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# AL-SHAJARAH

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*Al-Shajarah* is a refereed international journal that publishes original scholarly articles in the area of Islamic thought, Islamic civilization, Islamic science, and Malay world issues. The journal is especially interested in studies that elaborate scientific and epistemological problems encountered by Muslims in the present age, scholarly works that provide fresh and insightful Islamic responses to the intellectual and cultural challenges of the modern world. *Al-Shajarah* will also consider articles written on various religions, schools of thought, ideologies and subjects that can contribute towards the formulation of an Islamic philosophy of science. Critical studies of translation of major works of major writers of the past and present. Original works on the subjects of Islamic architecture and art are welcomed. Book reviews and notes are also accepted.

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## ***Book Reviews***

**Shereen Abdul Saroor (ed.), *Muslims in the Post-War Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance and Reform*, Colombo: Alliance for Minorities, 2021. 198 pp. ISBN 978-624-9836-05 .**

*Reviewer:* Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky, PhD, Department of Political Science, IIUM. Email: zackymfm@gmail.com

Shereen Abdul Saroor's edited work titled *Muslims in the Post-war Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance and Reform* is a welcome addition to the ongoing discussion on the socio-political and religious dynamics of the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka. The theme has attracted wider scholarly attention in the last ten years for a reason. It is because since the civil war ended in 2009, the community has been portrayed as a 'new other' that should be controlled by dominant majoritarian apparatus. As a result, ultra-Buddhist nationalist forces in Sri Lanka systematically mainstreamed global Islamophobic discourses that connect Islam/Muslims with violence and barbarism, exclusivist culture. Hence, the scholarly community showed a deep interest to study the root causes of the phenomenon, its impact as well as responses of the Muslim community in general. As such, quite considerable amount of academic works was published exploring the unfolding dynamics and its historical genealogy in detail.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For key works on the subject, see, for example, John Clifford Holt, ed., *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Ameer Ali, "Four Waves of Muslim-Phobia in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 35, no.4, 2015; Ameer Ali, "Muslims in Harmony and Conflict in Plural Sri Lanka: A Historical Summery from Religio-Economic and Political Perspective," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34, no. 2, 2014; Dennis McGillivray, "Sri Lankan Muslims between Ethno-Nationalism and Global Ummah," *Journal of Nation and Nationalism* 1, no.1, 2011; J.J. Stewart, "Muslim-Buddhist Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *South Asia Research* 4, no. 3, 2014; A.R.M. Imthiyas & A.M. Saleem, "Muslims in the Post-War Sri Lanka: Understanding Sinhala Buddhist Mobilization against them,"

Shereen's edited work stands apart among them on a crucial point. The work consists of collection of essays, which are primarily reflections of social activists and activist-academics, who have directly engaged in resisting majoritarian narrative of the state and society in Sri Lankan context (p. 06). The editor of the work, Shereen Abdul Saroor (b.1969) herself is an experienced and an award-winning peace as well as women rights activist, who has been outspoken against human rights violations in the country for more than two decades. Therefore, one can possibly read *'Muslims in the Post-war Sri Lanka'* as a comprehensive report, which brings analytical perspectives of front-line activists on the depth and width of the crisis with all of its complexities. Moreover, all fourteen chapters of the work collectively strive to illustrate the struggle of Sri Lankan Muslim minority. Some chapters try to present facts and raw data about the trend and developments of anti-Muslim phenomena in the last decade. Few other selected chapters attempt to analyse the data through the theoretical lenses of majoritarianism, ethnic-nationalism, politicisation of religion, majority-minority relationship. However, this review mainly focuses on the second type of essays, which aim to develop broader analytical insights of a reader in reflecting the case of Sri Lankan Muslims. Additionally, the book answers two somewhat interconnected questions: how majoritarian forces otherise the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka and how religious identity aspirations of the Muslim community reacted to or evolved in response to it? (p. 06).

