Ani Zonneveld

AN UNLIKELY SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIOR

Making My Life Count as a Muslim Feminist

Activism and Social Movement Studies

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LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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"Some Muslims force people to fit into a box called Islam whereas I look at Islam as lifting people out of their boxes."- Ani Zonneveld

Abstract

In 1981, 18-year-old Ani landed alone in the middle of rural Illinois from Kuala Lumpur—adrift in an unfamiliar landscape of corn fields, cows, and Caucasians. As a privileged daughter of an accomplished Malaysian politician and diplomat, Ani shares her journey overcoming the common thread of patriarchy, sexism, and prejudice at the intersections of music, politics, religion, and human rights, which exposes inconvenient truths and lifting us out of tribalism and into allyship with each other.

Key words

Feminist, religion, patriarchy, conflict, LGBTQ+, women's rights, interfaith, colonialism, lived experiences, allyship

Acknowledgments

My oldest brother Azahari did an oil painting of me titled "The Warrior", depicting a woman with a *kris*, a Malay dagger, strapped to her back. He always saw me as an *avant garde* warrior, recognizing what has become core to my identity before I saw it in myself. Azahari was my protector, holding up the pitchfork between our conservative family members and myself, giving me the space I needed to let my free spirit flourish. He passed away January 30, 2024 leaving a hole in my heart.

I can never thank my parents enough for all their offerings to me—the many life lessons, the privileged upbringing that allowed us to live in so many countries immersed in the cultures of the world, and along the way, the gift in the diversity of friends, which has shaped my inclusive worldview.

My life has been enriched by so many friendships, but there are a few good folks in particular who have been there for me, lifting me up. Among those are Karima Bennoune, Maliha Khan, Frej Fenniche, Marilyn Wyatt, Rabbi Jim Kaufman, and Kevin Jennings, who after Azahari, has been my most ardent champion and mentor.

This book would not have been written in the way it was had it not been for the work of Sherine Elbanhawy, who dedicated time into poking holes in my initial writings and nurtured me into emoting more, and in allowing myself to be vulnerable.

My husband, Arthur—my steadfast anchor—has supported me through every journey that my free-spirited nature has led me on—from being a songwriter to becoming a human-rights advocate. He ensures that, as I soar, I remain grounded in reality. And my daughter, Jasmine—now my greatest teacher—keeps me connected to the dreams and aspirations of Generation Z, and, from that prism, encouraging me to remain authentic to who I am.

Contents

Introduction

One of my primary motivators for writing this book was my experience guest lecturing in classes on ethics at the Institute of Social Ethics at the University of Lucerne, and in several classes on Islam and human rights at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and Yale. In these experiences, I have found that I am able to pique the interest of students by helping them to connect the theory that they are learning with the lived experiences, and the impact it has on people's lives through the work I do.

To connect with you emotionally, this book is filled with stories and anecdotes of experiences that I've lived through, which I hope will help you see the world in a more inclusive prism. I prioritize this inclusivity because, far too often, we humans take sides simply because of a shared identity. We've been raised to protect our own kind, be it along political, racial, religious, or national lines. Regardless of whether it's in the music business, the field of social justice and human rights, or in religious communities, it is remarkable how tribal we humans are. We get defensive of our kind even when our kind have acted criminally. It is this nature that results in conflicts at the global scale. How we see each other, and how we treat each other, impacts the environment we live in, the politicians we elect, and policies we enable.

Weaving in and out of this book are stories that will challenge stereotypes and defy the divisiveness that consumes us. In these stories,

I explain what's in my head and what's in my heart. I drop names and call out hypocrites, while lifting up those who value and work toward the collective well-being of all of humanity. I give examples of cutting down patriarchal structures at their knees by using alternative thinking and applicable practices that I hope will inspire you to create inclusive cultures—particularly those who are entrapped in intense patriarchal communities. Above all, these stories point out how to build trust to advance human rights, not just for yourself, but, just as importantly, for others as well.

