

Rethinking Islam in a Troubled World: Religious Themes in the Novels of Isa Kamari

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Abstract

Religion is a major topic in the novels of the prolific Singapore author Isa Kamari (1960-). In his earliest writing (*One Earth*, 2008), Islam is an unproblematic religion that offers clarity of doctrine, moral guidance in everyday life, psychological comfort and reassurance. It belongs, however, most naturally to small village situations and has begun to fail in larger urban contexts. Under the influence of globalisation and political resentment, a second movement has developed within Islam which places an emphasis on terrorism and violent action (*Song of the Wind*, 2009 and *Intervention*, 2010). A third and contrasting perspective focuses on the universal and inward spiritual nature of the Islamic revelation (*Selendang Sukma*, 2014 and *The Tower*, 2010). Isa's latest work, *Tweet* (2016), is influenced by Attar's mystical allegory, *The Conference of the Birds* (c. 1177), but argues for a spirituality that is committed to the transformation of worldly life in a positive and compassionate direction and not an escape from it.

Keywords

Conference of the Birds, Isa Kamari, Islam, Singapore Malay Dilemma, terrorism, mysticism

You crouch in the dry well of darkness
stricken in misery's dungeon:
wing out of this dark oppressive deep
and soar toward the sky of the Beloved.

Like Joseph, leave behind the well and the prison
to become a king in the Egypt of Eminence.
When you arrive at such a grand palace
Honest Joseph will be your companion.
(Farid ud-Din Attar, trans. Wolpe 34)

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Isa Kamari is not an entirely comfortable subject for our wider discussion of Anglophone Malaysian literature. He was born in Singapore in 1960, graduated in architecture from the National University of Singapore in 1989 and continues to live, work and write in the Island Republic. Yet we must also note that in 1960 Singapore was not yet politically separated from the mainland of the Malaysian peninsula (see also Aveling 2016); Isa holds the degree of Master of Philosophy in Malay Letters from the National University of Malaysia, awarded in 2008; and, most importantly, much of his work has been published in Kuala Lumpur, in Malay and/or in English translation, although his latest novel, *Tweet*, was published in Singapore and was written directly in English. If English offers the opportunity for making one's work available to a broader audience than that provided by a communal language, then we may accept that Isa's work is well positioned for dialogue with Anglophone Malaysian writers.

In this paper, I am concerned with one significant aspect of Isa's writing – the use of religious themes in his fiction. In *One Earth*, Islam offers clarity of doctrine, moral guidance, psychological comfort and reassurance. In *Song of the Wind* and *Intercession*, Isa suggests that a violent movement has developed within Islam that places an emphasis on terrorism and aggression. Countering this, finally, is a recent, third and contrasting perspective in *The Tower*, *Selendang Sukma* and *Tweet* that focuses on the universal and inward spiritual nature of the Islamic revelation.

Isa's thought is daring and controversial, bordering at times closely on what many readers might even consider heresy. From a less judgemental perspective, Isa's writing on Islam may be seen as resolutely continuing the debates that began after 1975 within the wider Malay community on the nature of a truly "Islamic Literature" (*Sastera Islam*). In doing so, he has also faced the difficult topics of psychological doubt, personal interpretation of belief, the spiritual dimensions of social change and the nature of mystical experience, all of which are seldom discussed in Malay and Indonesian literature. From the Anglophone perspective, he is exploring in depth a subject that is often treated as no more than a part of the broader set of external cultural markers and serves only to produce stereotyped accounts of local colour. Isa can, thus, provide us with a new and different perspective on the expression of literary worldviews in this region of the Malay world.

Islam Pure and Simple: *One Earth*

The first of Isa's three different approaches to religion presents Islam as an unproblematic, literal, doctrinally orthodox religion that offers doctrinal clarity, moral guidance in everyday life, and psychological comfort and reassurance. This type of Islam belongs most naturally to small village situations, in which a mosque (or a *surau*) has a prominent place. Isa's first novel, *Satu Bumi* (1998; *One Earth*, English translation, 2008), possibly draws on the story of his mother-in-law, a

Chinese woman who was adopted by a Malay family during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya (Isa Kamari, "Personal Reflections", 2010a: 66). The novel describes the social and political turmoil that marked the Second World War and the years leading up to the separation of Malaysia and Singapore (1942-1965). The story of the woman, Aminah Abdullah (formerly Swee Mei), is told by Irman, her grandson, who has come to honour her grave. The wider context is provided by an old man, a gravedigger, called Yassir (10-14, 142-43). Aminah's biography is one of "sacrifice and courage" (142), she was a Chinese woman who converted to Islam and enjoyed a sense of security in the practice of her religion. There was nothing complicated about her belief. During the Japanese Occupation, she "grimly faced the harsh reality and found strength in the new religion of Islam" (8). The village mosque at Bidadari was Aminah's "safe haven" from the threats she experienced from inside and beyond the village, largely because she was still perceived as Chinese (33, 93, 109); the call of the evening prayers offered her "tranquillity" and "solace" (109). The Jamae mosque near her child's school later proved her piety to the suspicious villagers who feared that she had reverted to heathenism (99). Her best friend, Rukiah, lived in a small room there; Rukiah's husband was the muezzin and looked after the mosque and "the welfare of its inhabitants" (104).