In the very first essay of the book, Samuel traces how far minorities are permitted to practice their respective religions in freedom in Sri Lanka. His analysis gives a negative picture about the state of religious freedom in the country. He argues that post-colonial Sri Lankan history is filled with events seeking to deny minority

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*Asian Ethnicity* 6, no. 2, 2015; Mikael Gravers, "Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Burma and Sri Lanka: Religious Violence and Global Imaginaries of Endangered Identities," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Buddhism* 16, no. 1, 2015; N. R. Dewasiri, *New Buddhist Extremism and The Challenges to Ethno-Religious Co-existence in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 2016); G. Gunathilake, *The Chronic and Entrenched: Ethno-Religious Violence in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: International Center for Ethnic Studies, 2018).

religious rights. For him, the genealogy of the crisis goes back to a lethal development of politicisation of Buddhism in early post-colonial Sri Lanka. In the 1950s onwards, ‘the majoritarian’ political parties have resorted to extreme nationalist stances adopting a populist politics with anti-minority rhetoric and sentiment (p. 15). As a result of the mainstreaming of populist majoritarian political narratives, ‘Sinhala-Buddhists are viewed as the primary citizens and minorities as guests (p. 17). However, Gunathilake is not ready to confine the cause of current anti-Muslim sentiments in Sri Lanka to mere politicisation of religion per se. For him, post-war Muslim victimisation was born out of ‘the cyclical relationship between majoritarian discourses, transnational influences, and Islamist radicalism’ (p. 39). In the recent past, mainstream discourse of Sri Lankan Buddhist nationalism was further fuelled by anti-Muslim policies of Myanmar, China and India. These transnational ultra-nationalist forces assist their Sri Lankan counterparts on how to create targeted anti-Muslim policies. The emergence of Islamophobic narratives out of those political developments “can then circle back to incentivise some disenfranchised members of the Muslim community to gravitate towards Islamic radicalism” (p. 39). The resulting Islamic radicalism in turn paves the way for consolidation of majoritarian ultra-Buddhist nationalist forces in furtherance of their anti-Muslim narratives.

Taking the debate further on the nature, function, and impact of ultra-Buddhist nationalism on Sri Lankan state, governance, and minorities, Shereen’s essay “Terrorizing Minorities through Counter-Terrorism” offers an important insight into the Sri Lankan state’s strategic targeting of the Tamil and Muslim minorities. It implicitly shows that majoritarian nationalist states do not need well targeted anti-minority laws to be enacted to marginalise minorities. Instead, they frequently use prevailing laws to achieve their objectives. By tracing the impact of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) on diluting the civil rights of Sri Lankan minorities, Shereen says that ‘just as the PTA was once used against thousands of Tamils suspected of having ties to the militancy, it is now being used to arrest hundreds of ordinary Muslims’ (p. 92). Thus, prevailing counter-terrorism laws are “a weapon wielded by majoritarian power

to suppress those who offend majoritarian sensibilities” (p. 93). Going even further, Shereen’s essay highlights how laws that were enacted in the first place to protect social harmony, are being manipulated by the Sri Lankan state to target minorities and their struggle for civil rights (p. 92).

Unlike in the southern regions of Sri Lanka, the stronghold of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, which is their main rival, the Tamil nationalist organisations occupy the greater part of the political landscape of the North-Eastern parts of the Island. Tamil nationalism stresses that the North and East are the traditional homelands of the Tamil people...and discursively denies the Muslims and Sinhalese who live in the region the full rights of belonging’ (p. 197). As such, a separate chapter that is allocated to discuss the struggle of North-Eastern Muslims against Tamil nationalism, sheds light on the vital internal socio-political dilemma Sri Lankan Muslims, being a non-territorial minority, are currently facing. Their dilemma is that any political move by Muslims of the South to have peace with the Sinhala community and nationalist government would adversely affect Muslim-Tamil relations in the North, since such a move may be seen as a betrayal in the Tamil community (p. 197). Anyhow, the authors of the essay argue that both Tamils and Muslims in the North should understand that communal strife between them would only benefit in the end the Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism (p.198).

Farah Mihar’s contribution evaluates the overall responses of the Muslim community leadership to the ultra-nationalist projects of both Sinhala and Tamil communities in light of the human rights framework. Here the author concludes that the wider community’s response to the violations faced by Muslims was based on development, peacebuilding and political inclusion approaches rather than demanding human rights and/or justice’ (p. 112). Otherwise stated, Muslim leadership aims to address societal implications of the majoritarian and regional nationalist projects by empowering inter-community relationship discourses and meeting the developmental needs of the community (p. 117). Nonetheless, she notes that the Muslim leadership has slightly started to trust human rights framework in response to very recent well-directed anti-Muslim policies of the current government. Interestingly, Mihar

critically points out again that even this shift only indicates that the framework remains ‘the last resort for southern Muslim community elites who prefer other methods of dealing with grievance and violations’ (p. 120). Beside socio-political responses of the Muslim leadership, the chapter on reforming Sri Lankan Muslim personal law, gives a glimpse of ideas about how Muslim traditionalist religious leadership has responded to the creeping majoritarian allegation on their earlier religious understanding. It highlights how traditionalists, who have long been resisting reformist Islam in the name of protecting the ‘Muslim identity’, have agreed to compromise their resolute positions to protect their establishment against dominant majoritarian ultra-nationalist political pressure (p. 132).