Before I go any further, let me first explain the title of the book.

In the human rights space I work in, often around people of faith, the word feminist is usually frowned upon. It has been misunderstood to mean anti-men or men-hating women. It was therefore important to include the term "feminist" in the title of this book to explain that, although I identify with the values of feminism, that is the belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes, I also acknowledge that there are different approaches and tones in the ways in which feminists conduct themselves. Mine is just one example.

It was also important to include the word "Muslim" alongside "feminist", as my advocacy work is deeply anchored in the spiritual teachings of Islam. Many secular activists, and especially secular Muslims will take issue with this, as they see the terms feminists and Muslim together as an oxymoron. At the launching of one of the programs I spearhead, #ImamsForShe in Tunisia, I was, as expected, challenged by the religious right. But a secular feminist also stood up and said "how dare you put Islam and feminist in the same sentence!"

For those Muslims and non-Muslims who see feminism as an exclusively western and agnostic value, I challenge them with the examples of the Prophet Muhammad's own actions—appointments of a woman as an *imam* and as leaders of the early Muslim community. He was the first Muslim feminist.

Sexism and patriarchy are dominant infrastructures that benefit a select few. Reshaping that infrastructure and the centuries-old mindset that accompanies it requires collective engagement and action from us all, working in allyship with one another. Regardless of whether you're a Muslim or not, spiritual or not, I hope you will learn from my life experiences of being continuously challenged and still actively choosing to do better, not just for yourself, but for those who are in need. For it is only when we lift each other up collectively that we can finally dismantle the walls of inequality and oppression built by the patriarchy.

Learning objectives

Through a series of chapters, Ani shares her personal experiences, challenges, and insights as she navigates her identity as a Muslim woman—challenging patriarchal norms, and championing human rights. The book covers topics such as music, sexism, patriarchy, Islam, interfaith marriages, and LGBTQ+, with the aim of highlighting how:

1. Power dynamics shaping the narrative we consume has us pitched against each other.
2. Political and religious authorities work together to bolster their power through divide-and-conquer tactics.
3. Individuals can establish their own alternative social and cultural structures outside of the patriarchal and sexist systems.
4. To think strategically and to look at the big picture.
5. To learn how to connect dots, and how to work in allyship with unlikely partners toward a shared vision.

1
Who am I?

"Ani, I'm sending you off to college. You will NOT do music, and you WILL do something useful with your life!"

Those were my father's commands.

At the age of 18, I was sent off alone to college in Illinois. Upon arriving in Chicago, I hopped onto a small propeller plane bound for Moline, Illinois. Seated beside me during this short flight was an elderly white woman, and we engaged in a genuinely pleasant conversation. As we were about to part ways, she posed an unexpected question, asking, "You seem like a very nice young lady; what church do you go to?" Caught off guard, I hesitated for a moment before responding, "I'm Muslim." To my surprise, she replied, "Well, I have never heard of that church before!"

I was taken aback by her response, as I was surrounded by friends from diverse races and faiths as a diplomat's child. For a total of 16 years, I lived in Germany, Egypt, and India, an experience that taught me to see people for who they are, not by the color of their skin, or what their parents did for a living.

My first experience as a minority was at the age of five at the British elementary school in Bonn, West Germany. The whole school would gather in the assembly hall, and every morning, before the principal spoke, we would say the Christian Lord's

Prayer. After a few mornings, I confided in my mother about me praying to Jesus. "What do I do?" I asked. To which my mother responded, "Just replace Jesus with Allah and you're fine. We're all praying to the same God."

My mother's simple wisdom, urging me to make this simple adjustment in the Lord's Prayer became a guiding principle, reinforcing the notion that, beneath the surface, if we prayed, we all pray to the same higher power.

In this context, the realization that someone had never encountered the term "Muslim" left me astonished, and a tinge of fear began to seep in. I thought, "Where in heavens did my father send me to!"