Despite the distinction between the village (normally a place of safety) and beyond it (always a place of potential danger), Isa's view of Islam is ultimately non-communal (131). Islam is not simply the religion of the Malay community. It "encompassed elements from any culture because it was universal" (23). However, Aminah's fear of potential violence from the Chinese community if they found out that she had converted is proven correct. She is raped and murdered by a gang of Chinese youths during a riot on the day commemorating the birth of the Prophet (140). Irman's telling of Aminah's story to Yassir, nevertheless, brings him not bitterness but added maturity for himself and he leaves the mosque deeply moved at the memory of his grandmother, wanting to learn to "be magnanimous and an adult" (148). As part of this change, there is even the suggestion of his future marriage to Siti Aisyah, Rukiah's daughter. This is a simple, uncomplicated view of the daily living out of the teachings of the faith in a small community. It is a common attitude in much of Malay literature, from the 1960s to today.

However, it must also be noted that Isa's attitude to Malay Islam from the beginning contains both light and shadow, beauty and ugliness. Aminah admires "the unity among the Muslim village folks in organising their daily lives and spiritual duties" (8). But simultaneously she recognises that they are also superstitious (20), have "no interest in religious affairs" (32) and are prepared to live surrounded by filth (68). They were reluctant to help build the mosque at Kampong Tawakal prior to the war (31), or to rebuild it when it was razed by fire (107). Instead, they spend their time slandering each other (65). Further, "they

were more interested in having fun and adopting an attitude of nonchalance towards their backwardness or lack of faith. They were like a flock of sheep without a shepherd” (32). When she works to support her family, Aminah returns to her previous occupation of a Chinese labourer, being, however, “the only *samsui* woman who professed the Muslim Faith” (70).

These negative attitudes are shaped by the real wider social disadvantages that impinge on the Malay community. They are described in this and Isa’s other novels and are part of the Malay “Singapore Dilemma.” (Lily Zubaidah Rahim 1998). *One Earth* suggests that the many problems in Malay society include high divorce rates, disintegrating families, drug addiction and delinquency (119). These problems are attributed to the breakdown of religion (poverty is not mentioned, except, perhaps, as the implicit consequence of the lack of faith). To Aminah, the rioting that took place after the war was:

the result of the restlessness within the souls of the people struggling to breathe in the city’s air that was tarnished by colonisation. These were the souls who lost their direction in the wilderness and struggles of life. They were suppressed and forced into conformity in the face of myriad of problems. (92)

As in many of Isa Kamari’s novels, the Malay community of *One Earth* is drifting helplessly (“like a flock of sheep without a shepherd”), unprotected from the broader context of the new postcolonial nation state. This systemic suffering is caused by the lack of political, as well as religious, leadership. A further disastrous consequence of this alienation in the early 1950s was the creation of Malay support for radical political change in the forms of UMNO and of the Malayan Communist Party, both of which promised an end to social injustice and economic inequality, although in very different ways. The turn to radical Islam in the 1970s was nothing more than a further aspect of this search for a false security through the adoption of alien forms of communal action. These political fronts have tried to reshape and even sometimes replace religion; they are not meaningful realisations of it and they cannot lead to a more perfect form of society. The next novel to be discussed makes this clear.

A Radical Political Islam: *A Song of the Wind*

A second perspective places an emphasis on the lesser sense of *jihad*, namely armed struggle. (The greater *jihad* encourages a purely personal reform, warfare against one’s baser nature.) This perspective sees warfare as a necessary response to long centuries of the humiliation of the Muslim *ummah* (community) by non-Muslims. From the simple village perspective (and that of the modern state as well), these current actions are supported by violent ideologies, and are ultimately the distorted fanaticism of more extreme believers.

Told in the first person, *Memeluk Gerhana* (*A Song of the Wind*) describes the major character’s attraction to, and escape from, involvement with radical Islam

as a teenager. The novel fits easily into the well-established category of stories about a young man's growth to maturity in the turbulent setting of a newly independent Singapore, as brilliantly developed by Goh Poh Seng in *If We Dream Too Long* (1972) and Robert Yeo's *The Adventures of Holden Heng* (1986). The first half of Isa's novel deals with the childhood of the protagonist, again named Ilham, in Kampung Tawakal and Ang Mo Kio, his education at Whitley Primary School and Raffles Institution, and National Service in the Police Force.

