit because of the abusive environment. Shortly after, she resorted to working as a construction worker, earning less than her qualifications warranted. Farah even faced failure three times when she took the NEBOSH<sup>6</sup> course. Despite this, Farah insists that there was beauty in her endurance; she was living her late husband's dreams on his behalf. Despite her initial lack of confidence, it was her remembrance of her late husband that became her primary motivation; she found strength in thinking about him. Farah was honouring her late husband's memory by pursuing his ambition.

While Farah had to pursue work to support her young children, Mastura pursued teaching again after her husband's passing for a sense of purpose:

*I was bored and lonely at home. My youngest son was in college, so I was often alone. My son-in-law asked me if I wanted to work again. Initially, I thought I couldn't because I was already old, and **I was unsure if any schools would be keen on hiring me. But Alhamdulillah, we found one. So, I worked again.***

Farah and Mastura were in two completely different social positions when they became widows. Mastura was 55 when she lost her husband to cancer, just three months shy of her retirement from teaching, which would have granted her wish of doing more leisure activities with her husband. Mastura sought teaching again to give her a sense of purpose and fill her time, so she would not be consumed by grief, loneliness, and boredom simultaneously. It also

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<sup>6</sup> NEBOSH is The National Examination Board in Occupational Safety and Health, offering qualifications in health, safety, environment and wellbeing management.

gave her a sense of fulfilment and achievement; she was passionate about teaching. She taught for another 12 years until her youngest son eventually married and welcomed his first child. From there, she decided to retire to help her son care for his children.

In contrast to Farah, who thrives on remembrance through work, Mastura regularly remembers her late husband through cultural practices. She regularly visited her late husband's cemetery every Friday with her family for five years after his passing. Mastura also hosted *Tahlil Arwah*. These are standard cultural practices for remembering loss in Brunei Malay Muslim society, and perhaps, widows continue to thrive in remembrance because of these practices that encourage them to do so.

Tahlil Arwah is hosted on specific days. Bruneian Malay Muslims usually host them on the first three nights from the day of death, the 40th night, the 100th night and every anniversary night. Tahlil Arwah is a religious gathering held to seek forgiveness and blessings for the deceased. On the other hand, these gatherings and cemetery visits involve a ritual of reciting a chapter from the Qur'an, specifically *Surah Yaseen*, and the *Doa Tahlil*. These recitations enable those still alive to dedicate the rewards from their acts of worship to those who have passed away. They are an act of love and remembrance performed by those in this world for those who are already in another realm. While these practices are standard among Malay Muslims in Brunei, they are not unique to this country. Satari (2024) observed that the practice of reciting Yaseen and Tahlil Arwah has been passed down through generations and is still observed by the Muslim communities in the Malay world to this day, including Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore.

Circling back to thriving, some of the interlocutors also explored leisure activities. As mentioned, leisure studies refer to this phenomenon as 'blossoming,' whereby widows appreciate a new reality that allows them to have a socially engaged and fulfilling life, due to the increased spontaneity available to them as single women. For instance, Aminah was a housewife who always spent the majority of her time at home, but after becoming widowed, she began to look for leisure activities to fill her time:

*I participate in a dhikr<sup>7</sup> group, Biro Wanita Kampung Tungku. We would have activities at the mosque, and we are entrusted with looking after it. I would meet friends and neighbours. Naturally, I would not be lost in my thoughts...*

Latifah shares similar pursuits:

*I participated in Majlis Ilmu<sup>8</sup> and listened to talks with 'Kumpulan Meraih Berkah<sup>9</sup>.' I also took up cooking classes on Mondays and Fridays, there is a cooking school course here. I would remember my late husband; he would be glad if he knew I could now cook many different dishes.*

Aminah and Latifah's new pastimes have enabled them to meet new friends, gain support, and deepen their understanding of religion. Towards the end of their responses, Aminah and Latifah both share a moment of remembering loss and remembering their husbands.

The excerpts above are strong evidence that widows do not live a life of misery. They find something, be it work or leisure, not only to fill their time and give a sense of purpose, but also to enrich their lives by pursuing their interests. They are thriving and living life to the fullest in their own ways. This does not take the pain of loss away, but it brings about a path out of grief. It creates something worth moving through for a meaningful life, even without their beloved husbands. How, then, does the notion of thriving in remembrance reflect the ongoing influence of redha?

Farah's story about living her husband's dream directly reflected the influence of redha. It shows her acceptance of what Allah planned for her, including her husband's death and the challenges she endured after his passing. Her ability to move through each difficulty with an optimistic attitude demonstrated her resilience, as she believed that reward and ease would be granted for her act of redha. And, of course, her achievement at obtaining her current position at a prestigious organisation shows how redha has also allowed herself to thrive. For Mastura, Aminah and Latifah, the influence of redha is more implicit. The three of them host Tahlil

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<sup>7</sup> A group performing the practice of dhikr (remembrance of Allah.)

<sup>8</sup> Majlis ilmu is a knowledge-sharing event organized in conjunction with the Sultan's birthday by the Knowledge Council Steering Committee.

<sup>9</sup> A non-governmental organisation comprising of only women. When their group name is directly translated, 'kumpulan' means group, and 'meraih berkah' refers to pursuing blessings. This organisation aims to encourage more engagement with Islam.

Arwah annually in memory of their late husbands to this day, demonstrating not only remembrance but also acceptance and contentment with their destiny.