When deciding on which university to attend, I staunchly declined my father's suggestion of the University of Arkansas with a rebuttal, "Dad, considering the history of the South, I'm not going to Arkansas!" Despite my father's well-read nature, his first choice was probably rooted in the idea that Arkansas is probably a boring enough of a place and would keep me out of trouble. My reservations, however, were rooted in the grim imagery of a history lesson in high school about racial violence and oppression at the British School in New Delhi. This perception culminated in the haunting image of a black man hanging from a tree, etched into my memory. It is within this backdrop that my initial interaction with a native of Illinois left me with a disquieting feeling.

In September 1981, I arrived at the airport in Moline, Illinois—the smallest I had ever encountered as an 18-year-old who had been traveling since the age of two. With an oversized brown

suitcase, a carry-on bag, a modest amount of cash, and the contact details of a Monmouth College representative—who was supposed to pick me up—I faced the possibility of an uncertain night if they didn't arrive. Keep in mind, this was 1981—a time void of cell phones or smartphones to scout nearby hotels, and I had no credit card to rely on. After enduring a grueling journey from Kuala Lumpur to Hong Kong, from Hong Kong to Narita, then Narita to Chicago, and finally Chicago to Moline, I was simply exhausted. Needless to say, my relief was palpable when the representative materialized. After collecting my suitcase, a motherly-looking woman with a warm smile approached me, asking if I was Zuriani Osman. I guess, given I was the only brown person off the plane, I was easy to spot! Her presence made me feel secure and I allowed myself to relax, the weariness to take over, and in the car ride to Monmouth through the endless countryside landscape of cornfields and cows grazing, lulling me into a deep sleep.

During my inaugural semester in the United States, amidst the crisp fall air of Monmouth, a flier at the student union building caught my attention—an announcement of a guest speaker, Louis Farrakhan from the Nation of Islam. This confused me a bit. The old lady on the plane had said she had never heard of "Muslim", and yet here was a Muslim speaker at this rural town. Needless to say, I was very intrigued, as I had never heard of a Nation of Islam, and in my younger days, one could describe my personality as uber-ly "FOMO", or fear of missing out. I made my way to the venue early, securing a spot in the last row, in an aisle seat close to the exit door, just in case I needed to escape.

As the room filled, I observed the women—clad in all-white attire, white *hijab*, exuding elegance, beauty, and a serene aura. Their dignified demeanor reminded me of the way my mother carried herself minus the hijab, back straight, chin up, but unlike these women, my mum always wore a smile. Following suit, the men entered, donning sharp suits and bow ties, equally radiating dignity, standing tall and proud. The men didn't smile either, nor did they greet the audience. I noticed that right away, as we Malays almost always carried a smile. The room was packed, with folks standing along the sides of the room. Then Louis Farrakhan walked in with his entourage, and he started to speak. With the dignified appearances of the Nation of Islam attendees and the way they dressed and carried themselves, my mind was prepared for a speech that was equally dignified, uplifting, positive, and memorable. But when Farrakhan opened his mouth, I was so taken aback by his words. I could not believe what I was hearing.

Farrakhan's speech delved into racist and prejudicial commentary about people of other races and religions, particularly White people and Jews. He smiled, but it was accompanied by a deceptive tone, and his choice of words was simply vile. After many decades, I don't remember his exact words, but the emotional memory stuck with me. Disgust welled up within me, an unfamiliar emotion. What was it that I was listening to? How could this man of faith, a Muslim, speak of others in such a manner? Raised in an environment void of hate in the name of religion, where my parents had never expressed prejudice toward other races, religions, or sexualities, this experience was so alien to me that I didn't even know what to call it (Photo: Ani's parents).