The second half of the novel describes Ilham's involvement with a heavily politically committed form of his faith at a time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East and a fear in Singapore of secret organisations whose intentions might be to overthrow the government. Ilham is arrested for his naïve involvement with a group that models itself on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and studies not only the scriptures and the *hadith* (traditions relating to the life of the Prophet Muhammad) but also the controversial works of such writers as Syed Qutb, Hasan Al-Banna, Maududi, M. Natsir and Maryam Jameela (181).

Ilham voluntarily renounces this group after a short period of police investigation. Still only 21 years of age at the end of the novel, he sees himself as slowly leaving behind him the darkness of the "eclipse" into which his experiences have taken him. As at the end of *One Earth*, Ilham has changed in a positive way. He is older, more self-possessed and more rational. As he writes: "I was surprised how quickly I had matured. Not many youths were 'fortunate' enough to have had my experience. My teenage years were ending ominously, everything was happening too quickly, spiralling out of control, and I was emerging into adulthood, crippled and alienated" (234).

Despite this gloom, Ilham has the promises of a positive future that include marriage, entry into the university and a worthwhile career. He has survived the danger of religious radicalisation and his faith has been deepened and shaped in the direction of a more objective understanding of a peaceful personal and communal religious existence. At this stage in Isa's writing, it is apparently not difficult to escape the pernicious influences of radical Islam in favour of a domestic style of Islam, if one is matured and willing enough. *Intercession* shows a much more ominous situation.

Cloning Islam: *Intercession*

In *Intercession* (*Tawassul* 2002, translated 2010) Isa further developed his analysis of the differences between orthodox Islam and its radical shadow. His presentation of plot is more complex than in his earlier works. The story is told from a number of perspectives by a range of characters, each being assigned her or his own chapters. In terms of its origin, *Intercession* grew from the combined influences of Isa's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in February 2001; newspaper reports he saw on the cloning of a sheep, together with the possibility offered by

the display of a hair of the Prophet Muhammad at an exhibition on Islamic Civilisation in Brunei Darussalam during mid-2001; and the terrorist attacks of September 11th in the United States.

The “Note to the Reader” at the end of the novel begins: “It disturbs me to hear about the wars and acts of terrorism that have taken place all over the world...” (162). Isa lists the wars in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Palestine, Mindanao and Kashmir that involve Muslims, and the news coverage of 9/11, and “the exploits of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Hamas, MNLF and Jemaah Islamiya.” He suggests that these have “inadvertantly destroyed the belief of many that Muslims are a peace loving people.” He affirms the image of Islam as “a tolerant faith that is based on goodwill, consensus and humanitarian love” (162). But he also insists on the “inadequacy of Islam in tackling the onslaught of modernisation and advancements in science and technology (162). But he also recognises the existence of what he calls a “retrograde” version of Islam: an Islam that particularly belongs to communities that are: “largely deprived of knowledge, wealth and power” (162). The Note argues that the statement “Return to the Koran and the Ways of the Prophet” has been wrongly applied: “The maxim binds our thoughts to a rich past tradition, but it fails to free us to adapt to the contemporary world. We are trapped in the glory of the past but blinded to our current weaknesses” (163).

Tawassul uses fantasy to explore how this alternative Islam came into being. The main character is Syan, a famous young (twenty-year old) botanist, who is in search of her grandfather, Hasyr. He is an anthropologist, who is commonly considered an “apostate” (15) and a “heretic” (47). The geographical location of the story appears to be in Borneo, but it also exists somewhere “between reality and a dream” (104), creating “a voyage into a mystical realm of the spirit” (89, 104-05). Syan journeys to the Tuwau (possibly based on Tawau in East Malaysia) Valley, where her grandfather conducted research on the Imorot people (likely a reference either to the indigenous Moro or Igorot [or both] people) some twenty years ago and indeed where he may still live. Among the books Syan brings with her is the first book he ever wrote, in which grandpa repeated the Imorot mantras that promised the coming of “one special person” (96), “the long-awaited one” (101).

At the centre of the novel is the man called Hira. (Traditionally, the name relates to the cave where Prophet Muhammad meditated for long periods). Hira is “a gift from the One” (54), and much of his life parallels that of the Prophet Muhammad himself. Proclaimed “The Intercessor” (61, 121), his body bears the supernatural marks which the Prophet’s own body bore. He cleanses the sacred sanctuary, Jaabah (Ka’abah), from idolatry and fights various battles on behalf of the One. Not all his story parallels the historical details of the Prophet Muhammad’s life. Hira’s nominal father might be a reclusive genius, a German genetic specialist, who returned to Europe twenty-five years ago with a woman

from the valley: “It was suspected that the woman was in fact his test subject in experimental genetic research, given his special interest in remote populations untainted by modern influences” (35). She has her own chapters regarding the conception and gestation of the child. If this story is accepted, then Hira is the result of a remarkable medical operation. He now lives in “a cave on the Mountain of Light” (55) with his mother, Anisa, the woman who disappeared twenty-five years ago (37), and she conveys his messages to the world (60). Having finally come close to Hira, Syan turns to the book of *Songs in Praise of Prophet Muhammad* she has brought with her (90-94) and begins to feel a wave of “profound and treacherous emotions,” despite, or because of, her scepticism.