### **The question of remarriage**

When we think about widowhood and life after spousal loss, the question of remarriage becomes an elephant in the room. As indicated, interlocutors do not necessarily ‘move on’ from their love for their late husbands, instead they thrive in remembrance. Nevertheless, how do widows navigate the question of remarriage within this remembrance?

The question of remarriage is especially pertinent among the interlocutors who had young children when they became widowed. Only one of the 12 interlocutors has remarried. Jamilah remarried three years after her late husband's passing, and the marriage lasted for 18 years before they separated.

*He was someone I was very close to. When my late husband passed, he was always there for me to ask for help from, so the circumstances made me dependent on him and allowed me to marry him. **I was looking for companionship, someone to turn to, someone I could depend on to help raise my children. My children were all young, and remarrying allowed them to grow up with a father figure again.***

Jamilah had one son with her second husband. She viewed him as a good person and a caring and responsible father. However, they had irreconcilable differences and divorced in sad circumstances. Unfortunately, he passed away one year after their divorce. Although they divorced, Jamilah was deeply saddened by his passing - she expressed that it felt like she had become widowed twice. Unprompted, Jamilah also shared a difference between her first and second marriage:

*Even though I remarried, it was a good marriage, and he was a good man. **But truthfully, nothing compares to my first husband.** Of course, they are not the same person. But my first husband was my ideal partner. **It's just different.***

Hanan, on the other hand, recalled being advised by a close relative to consider remarriage. She expressed feeling upset by this:

*Initially, I was taken aback, but I did not want to react immediately. I sat it down, thought about her advice and admitted that there is truth to it. I still have a long way to go. My kids are young, and I am young, but again, **I would not mind living the rest of my life single. I know I will not find someone like my late husband.** If I meet someone new, I'm not sure. Would I be scared? Would I enjoy [their company]?*

Hanan demonstrates apprehension, even almost unwillingness, to the idea of remarriage. She even mentioned the possibility of feeling *scared* about the idea of remarriage. When I probed about what she felt scared of, she stated that she was scared of incompatibility. Similar to Jamilah, Hanan also said that she won't find another partner like her late husband. It suggests that widows do not move on; they only *move through*. Jamilah holds similar sentiments despite being remarried, further exemplifying that they do not move on.

While Hanan was advised by a close relative, it should be emphasised that none of the interlocutors expressed feeling pressured to remarry or discouraged from remarriage. This suggests that for Malay Muslim widows in Brunei, the intention for remarriage (if there is any) was not about social expectations but was deeply rooted in personal desire – the longing to no longer feel alone and to share life with someone again, especially when raising young children.

All the interlocutors who were widowed at a later age did not express any desire to remarry and did not even consider it. At times, they were even appalled that I asked about remarriage. Mastura has been widowed for 23 years now. Her remark lingered as it encapsulates a love that perseveres and thrives from remembrance:

*“How can I remarry? He still lingers in my vision, in my heart. I still remember his voice, his laugh, his scent...”*

In their act of thriving, their late husbands linger in their hearts and minds, influencing how they navigate life, including their decision to remarry. The influence of *redha* can be implicitly seen in their acts of thriving, especially in their hosting of Tahlil Arwah, signifying acceptance and submission to Allah's *qada* and *qadar*. Thriving and staying in remembrance are acts of love performed by those in this world for those who are already in another realm.

## **Conclusion**

As this paper shows, *redha* becomes a practice of *faith* and *fortitude* among Malay Muslim widows in Brunei to navigate spousal loss and reconstruct their lives. The core of *redha* is submission to Allah. *Redha* guides their emotional states, outlooks and actions after spousal loss. Realising their Islamic obligation to practice *redha* comes almost immediately after their husband's death, but embodying it in their hearts, minds, and actions required rational effort.

In their initial stages of embracing redha through acceptance, begrudged acceptance and sorrowful moments provide widows with sobering realisations of their new reality and identity. The moral imperative of submitting to Allah's destiny and the cultural belief that they are creating difficulties in their late husband's departure to the hereafter induced their acceptance. Following acceptance, the resilience of widows becomes evident in the ways they endure their adversities. Redha facilitates their resilience by encouraging emotional states like *sabar* (patience) and numbness. These allow them to rationalise their emotions, endure, and move through with faith and fortitude.

As the findings suggest, widows do not so much as move on from their late husbands, but they thrive in remembrance. Remembrance is poignant, it symbolises their love persevering. It emerges in the widow's actions, such as living out their late husband's dream, and their annual hosting of Tahlil Arwah to ask Allah to forgive and bless their late spouses. Within their practices of remembrance, the ongoing influence of redha is implicit; they signify acceptance and contentment with Allah's qada and qadar. Perhaps, widows thrive in remembrance because of these cultural practices that encourage them to do so.

In sum, introducing the notion of redha adds unexplored depth to the existing discourse on widowhood. It offers a productive lens for examining how ethnoreligious factors influence the experiences of widowhood among Malay Muslim women in Brunei, bringing to light many aspects that would have otherwise been overlooked.

At heart, this paper is an effort to understand my mother better, as a daughter who lacked understanding about her mother's struggle with spousal loss. My eyes are wide open and my chest softened by compassion and empathy. I hope it prompts readers to practice more understanding not only towards widows, but towards any individual who experiences permanent loss of a loved one.

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