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Janson, Torsten

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Islamic Children's Literature: Informal Religious Education in Diaspora

Torsten Janson

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Abstract

This chapter explores the brand of Islamic children's literature produced in diaspora, in order to discern how this supplementary educational tool has responded to key concerns of Islamic education. How is Islamic faith staged in diasporic literary depiction? What innovative formats are employed and how does such innovation affect the content? Rather than understanding this literature in terms of mere adaptations of novel formats, Islamic children's literature is explored as a mode for cultural negotiation in and of itself. It ambiguously balances between a defensive-exclusive and offensive-inclusive cultural stance. On the one hand, and in its early phases, it has been formulated as a defense of religious principles in a sociocultural context defined as threatening, in face of which Islam is mobilized as a safety mechanism. In such aspects, Islamic children's literature has essentially reproduced cautious and socio-conservative literary patterns in the Arab and/or Muslim world at large. On the other hand, the

T. Janson (✉)

Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

e-mail: torsten.janson@cme.lu.se

format as such subverts traditional forms of Islamic education and rote learning practices, in favor of a religious pedagogy through which Islamic creed and practice is highlighted as a rational and culturally flexible matrix for life. Currently, the literature is set in a process of rapid development. Core religious virtues are increasingly staged through vivid narrative and graphic representation, and in inclusive appropriation of Euro-American literary formats such as the detective story, the world of sports, the comic book, the fable, and fairy tale. Such innovative formats invite culturally inclusive depictions of diasporic existence, in an open and vulnerable exploration of what Muslim identity and Islamic faith may mean for a young mind. In the process, the borders are currently becoming less distinct between the brand of Islamic children's (established since the 1970s) and an emergent literature depicting the lives of young Muslims with less explicit religious or ideological purposes.

Keywords

Islamic children's literature · Picture books · *Da'wah* · Diaspora · Religious pedagogy

Introduction

The brand of "Islamic children's literature" found its distinct shape in Britain from the 1970s, devised as a conscious strategy of religious socialization. It was launched as an educational alternative to "non-Islamic" children's books in the English language, that is, as distinct not only from children's literature in general but also from books depicting Muslim identity and culture without the intent to foster an explicit and active religious identity. Already here, a clarification on the use of the terms "Muslim" and "Islamic" is in order. They suffer from considerable vagueness and are used differently in news, debates, as well as within academia. In this chapter, "Muslim" is used as a neutral, descriptive, and ethnographic concept referring to everything that may be ascribed to *Muslims* as people, organizations, and societies: "the Muslim world"; "Muslim debates on gender"; etc. "Islamic" is used as an overarching concept referring to thoughts and practices that can be ascribed to Islam as a system of ideas: "Islamic law"; "Sunnī Islamic norms of representation"; etc. It should be used with caution within academic studies, since the Muslim debates about what is to be regarded as "Islamic" or "un-Islamic" are highly normative – as illustrated by the concept of Islamic children's literature.

The genre of Islamic children's literature in English has its background in ventures of *da'wah*, the "invitation" to Islam (the Islamic concept of mission or edification), formulated in the context of the European minority situation (Janson 2003). Islamic children's literature thus is understood in its normative sense, that is, "in line with correct Islamic principles" (as defined by the publishers). A recurring concern of this literature is its preoccupation with "the Muslim child," understood not in cultural or ethnic terms, but as an incomplete religious subject, in need of fostering and guidance in order to attain its full religious potential – becoming "Islamic" (Janson 2017).

For example, when the pioneering United Kingdom-based publisher Islamic Foundation launched its successful *Muslim Children's Library* during the early 1980s, this brand was presented as books “with a difference, for children of all ages.” According to the editor and author Khurram Murad (1982a), children's books in general aim only to entertain or to train without any place for God or the guidance of prophets. Such entertainment and skills are devoid of value and meaning:

Such books, in fact, rob young people of access to true knowledge. They give them no unchanging standards of right and wrong, nor any incentives to live by what is right and refrain from what is wrong. The result is that all too often the young enter adult life in a state of social alienation and bewilderment, unable to cope with the seemingly unlimited choices of the world around them. (Murad 1982a: 3)

In this sense, the general concepts of “Muslim” and “Islam” are tied down to a specific, ideological horizon, building on an activist and socially committed vision of Islam as an integral “part of everyday life” (Murad 1986; for a discussion, see further Janson 2003). It should be underscored that this activist interpretation of Islam is far from representative for Muslims in general, but is typical for a moderate Islamist understanding of religious identity and social agency. Indeed, the publisher Islamic Foundation was set up in 1973 as an independent offshoot of the South Asian reform movement Jamā'at-i -Islāmī, founded by one of the towering figures of Sunnī moderate Islamism during the nineteenth century, Abū al-‘Alā' Mawdūdī. The Jamā'at-i -Islāmī lacks significant popular following in Britain, controlling a mere 3% of the 1500–1600 mosques of Britain. But the entrepreneurial initiative of the Islamic Foundation and its sister organizations (originating from the Jamā'at-i -Islāmī) grants the movement an informal position outmatching its popular mandate. Formally, the Islamic Foundation is an independent research and education branch, affiliated with British Universities and research centers and has earned considerable attention and credibility as a bridgehead between Muslim and non-Muslim interests in Britain – while in some quarters the Jamā'at-i -Islāmī background also spurs suspicion (see further Janson 2003).