It is quickly made obvious after Syan’s meeting with Hira that there are two contemporary Islams in Tawau: one of harmony, peace and monotheistic surrender, and another that is growing much more quickly and represents the distortion of a peaceful religion in favour of military might, hatred and the destruction of civilised values and differing beliefs. The problem for contemporary Islam is to decide which aspects of early Muslim history should be left in the past and which are important for today’s world (129). As Syan and her guide, Hijaz, travel deeper into the Tuwau Valley to find Hasyr, the history of Muslim wars seems to be repeating itself. The battles of Badr (622 CE) and Uhud (624CE), in which the Prophet himself fought, in particular, are being refought all over again (112). There is no interest in the past scientific and intellectual achievements of Islam. This is a frightful choice for the new community to be making. Syan sees some signs of what lies in the future in the form of visions. For example, she watches the two towers suddenly disappear (106). Hijaz explains:

The towers were destroyed by violence. Violence that was the consequence of the exhaustion of reason, of a superficial understanding of history; a savagery that arose out of grief, disappointment and aggravated grievances; a destructive spirit consuming the soul because of its inability to change or adapt to new demands. (107)

And further:

The future promises still more terrible challenges to come. Their demands will shake the foundations of belief. Those who are unprepared, those who ignore these new demands, will also choose the path of destruction. Their impulsive and ill-considered attempts to mimic history – to turn back Time – will be used to justify oppression, ruin and pain. (107)

At base, the comments can be seen as drawing on a long-established dichotomy between emotional impulses (*nafsu*) and reason (*akal*). When the two drives are

not in balance, when reason does not temper emotion, there can be no doubt that the world can expect a great deal of further violence in the name of God.

The ugliness of the military forces is made even more obvious when Syan and Hijaz return to the edge of the valley, to find Imorot training camps there as well. The men they meet have long beards and carry Russian-made Kalashnikov rifles (130). “Their “blood-shot eyes were wild with murderous intent and palpable anger” (139-140). The barracks are crude and unkempt, “as if they had been constructed in a hurry” (129). As in *One Earth*, there is a small safe circle, potentially beautiful in its own way, and beyond that exists only violence that now seems to be spreading endlessly. The small circle is reconstituted when the pair enters the Jaabah, although they discover that Hira is dead and only his tomb remains. Syan undergoes a profound religious experience as she sits by Hira’s graveside, repeating the same verses from the *Songs in Praise of the Prophet Muhammad* as before, but now in a deep mystical rapture (135-36). Next, she discovers the three tombs of her grandfather, the village headman and Anisa (138). But outside the sacred precinct, the fort and the training camp are filled with armoured tanks and jeeps, missiles and mounted guns, making their way to the foothills. There is also a group of about thirty suicide bombers, moving out in a different direction from the convoy. Syan comments:

The whole scene reminded me of the historic moment when the Prophet had sent his representatives to all parts of the world in order to spread the Islamic faith. Except that all these men were clearly not intending to deliver at all the same message. (141)

Considering the expansion of terrorism, Syan’s final questions are: “Of what value was all the blood and sweat spilled in the name of proclaiming his creed? Was all of it a lie? Had his coming been squandered?” (141). As if in reply, Hira insists that this is not the case. Speaking through his mother, he says:

Please give this message to the world. I am a vision arisen from the sublime depths of the soul. I came to answer Man’s thirst for knowledge and power. Man’s accumulated knowledge has placed him at the apex of Creation. It is a blessing but also a curse – an insult. (156)

The new “Muhammad” preaches the power of the heart (*qalb*), the dream, but also the danger of rationality not being tempered by emotion (compassion):

It is dreams that nourish knowledge. As human understanding flourishes and grows, the line between reality and fantasy begins to blur and fade. As man approaches the very secrets of Creation, his dominion over Nature swells – even as his sense of the sacred, and of propriety, dwindles. All this has taken place because Mankind invariably forgets, It is foretold. It is written. (156)

Hira's original message comes from intuition deep within the heart, and is uttered in response to basic human needs. Mankind must never forget. The last chapter fully belongs to him, and it reinforces the peaceful values of Islam. Hira's advice is:

First, utter His sacred names
 Second, petition Him with good deeds
 And last, seek the intercession of holy men who commune with Him as I did
 when I was alive. (150)

The novel's emphasis on prayer, morality and the guidance of the wiser and holier members of the community, is followed by the threefold affirmation of God's nature as "The One and Only." Isa confronts radical Islam in *Intercession* and finds it profoundly evil. Unfortunately, it is now much harder to escape. The real truth exists in knowing how to deal with a complex historical tradition and being able to balance compassion and reason, in order to define the boundary between reality and illusion. It is a challenge that the whole Muslim community must face if it is to be worthy of the teachings of the Prophet of God.