Figure 1: Ani's parents, 1970

At eighteen, and although "fresh off the boat," so to speak, I knew about slavery and Jim Crow, but I knew nothing about the Nation of Islam, an organization now designated as a hate group by the

Southern Poverty Law Center. Over the years, I have come to learn that America is home to so many hate organizations that it needs an independent entity such as the Southern Poverty Law Center to monitor and identify such groups, starting with the plethora of White-supremacist organizations.

Now, many years wiser, I understand the reasons for the founding of the Nation of Islam, its historical context, its roots in racial struggles, and the quest for self-empowerment among African Americans. I understood it better, especially after 9/11, in how unsafe and oppressive the environment was for American Muslims as a result of the American government's "war on terror" in other words, its anti-Muslim policies. With the war on Gaza on October 7, 2023, the outbreak of anti-Muslim hate has taken on another meaning, starting with the murder of six-year-old Palestinian boy Wadea Al Fayoume, who was stabbed 26 times. Other acts of hate crimes have since been perpetrated, but authorities have been reluctant to call them as such. Families of Palestinian Americans killed by Israel Defence Forces in Occupied Palestine receive only lip service from the State Department about "getting to the bottom of it", whereas Israeli families (not Americans) killed by Hamas get to meet high level American officials multiple times. The preferential treatment is blatantly discriminatory, and I question the loyalty of our own government officials.

What American Muslims are experiencing is institutional racism. African Americans and the Indigenous people of the Americas have endured this for centuries and continue to experience it. Therefore yes, I get why the Nation of Islam came to be. Yet, I remain

unconvinced that self-empowerment necessitates demonizing others. Demonizing others is an act of small-mindedness.

As I learned from a young age, the world isn't just Black and White, as there is a whole spectrum of colors in between. Through life's lessons, I've come to understand that hate, prejudice, and love resides in most of us, regardless of the color of our skin. While it is easy to succumb to hate and prejudice, it is really hard work to overcome them and tap into the expansive space of love. That is the human struggle.

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I remember how 9/11 marked a pivotal moment in how being Muslim automatically meant "representing" a community, imposed on us in the form of a negative collective identity, discriminated against, and assumed to belonging to the terrorist tribe unless proven otherwise. Quite different from the American legal mantra "innocent until proven guilty".

Representing your community and your culture was a responsibility I carried growing up. I know that feeling too well. It is burdensome. From an early age, as a person of color and a minority living in Germany, I was taught to present myself in a dignified manner. Everything, from my manner of speech to my choice of clothing, carried the weight of the message: "You are a representative of Malaysia, and your words and actions reflect on our nation." Open-toed footwear and jeans were not permitted; instead, closed-toed sandals, slacks, or dresses were the norm. As a result, my wardrobe underwent meticulous curation. Even when my hair cascaded down to my waist, it was consistently maintained—combed, braided, or secured in a ponytail. The

responsibility of grooming me or styling my appearance fell to my mother or caregivers, all with the aim of molding me into a paragon of "respectability."

As a child, I had no choice but to go with the flow, but as a teenager, "respectability" felt suffocating. Being hard-wired that way was understandable for the role I was dictated to play in protecting the country's reputation, but it was definitely not helpful in the doggy dog world of the music business in Los Angeles.

It was in this new American setting that I made a concerted effort to shed the obligation to "represent." It was hard, as it was not just about living up to your own individual identity but the balance of being part of a community without allowing the community to dictate the parameters of who they want you to be. Finding this healthy balance is a struggle for many immigrants, but for me, letting go of this responsibility to represent became a necessity—for my own well-being, for my own liberation.

The hyphenation of my identity to include American and Muslim took root.

And so, when 9/11 forced Muslims to "represent", it was in the spirit of independence and fueled by anger that I felt compelled to insert an alternative narrative to the dominant ultra-alpha male narrative, in the form of a female voice, through my music. It drove me to write, produce, and perform an entire album's worth of material centered on promoting egalitarian values, human rights, self-empowerment, and a poignant reminder of women's roles in Islam. It was the first time I shyly uncurled my middle finger to an authority. My first expression of independence and resistance. It felt good.