This publisher remains one of the leading actors on the market of Islamic children's literature in English but has been followed by several similar publishers in the United Kingdom, India, Australia, South Africa, and the United States. While Islamic children's literature today is produced in multiple languages, the genre of was originally conceived in a British, English language format. The first and henceforth dominant diasporic publishers consciously chose to publish in English, rather than Arabic, Urdu, or other native languages, in order to accommodate the needs of new generations of Muslims in minority. Therefore, English remains the most important language for Islamic children's literature in diasporic settings – even though the production of books in other European languages also is expanding and the development of diasporic children's literature indeed reflects tendencies in current Arabic literary production (see further below).

The following chapter will deal with Islamic children's literature in the specific sense outlined above, and the concept of “Islamic children's literature” will thus be

reserved for English pedagogical-literary products with the explicit religio-ideological purpose of preserving, disciplining, and adjusting young religious identity in accordance with the needs of diasporic minority existence. As shall be discussed in the following, however, the line is gradually becoming less distinct between Islamic children's literature in this stricter sense and a more "general" literature depicting Muslim characters and subjects, as the market is expanding and the religiously motivated publishers are becoming more market adjusted and literarily mature.

Islamic Children's Literature: A Crossroad of Local Concerns and Transnational Tendencies

The question of religious socialization has been a core concern of European Muslims ever since the establishment of significant Muslim communities in the 1960s. How could Muslim religious identity be preserved in a cultural context perceived as Christian at best, and, at worst, defined by secularism, immorality, and cultural decay? Children in particular were regarded as exposed to majority norms through secular public education, cultural consumption, and peer relations. In the United Kingdom, where the brand of Islamic Children's literature emerged, Muslim leadership remained fragmented, since British Muslim mosque organizations largely mirrored ethnic and sectarian affiliations of the motherland left behind. As a rule, British mosque organizations have relied on traditional forms of religious socialization and instruction for children, focusing on a mimetic learning of prayer and Qur'ānic recitation, while disregarding deeper questions of religious and cultural identity. In this context, small but industrious organizations such as the Islamic Foundation recognized the need for renewed methodologies in religious socialization – and children's literature was launched as a key strategy to this end.

In this sense, Islamic children's literature should be regarded as an informal supplementary provision in response to (and commercially targeted for) religious educational needs in Muslim diasporic communities. This literary genre and its conceptualization of "true knowledge" is intimately connected to Muslim minority experience, geared at safeguarding religious socialization in a culturally threatening context (Janson 2003). In this sense, the fictional and idealized "Islamic child" of the religious literature aspires to put the actual multicultural Muslim child within the grasp of Islamic institutions – and to make it less threatening (Nodelman 1992; Janson 2017).

Having said this, it would be mistaken to think of this literature as solely a product of local factors in Muslim diasporic communities. Islamic children's literature produced in Europe or in the United States reflects larger, transnational tendencies in the Middle East and Arabic speaking world at large. Indeed, the "Middle East" and the "Arabic speaking world" are also problematic concepts. The concept of the Middle East has its historical background in a colonial and orientalist description of the world, often resting on highly problematic assumptions about its specific cultural, political, or religious identity – with very unclear borders. In this chapter, the concept is used conveniently only, as a loose geopolitical concept referring to the states of North Africa, the Arab peninsula, Turkey, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon,

Iraq, and Iran. “Arabic” is used as a linguistic concept – which in turn denotes standard Arabic (*fushḥah*) as well as multiple spoken dialects (see further below). “Arabic children’s literature” in this chapter thus refers to children’s literature written in the Arabic language(s). As an example of such transnational tendencies, the narration and representation of “Islamic knowledge” of Islamic children’s literature produced in diasporic settings partly stages and renegotiates the constraints of figurative representation of traditional Sunni-Islamic theology (Janson 2012; Janson 2017). And as will be clear in the following, the genre similarly reflects and renegotiates pedagogical norms and cultural sensitivities underpinning children’s and youth’s literature in the Muslim world at large, as observed in research on Arabic children’s fiction (Starrett 1996; Mdallel 2004; Dünges 2011; Elabd 2015).