Islam and the Inner Search: *Selendang Sukma*

A third and again different perspective on religion focuses on the inner spiritual dimensions of Islam and the universality of the mystical quest.

Selendang Sukma is perhaps Isa's longest novel and is not yet available in English. It tells the story of a Singapore architect, Ilham, who has been hired by a Balinese businessman, Pak Lempad, to design a luxury hotel and an orphanage. For our purposes, we will focus on a small, but crucial, aspect of the book: the theological dimensions of the discussions between Ilham, a Muslim, and Dewi, Pak Lempad's Balinese assistant, with whom Ilham has fallen in love.

Does Dewi's Hindu-Balinese religion have any ultimate value? The novel suggests that all people have an intuitive knowledge of God. An important premise is that the Prophet Muhammad taught his followers to respect other religions. Dewi explains, for example, that the Prophet stood up to show respect for the passing funeral of a Jew who had just died and this was a sign of his respect for all people (223). She further explains that this respect for all is the way in which she and "Mas Ilham" should "seek the light together: each practice their own religion with an open mind, while avoiding prejudice towards other ways of thinking. The aim is to find the truth, not just the similarities between different beliefs" (223-24, 267). Nevertheless, the chapter "Seni" finishes with verse 64 of the Qur'anic surah "Al-Imran," in which *Abli Kitab*, believers in the Abrahamic tradition, are invited to come to a fundamental consensus that they will "worship no one but Allah or associate any one with him" (224-25).

Dewi and Ilham's investigations show that the first religion of mankind, the Adamic revelation, is the "original Islam" (237-38). Several Qur'anic verses are quoted in the novel to support this claim, including al-A'raf 172:

And (remind them): when our God brought forth the descendants of the sons of Adam from their loins, Allah bore witness to them saying, 'Am I not your God?,' they answered 'Yes,' so that on the Day of Judgment you will not say, 'Truly we are people who were negligent.' (237)

For good measure, there is also the thirteenth century story of Hayy ibn Yaqzawn, (286), who was raised by a doe on an isolated island but nevertheless developed a natural monotheistic outlook.

This natural monotheism also justifies the implication that, despite the common impression to the contrary, Balinese Hinduism is monotheistic. Dewi and Ilham both note that there are no idols of individual gods on Bali. To prove Hindu monotheism, Dewi quotes a series of verses asserting the oneness of God, from the *Bhagavad Gita* (10.3) the *Yajur Veda* (32.3, 40.90) and the *Rig Veda* (1.164.46, 8.1.1, 6.45.16). The names of the various deities – Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma and so on – are no more than descriptions of various attributes of the one God (149, 233): Vishnu means "Lord," Brahma means "the Creator," and so on (235). Al-Isra 110 states that God responds to all names (235) In Islam, Dewi mischievously observes, God also has many names, not just a few (149).

Clearly Dewi is well on the way to becoming a Muslim, which is in many ways the unstated outcome hoped for from the argument. She accepts that "There is no god but God..." which covers half of the Muslim Profession of Faith. What about the other half: "And Muhammad is the Prophetic Messenger of Allah." Thinking about it, Ilham decides that Abraham, for example, did not know of the forthcoming great Prophet but he was accepted by God, so others may well be too, then and now. It is the first half of the Profession that counts (252) and there are also a number of verses quoted that confirm this.

How close in fact Dewi comes to conversion is indicated by her assertion of a newly acquired Malay-Muslim identity. At the opening of the orphanage she wears a *baju kurung Melayu* and uses the standard Arabic greetings to the Muslims she meets. Unfortunately, the ceremony is never completed and her conversion never confirmed because the gathering is destroyed by a terrorist attack (347). A newspaper report describes this as an act by Hindu extremists (373). Nevertheless, with this disaster the memory resurfaces of the "Bali bombings" of 2002, in which 202 people were killed and another 209 injured. The association of violence with Islam is a subtheme throughout the novel (147-8, 182, 214) and sits disturbingly alongside the playful, romantic approach to Islam that is associated with the relationship between Dewi and Ilham. Although there are also examples of mutual tolerance between villages that are intended to show how the

two faiths can exist together, the long historical tradition of Muslim violence towards the Balinese is described in detail (179-185, 214) and overshadows these few cases of tolerance. The ideal is still that religion – and ultimately Islam – is more spiritual, and more beautiful, if it is tied to life in a small consciously loving community. The reality is that unfortunately this is not always possible today. The pressures of the wider state, and the globalisation of hatred, have played their part in the destruction of Ilham and Dewi, as well as the small-scale attempt at compassionate living that was the orphanage.