Crafting songs became a skill, but it started out as innate as breathing, an untrained instinct ingrained within me. In 2004, I took the step of releasing the album "Ummah Wake Up," (Ani/Zonneveld, 2003) using this creative outlet to voice my thoughts and forge an artistic form of resistance against patriarchy. My objective was to address a wider audience, including individuals like the elderly lady I had conversed with during my journey to Moline, Illinois, when I was eighteen. Through my music, I aimed to offer a musical and educational channel, countering misinformation and fostering a deeper understanding among the public. It was my small contribution to dispelling stereotypes and prejudice of Muslims and Islam.

It was through music and songs that I allowed myself to express freely. Music was my gateway. Over time, this permission became the new norm, enabling me to unwire what my parents had wired me to be, slowly discarding the old wires and replacing them with fiber cables. Through music, I learned to be me.

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Being far from home and independent at 18 years old taught me to survive. After graduating from college and moving to Los Angeles, hard knocks and "paying my dues" were quite the reality check from my very privileged and sheltered upbringing. The music business was brutal. It was racist and still is sexist, and as an outsider without the connections to open doors for you, it was a very difficult time of my life, but I learned from it.

Trying to pitch a song or a music project and getting rejected was nothing new to me. As a songwriter, I would write, program

the music in my home studio, and work in recording studios to lay down the vocals, and "live" instrumentation, and mixing.

It cost about $1,000 to record a song which entailed paying for singers and musicians, and studio time. Writing and producing songs was an investment in your resources, with no clear return on that investment, but producing the product was how you pitched your writing and production skills to publishers, artists, and other songwriters. It was these songs that helped you get into meetings for them to "check you out" before they would want to consider investing their time in meeting with you. It was the equivalent to the creators who pitch their products in "Shark Tank" today. You had to have a product to sell. As the saying goes, "show me what you got!"

By the time I had written and produced my first Islamic pop album at 42-years-old, I had already been a 15-year veteran songwriter and producer in the music industry in Los Angeles, with 40 songs published worldwide, and a few awards under my belt. I could write and produce in my sleep, and I knew how the distribution of music works.

With my album "Ummah Wake Up" on hand, the next step was to get it distributed and get publicity for the product and sales. The most obvious distributor, I thought, would be to Muslim retail stores, and there were quite a few of them, many distributing Islamic religious songs called "Nasheed". In Malaysia, *Nasheeds* were sung by male and female artists. Gender and music in general was not an issue, but apparently, in America, Islam has regressed such that women were, and still are, barred from singing, particularly in front of male audiences.

My calls to many online retailers failed to get any response—instead, I received the typical silent treatment, no different from the music industry. This silent treatment puzzled me, as I thought, post 9/11, as a vilified segment of the American population, we were all united in our Muslim identity and sticking up for each other. Shouldn't my Muslim community appreciate this counter-narrative? Little did I know I was wading into a marsh pit of sexism and patriarchy, no better than the secular music industry.

After many calls to retailers, I was finally able to get through to a Los Angeles Muslim online retailer, *Islamicity*. This company distributed a lot of religious content, including music, but evidently, only that of male performers. That was in 2004.

"Don't get me wrong Ani, we love your music," he said apologetically, "we listen to it all day at the office, but we just can't sell it. Our shoppers will boycott us."

"Why?" I ask.

"Well, first, you are a female singer, and a female voice is *aurat*, (to be covered), it's sexual. Secondly, you used all the musical instrumentation in your production, and during Prophet Muhammad's time, there was only the *dumbek* percussion, so therefore, only a drum is permissible as a musical accompaniment."

First off, I don't consider my singing style sexual at all. It is far from Britney Spears, Shakira, or Beyonce's sexual lyrics and gyrating hips. Secondly, this man should get off the phone and off the internet if he's restricting the use of a musical instrument to that of the 700s.

The hypocrisy is jarring.