The present chapter aims at identifying the gradual unfolding of central topics and tropes in the emergence of the genre of Islamic children’s literature produced in diaspora, in order to discern how this supplementary educational tool responds to key concerns of Islamic education. How is Islamic faith staged in diasporic literary depiction? What innovative pedagogical, aesthetic and narrative formats are employed and how do such appropriations affect the content of the literature? What topics are dealt with confidently and innovatively and what themes are met with caution or avoided altogether?

Patterns of Religion and Morality in Arabic Children’s Literature

Before discussing the specific brand of diasporic Islamic children’s literature, it is informative to explore the state of the arts of children’s literature and its appropriation in pedagogy in the Middle East – and the Arab world more specifically. As mentioned above, the genre of Islamic children’s literature took shape and developed in a Euro-American Muslim setting. In several respects, however, the diasporic literature displays stylistic and topical characteristics similar to the children’s literature in the Middle East and has emerged in a negotiation with similar pedagogical, religious, and sociocultural sensitivities.

The interconnectedness of children’s literature with pedagogy is by no means unique to the Arabic speaking world. To the contrary, international research and theory has commonly contemplated children’s literature’s inherent relation to pedagogy. Literary discussion has commonly taken place from a distinctly normative position, attempting to define what literature is *suitable* for children (Nikolajeva 1996). Such debates are formulated from religious as well as secular points of departure.

For instance, there is a Christian, religiously oriented debate on the utility of children’s literature for educating religious norms. What is, for example, the religious-pedagogical value or harm of fantasy books such as the *Narnia*, *Lord of the Rings*, or *Harry Potter* series? Other debates concern the explicitly confessional literature, such as the expanding market for children’s Bibles and Bible storybooks. What are the criteria for a “good children’s book?” According to a particularistic orientation, a book has value only if it is explicitly Christian. A more literary line of reasoning maintains that a poor book never can be pedagogically useful, irrespective

of its purposes or confessional nature. Many Christian books are regarded to be so poor in literary quality that they deter rather than stimulate religious identity among children (see further Naranjo 1999; Hutchens 1999; Stan 1995; Shannon 1999). As shall be clear, similar Muslim debates have recently emerged about confessional Islamic children's literature.

From a secular-pedagogic perspective, we find equally intense discussions on the potential of "multicultural" or "global" literature to familiarize children with cultural diversity or to provide means for self-identification. There is, for instance, an abundance of studies, handbooks, and literary resource collections discussing and suggesting how children's literature can be used in classrooms, in order to handle cultural plurality (Lamme 1996; Fredricks 2000). The same holds true for the utility of fiction in dealing with or conflict and trauma, such as literature on "Arabic" or "Muslim culture" in response to Islamophobia and cultural stereotypes in an American post 9.11 context (Schwarz 1999; Ward et al. 2010; Al-Hazza 2006, 2010; Al-Hazza and Lucking 2006). Ideas on the pedagogic instrumentality of children's literature thus remain strong also in a Euro-American context, despite the increasing academic interest in children's literature *qua* literature and the pleasure of reading as a means to its own end (Nodelman 1988; Nikolajeva 1996).

In the Arabic speaking world and the Middle East at large, the pedagogical overtones in the discussion about children's literature have been further advanced by the centralization of the educational system and the state control in the authorship and publication of children's literature and textbooks for school. Indeed, one of the problems inhibiting educational reform in the Middle East has been the interconnectedness of public education and vested political interests, which have used the educational system as an instrument for establishing ideological hegemony (Owen 2004: 29f). This has had profound and negative effects on the development of children's culture in the Middle East (UNDP 2004).

Gregory Starrett's (1996) observations on Egyptian school textbooks remain relevant for much of the Middle Eastern children's literature: it is intimately interconnected with patriarchal values, underscoring the importance of the domestic sphere and respect for elders. Secondly, school practices of memorization, recitation, and question and response are taught even before writing has been mastered, adding to the authority of the state-sanctioned, written text, rather than the mediating pedagogic authority of the instructors. And thirdly, education is connected to the sacred history of Islam. This is achieved through the linking of events from religious history to the contemporary, familiar setting, and by the connection of religious education with other school subjects.

Petra Dünge (2011) draws attention to similar tendencies in current Arabic children's literature. It remains characterized by didactic ambitions to impart values such as patriotism, the love of Islam, the appreciation for Arabic culture and Arabic languages. It also remains socioculturally conservative, heavily moralizing, stylistically dry and nonappealing in terms of graphic profile and illustrations. In terms of literary motives, recurrent are traditional stories from a classical Arab heritage; stories from the life of Prophet Muḥammad; tales of Medieval Arab scientists and travelers in the Middle Ages; and political core topics such as the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict. During the last decade or so, however, new tendencies are emerging, with an increasing literary focus of mundane life and psychologically credible depictions of the daily joys and sorrows of contemporary children. There is also an emergent development in the gendered depictions, gradually introducing new, socially active roles of women in society and more nuanced representations of fathers. There is also a new attention to and improvement of illustrations, hitherto “grossly underrated” (Dünges 2011). This development goes hand in hand with a rapid establishment of innovative publishing houses in many quarters of the Middle East.