Mystical Ascent: *The Tower*

The Tower (Menara 2010/2013) provides a tentative but not entirely worked out exploration of the image of ascent from the material world to the spiritual by a small group of just two individuals. It is important as part of a shift in Isa's writing towards mystical experience.

The novel is (again) the story of a character called Ilham and this time, his boss, Hijaz, an architect, as they climb the stairs to the top of his prize-winning building, a two hundred-floor tower. Hijaz is dying of cancer.

Like the earlier novels, *The Tower* includes the many problems in Malay society: particularly high divorce rates, disintegrating families, drug addiction and delinquency (119). Behind this is the same causal factor of social alienation, brought about by modernity, poverty and the failure of Islam. “[R]eligion has become foreign to the life of our communities,” Hijaz says, “the way it is delivered no longer leaves an impact on our souls, because it has been separated from the reality of contemporary life. Religion is put forward as the affairs of the afterlife and not a necessity of worldly reality. When in fact life cannot be isolated... (120). This current lack of spiritual direction specifically motivates Hijaz, who wants more to his life. The journey is his “attempt to redeem what has been pawned,” his soul (22). As in *Song of the Wind*, Hijaz had also been investigated for his involvement with a religious study group as a young man (23) – he was accused of conspiring against the authorities. The charges kept him out of university, reduced his rank as a national serviceman to almost nothing and required him to redeem himself by working for a statutory body (33). He was called an “extremist,” “a fanatic” and “a fundamentalist” (51). Despite – or because of – his commitment to religion, his inner world became a turmoil, his ego having come to dominate who he was (52). As a consequence of his ostracism, he has never even really been in love (110): he has no affective bonds to other human beings.

The two men climb all day and finally rest. Sleeping opens the soul to the world, and the next morning the boss is prepared to allow Ilham to lead him (101). Ilham advises Hijaz, however, that the literal journey doesn't count; instead “you should dive into the cove of your heart” (127). The last scene presents Hijaz passing out of his body and beyond the world. The sense is more an experience

of death than religious ecstasy. Hijaz does not fully accept the peace that traditional Islam offers and as a consequence fails to turn inward at these last moments. But the possibility of internal conversion prepares the reader for the unambiguous mysticism of Isa's next novel *Tweet*.

The Path of the Sufi: *Tweet*

Tweet is Isa Kamari's first novel written wholly in English. Despite the simplicity of the language, it is not a children's book. Unlike his earlier novels, the book does not mention terrorism; neither is it apparently particularly concerned with the Malay community. The novel has two strands. The first, material, strand is a family narrative about a visit to a bird park in Singapore by an old man, Jati, and his eleven-year old grandson, Ilham (of course), a common cross generation combination in Isa's writing (78). The other, spiritual, strand presents a series of bird stories, most forming an itinerary based on the Persian Sufi text, *The Conference of the Birds, Manteq al-Tayr*, by Sheikh Farid ud-Din Attar (perhaps 1157 to 1193). Attar's book is considered one of the greatest poems in Persian. Even in translation, it is an outstanding work. Davis and Afkham Darbandi describe it as "a great mystical poem... a marvellous rendering of Sufism" (1984, back cover).

The conversations between Ilham and his grandfather begin with the existentialist question: "Why am I here?" (2). A simpler question is: what does the boy want to be when he grows up? (3). He first suggests a king, or at least the president of Singapore (7). The discussion continues as they enter various enclosures, avoid others. The dialogue slowly opens Ilham's spiritual and social awareness. Much of the time, what seems to be chatter about the birds in the park is actually biting innuendo about the social condition of present day Singapore. The dialogue deals with issues such as meritocracy (20), gender relations (31-34), communalism (37) and the lack of free speech (38, 46). It also touches on the "Seven Habits" course of Stephan Covey (43), and "the World of Darkness" exhibit, the slum where the rebellious birds live and die (45). The pair pause. Ilham accepts an invitation from an anonymous –"foreign" (55) – gardener to dig in the ground, and then, refreshed, continues his sightseeing with his grandfather (50-54). In the words quoted from the Qur'an, "he feels the need to walk beautifully on the earth" (52).

When the conversation resumes, Ilham notices a "compassionate" (66) blind man who helps a local family descend from a tram; the man then unfolds his cane and walks away (58-59). Jati does not see the blind man but continues to observe that most of the birds in the park are "immigrants" to Singapore (53); the ugly local residents are being culled (55); their lives are too highly regulated (57), the immigrants are rude (58); and the environment has been mysteriously destroyed (21, 69). The comments suggest some strongly negative feelings about the economic and social development of the island Republic, from its original

condition as “a mangrove swamp” to “a thriving world class tourist attraction” (10). As the boy Ilham says: “It’s all about showing off and money” (54).