I am taking up space to explain the nuances and context for the censorship of women's voices because it always starts with the voice, but it never ends there. This mindset is anchored in sexism and patriarchy, and it needs to be named.

I was raised in a very traditional Muslim family and culture, so this sexism in the Muslim music industry in America has nothing to do with respectability, appearance, or religion. It is censorship, which is a pervasive, regressive mindset among many Muslim organizations. This mindset is also deeply embedded in conservative Muslim societies—where women, by default, sit in the back of the room, and where it is the men's voices and opinions that dominate a space. Or, in the case of Afghan women, their voice and role in society are completely erased.

I remember an open call in 2005 for performers for a music festival, MuslimFest, organized by Sound Vision in Chicago, clearly and publicly stating, "Female performers need not apply." The festival organizers protested the *Globe and Mail* article with an open letter, but proof is in the pudding. There were no female musical performers.

This gender discrimination was, and still is, clearly evident at most co-ed Muslim events and conferences. Go to any mosque or fundraising event, and you will not see an adult woman performing a song. It has improved in that women can now perform spoken word and poetry. Even at the 2023 Islamic Society of North America Convention, only male musical performers were listed as providing entertainment. According to their logic, male singers are permitted, as apparently women do not get sexually aroused by male performers. This contradicts the reality, though,

when I see Muslim girls in *hijabs* screaming for male singers at concerts. Somehow, this is not sexual attraction. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) is an umbrella organization consisting of thousands of mosques, which sets the tone for Islam in America. It is driven by a Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, the version that predates Saudi Arabia's Prince Muhammad bin Salman's version. Wahhabism, like most conservative branches of religion, look a lot like each other. It is very hierarchical and patriarchal.

To counter this fixation of a female singing voice, a group of progressive Muslims organized a musical event, and I was invited to perform at a one-day conference in Chicago, across the street from where ISNA was holding its annual conference. Some ISNA attendees went out of their way to hold up placards condemning us to hell. This expression of religion is what I call "zealots playing God."

There was one glimmer of hope to secure a distribution deal when a young male marketing officer at Yusuf Islam's (Cat Stevens) production company in London "Mountain of Light" reached out to me for a copy of my CD "Ummah Wake Up" for consideration for a distribution deal. Being a huge Cat Stevens fan, I was so thrilled at the request! But after many months of silence, the CD I sent was returned with a letter politely declining to digitally distribute the album claiming lack of funding.

On their website, the label distributed all-male groups, all of the artists sang acapella and accompanied with a *dumbek* only. It was evident that the label was gender-biased, stemming from a misogynistic and regressive interpretation of Islam, expressed and implemented in a business model. All the artists they had

signed were men and even after claiming there was no funding for me, they continued to sign not one, but three all-male vocal groups. The sexist and patriarchal thread continues…

The website and company no longer exist, and I wished there had been such a thing as "taking a screenshot" for my own record keeping. Again, I was discriminated against. To be at the receiving end from your so-called co-religious left me feeling spiritually "homeless" and without a community I wanted to belong to.

For those not in the music industry, or those only familiar with digital downloads, an online distribution of a finished product was easy money. There were no out-of-pocket expenses of producing the content, such as booking studio time, hiring musicians and producers to record new material, as a newly signed artist would necessitate.

Distribution expenses usually include getting the CDs manufactured, marketing, the cost of storage space, and the labor of sticking the CD in the envelope and postage, expenses that would be covered by the retail price paid by the consumer, marked up by at least by 50 per cent or more. Like I said, easy money.

If I was getting turned down for financial reasons, or because the music was awful, then I would not have taken issue with it. The censorship of a female singing voice in the name of religion is absurd. What is astonishing is that the Muslim world outside the United States is rich with female singers including religious-themed genres by Uyghurs, Kazakh, and Kyryyz women, who accompany their singing with percussion and lutes, or the Sufi qawwali singers, a tradition dating back to the thirteenth