Finally, as an overall remark, it may be stressed that “*Muslims in the Post-war Sri Lanka*” has made a significant contribution in broadening our understanding of post-war socio-political and religious dynamics of the community. Some chapters have meticulously document facts and figures of damages and events, caused by endemic anti-Muslim violence in the last ten years. Along with that, the book includes several quality perspectivist essays, which analyse those events and figures against the background of the unfolding interface of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism, ethnic Tamil nationalism, and issues of Muslim identity. As such the book strives to connect facts with perspectives, and hence it may be viewed both as a fact-finding report and an analytical document on the problem in question.

However, as a critique, the book does not seem to have paid the necessary attention to analysing the question of Muslim minority in Sri Lanka in light of the core debates in contemporary political philosophy such as on multiculturalism, liberal individual rights, minority group rights, communitarianism, and their implications for the different versions of nationalism and integrity of nation-state. All these themes of contemporary political philosophy offer different proposals and visions on how to manage cultural, religious, and moral pluralism in modern societies. As a result, the book does not explore critically the important question of how to restructure the cultural and societal relationship among different communities in the

Sri Lankan context from the perspectives inspired by the global debates of contemporary political philosophy.

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**Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese and Islamic Civilizations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 196 pp. ISBN 9781009074919**

*Reviewer:* Yusmadi Yusoff, a lawyer and former Member of Parliament, Malaysia (Ahli Dewan Rakyat and Ahli Dewan Negara). He was also an Adjunct Professor of ISTAC (Pro Bono) 2019-2020. Email: [yusmadi.yusoff@gmail.com](mailto:yusmadi.yusoff@gmail.com)

*Re-imagining International Relations'* slenderness relative to other tomes of international relations (IR), belies the breadth of its ambitions. In its own words, this book seeks to uncover “what IR theory might look like had it been developed within civilisations other than the West.”

The bulk of the book is a narrative of the comparative history, sociology and belief systems of ancient China and India and the Islamic world. This culminates in an analysis of six aspects of international relations - *hierarchy, power politics, peaceful co-existence, international political economy, territoriality and modes of thinking* – as they would have emerged from each civilisation, had the West not assumed its dominance of the field.

To be sure, the authors are not naïve about the challenges of such an enterprise. They anticipate the difficulty of both “forward” and “backward” projection. The former is that of extrapolating IR theory from classical ancient thinking, with particular emphasis on the difficulties of equating empires and modern nation-states. The latter is that of analysing ancient thought through the lens of modern, i.e., Western, IR concepts.



# AL-SHAJARAH

Vol. 27, No. 1, 2022

## Contents

### ARTICLES

OSMAN BAKAR AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL RENEWAL  
IN THE MUSLIM WORLD 1  
*Khairudin Aljunied*

IBN ARABI AND HIS CHALLENGES ON THE ISSUE OF FREE WILL 29  
*A REVIEW OF THE ISSUE IN LIGHT OF TWO OF HIS THEORIES*  
*Saeideh Sayari, Mohd Zufri bin Mamat*  
*and Maisarah Hasbullah*

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY, IFTĀ' CULTURE, AND SECTARIANISM IN 53  
MODERN PAKISTAN  
*THE IMPACT OF ITS INTRA-ISLAMIC PLURALISM*  
*Muhammad Kalim Ullah Khan and Osman Bakar*

AWARENESS TOWARDS WAQF ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN MALAYSIA 77  
AND INDONESIA: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION  
*Nisful Laila, Ririn Tri Ratnasari, Shafinar Ismail, Mohd Halim Mahphoth*  
*and Putri Aliah Mohd Hidzir*

QURANIC EXEGETICAL ACTIVITIES IN THE MALAY ARCHIPELAGO 101  
*A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW*  
*Nadzrah Ahmad*

CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM DURING EARLY 123  
ISLAMIC CIVILISATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECT CONCEPTS  
*Thameem Ushama*

### MANUSCRIPT STUDIES

AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSIAN SEALS: 153  
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DEVOTIONAL SEALS FROM  
AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MANUSCRIPT  
*Amir H. Zekrgoo*

### REVIEW ESSAY

ON PRAISE AND VIRTUES OF BOOKS IN THE ISLAMIC TRADITIONS 171  
*Azenita Abdullah*

**BOOK REVIEWS** 187

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9 771394 687009