The second strand to the narrative consists of just over a dozen incidents involving birds, considerably fewer than in Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*. The first episode is a standard literary trope: the hoopoe bird, “the guide to King Solomon,” meets the various species, who have come together to begin their Conference (4-5). Isa introduces seven types of spiritual seeker (Attar has twelve, see Wolpe’s translation 29-3). Following a comical discussion about the danger of human beings to the flamingos (6), the more negative aspects of the various birds begin to appear and are criticised as the meeting continues (10-12). The crested bulbul, for example is “mad with passion”; the hoopoe tells him he is “captivated by appearance” (11). The sweet parrot “walks with decorum” but is attached to its own happiness (12). Isa then presents the birds in pairs: the white and black swan (15-16); the peacock and the duck (17-18); the vulture and the hawk (23-24); the creatures of darkness, the owl and the falcon (26-27); the jungle fowl and the heron (29); the sparrow and the bird of paradise (30-33). The hoopoe rebukes them all as being obsessed with their own lives and therefore not open to Simuk (also called “Simorgh” in some translations), the great king of the birds, who veils Himself behind the light (34). The birds accept her criticism of them, then they argue about the choice of a leader (35), who must be blessed with divine favour (36). Finally, a spokesperson for the birds appeals to the hoopoe to teach them the Way (42).

The overall structure of *Tweet* is different from that of *The Conference of the Birds*. In *Tweet*, the single story of Jati and Ilham continues to alternate with that of the birds. *The Conference* is much longer and far more complicated. Each story of a bird – its virtues, vices and how to strengthen its character – is followed by a series of individual parables. These may be about anything or anyone: a sheikh who goes to live in a wine tavern, a dervish in love with a prince, the Almighty reprimanding Moses, Rabi’a’s exclusion from the Ka’abah because she is menstruating, an old woman seeking happiness, and so forth; there is no order or apparent end to the succession of allegories. Attar describes the stages of the journey – the beginning, the seven valleys, the bird’s arrival – in much greater detail than Isa (cf. Wolpe 249-317), as the birds variously complain and boast, voice their fears and learn about the Beloved (Wolpe 248). Finally, when they are admitted to the great king’s court and meet the Great Simorgh:

They were startled.
They were amazed
and still more astonished
as they advanced.
They saw how they themselves
Were the Great Simorgh,
All along, Simorgh was in fact,

Si, thirty, morgh, birds. (Wolpe 331)

They have found themselves – as God – and their own personal attributes are annihilated. Only God exists. Significantly the story that comes next is the story of the “blasphemer” Hallaj, who cried out “I am the Truth” as he was being executed (Wolpe 334). Hallaj’s story has already been told much earlier in *The Conference* (Wolpe 169-170), and is coupled there with that of his teacher, the pious Junayd (Wolpe 170), “the most important expounder of the school of ‘sober’ Sufism,” as Wolpe describes him (Wolpe 170, footnote 40). (Junayd largely escaped persecution but declared as he died “Glory to Me! How great is My majesty.”)

Although Isa also describes the seven valleys across which the birds must travel, he gives very little detail of the progress of the pilgrims. With the announcement of each of these stages, millions of birds leave the congregation. Eventually only thirty birds remain (*Tweet* 62-64). Following the apparent end of their walking through the bird park, Ilham, the green man, and Jati dance together, showered by light. Jati and Ilham are next joined by “the compassionate blind man” (*Tweet* 66), who also dances with them. Remarkably there are still only three persons present at the end of the dance (*Tweet* 66-67); the green man and the blind man being, I assume, the same person. The birds too form a circle around the hoopoe and dance, overwhelmed by a heavenly music (*Tweet* 64). Now that the birds have reached their journey’s end (*Tweet* 70-71), they learn the most remarkable thing of all: “Simuk” means “thirty birds in the language of the Palace.” They themselves are “the real Simuk” whom they have been seeking all along (*Tweet* 72).

Throughout Ilham and Jati’s stroll through the bird park, the earthly and the heavenly realms are symbolically united by the figure of a mysterious “green man” (*Tweet* 16-17, 24-25, 45, 63, 70, 77), whom Ilham can see and Jati can only remember as someone who worked in the park (*Tweet* 73-76). The bird keeper was called Khidr. At the end of the material narrative, Jati tells the story of how the worker climbed into a high tree, fell and remained under the water in the park’s lake for several hours (*Tweet* 75-6). He does not understand the spiritual significance of this figure. As the text makes abundantly clear, Khidr is, in fact, the name of the Muslim prophet who exists “at the border between the two worlds” and who in the novel is known as the “Gatekeeper” (*Tweet* 70). It can be argued that the Prophet Khidr has also manifested himself as the gardener, the blind man, the bird keeper who died long ago and the “compassionate stranger.” On the green man’s last appearance, Ilham looks up and sees a flock of birds flying over the park: there are, of course, thirty of them circling around Khidr’s own bird (*Tweet* 77). *Tweet* does not enter into the risks of pantheism, blasphemy and annihilation, that are found in Attar’s tale. The boy’s final ambition about his future, influenced by this strange man, is more humble than his first; he wants to

“take the first small flight like the young pink flamingo and build a home within, like the weaver bird” (70). In their different ways, Khidr, the blind man, the bird keeper and the gardener, as well as Ilham’s grandfather and the birds, have all brought him profound spiritual insight.

In the Epilogue that suggests a time many years later, the figures of the grandfather and the grandson are symbolically reunited in a domestic setting based on memory: Jati has died 30 years ago at the age of 91 (as was mentioned in the Prologue) and Ilham is now in charge of the bird park. As the manager, he thrives on the peace and happiness that can be brought into daily life by meditation (80-81). In this way, the mysticism of *Tweet* carries an aesthetic and social vision: true religion need not be “foreign to the life of our communities” (The Tower 120) at all. As a “prophet” rather than a “mystic,” to use Iqbal’s terms, with a physical and aesthetic appreciation of the value of human existence, Isa’s understanding of Islam keeps Ilham in this world, specifically in the beautiful park that Singapore could be. He does not seek to escape worldly responsibility but it is clear that his aim is to “walk gently” in life’s journey, as the Qur’an commands.

Conclusion

This paper presents a very preliminary introduction to the place of Islam in the novels of the major Singapore author Isa Kamari. It is an important topic and one for which he is prepared to challenge conventional thinking and practice. Over three decades he has progressively sought to understand the nature of village Islam and its quiet beauty; to read the destruction created by radical Islam as a serious misunderstanding of the way in which the history of the early community might still be relevant to the contemporary modern and a globalised world; and to cautiously explore the path of the mystic as a way to transform, not escape, earthly suffering. In the briefest terms possible, as Hijaz states in *The Tower*: “For me someone does not understand religion if he does not love and value life” (120).

In return for his seeking, Isa has often been accused of attempting to create a new religion, of disrespect towards the Prophet, of debasing Islamic history, of violating Muslim ethics and sensationalising the issues with which he deals. We might find his defence to these accusations in *Intercession*:

I had the peculiar sense that my present journey was not physical in nature, but a voyage into a mystical realm of the spirit. The river I travelled on was not the Senggang but a metaphysical stream that linked past and future – a river flowing over the sedentary bed of history fluid with the movements of the ever-changing cosmos; a river turbulent with possibility, whose banks and shorelines were Truth. I, with my boat was sullyng and scarring its unblemished surface. Because of my actions, the real and the spiritual worlds would be turned topsy-turvey. I would tip the delicate cognitive balance between Truth and Fallacy,

and start their war afresh. Was all this necessary? Was it not better to leave things as they were and to bury the past? (89)

The past cannot be buried. It is part of our present and can only be lived morally, aesthetically, in intimate society, with faith, the appropriate use of reason, and never-ending surrender to the One.

Appendix: The Seven Valleys

“The first valley is the Valley of Quest. When you enter it, you will meet a hundred difficulties and challenges. You have to leave behind all that is valuable to you. When you are sure that you do not possess anything, you still have to free yourself. Only then will you be saved from Destruction. You will see the Sacred Light. Whoever enters this valley will feel the longing” (*Tweet 62*).

“The second valley is the Valley of Love. to enter it, you must transform yourself into Fire. The force of a lover must be ablaze like fire. True love does not recognise all worldly thoughts which appear as smoke and fog” (*Tweet 62*).

“The third valley is the Valley of Redemption. This valley does not begin or end. Redemption is, to a traveller, prevailing. Every soul receives the light in accordance to its actions, for those who acknowledge and accept the ‘Truth’” (*Tweet 62-63*).

“The fourth valley is the Valley of Freedom. There is no desire to possess. Neither is there any wish to discover. In this valley nothing is old or new. You can or not do” (*Tweet 63*).

“The fifth valley is the Valley of Unity. In this valley, everything breaks into tiny pieces and then becomes one again. Although you might see multiple existence, in essence there is only one. Eternity disappears. Everything becomes nothingness” (*Tweet 63*).

“The sixth valley is the Valley of Awe. This is a valley of sadness, in this valley, there are only lamentations and longings that are aflame. Do you exist or don’t you? Are you at the centre or at the fringe? Are you temporal or eternal?

The answer is: I do not know anything. I am unaware of myself. I am in love but do not know with whom. My heart is full and yet devoid of love” (*Tweet 63-4*).

“The seventh and last valley is the Valley of Extinction. The essence of this valley is forgetfulness, blindness, deafness and utter confusion. Shadows disappear in light, a drop of water meets the ocean, restlessness suffuses with tranquillity, movement seeps into stillness which in turn begins to stir” (*Tweet 64*).

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