Another development concerns language. Arabic children's literature has usually been written in standard Arabic (*fushah*), rather than spoken national dialects. And as pointed out by Dünges (2011), standard Arabic is commonly associated with dry style and boring school lessons and difficult vocabulary. Recently, however, increasing numbers of authors rely on various dialectal forms of Arabic in children's literature, in search of a renewed, vernacular, and localized literary address, for stylistic as well as pedagogical and identity building reasons (Bizri 2012). As Lebanese author Nadine Touma has put it, if children never encounter dialect as written knowledge, they tend to conceive of their own, spoken diction and formal, written Arabic as two distinct languages (Chahinian 2012). Or to quote Chahinian's interview Touma: “[N]otre cerveau perçoit l'arabe dialectal et l'arabe littéraire, la *fushah*, comme deux langues complètement différentes, comme si on parlait l'anglais et l'espagnol. Conclusion: si l'enfant qui apprend le dialectal ne voit pas cette langue écrite, il ne comprendra pas que la *fusha* et le dialectal sont deux formes de la langue arabe” (Chahinian 2012). Hence, standard Arabic literature risks being conceived as a distinct literary form and disconnected from children's everyday language, with potentially alienating effects.

All in all, despite a growing recent interest, “images of children and childhood in modern Muslim contexts have not received detailed scholarly attention,” as pointed out by Karimi and Gruber (2012: 291). This holds true also for international research on Middle Eastern children's literature. With the current expansion of literary production and establishment of innovative publishing houses, however, scholarly attention is increasing. The topical renewal in the genre, the improvements in the literary address, and the updated attention to qualified illustrations are all signs that children's literature no longer is disregarded: “Didacticism and moralizing still dominate in many books, but others show that reading can be fun, pure, and simple” (Dünges 2011: 179). As shall be clear from the following, Islamic children's literature produced in diasporic contexts appears to be in the forefront of such renewal and innovativeness, as a direct effect of the perceived need of updating a functional literary address of the child in a Euro-Muslim and American context.

Children's Literature as an Updated Format for Islamic Education

The pedagogic commitment to produce a specific Islamic children's literature, taking shape from the 1970s, built on the dissatisfaction with the methods of Islamic education dominating much of the Muslim world – as well as the methods of the major faith

organizations in Muslim diaspora. According to Islamic Foundation and similar organizations, Islam can only be fully grasped and realized through personal reflection and active application of religious identity in everyday life – not through formalistic, mimetic observance. This in turn calls for a literary staging of Islam from a localized, cultural point of view. Hence, the narration of Islamic faith and pedagogics in diasporic children's literature stimulates a rethinking of what Islam is or could be.

During the last decade or so, the market of Islamic children's literature has rapidly expanded. Publishers in Britain and the United States maintain a lead in this field, but Islamic children's literature today is a global phenomenon, including books written in multiple languages. In the process, market identities and boundaries become less and less distinct. While Islamic children's literature as a rule still expressively aims at formulating doctrine and religious ethics for children, today several such publishers produce less ideological material as well, aiming at depicting various aspects of Muslim identity, history, and religion in descriptive ways. But this is a recent and slow development.

It may be noted, for instance, that award-winning Canadian children's literature author Rukhsana Khan, active in the debate about the literary representation of minorities in multicultural society, chose not to "endorse" any explicitly Islamic books in her *Muslim Booklist* of recommended readings on Islam and Muslim faith and experience – but only ambivalently so (Khan 2013). For instance, in an article published on her webpage, Khan discusses Linda Dedago's *Islamic Rose Books* series (Muslim Writers Publishing). Dedago herself describes her authorship as "Islamic fiction," representing "Muslims living as a minority in a multicultural and diverse society in a westernized country /.../ in a non-preachy way. Rather than telling the readers about Islam, the author showed the readers, through the book character dialogue and action how Islam can be relevant in the lives of Muslims today" (Islamic Rose Books 2013). In her *Muslim Booklist*, however, while underscoring the fact that she finds distinct values in the *Islamic Rose* series, Khan decided not to recommend it since "such stories belong in the same category as Christian publishing. They are books specifically aimed at their religious markets so I had to leave them off" (Khan 2013). Such reflections illustrate both the increasing complexity of the market of Islamic children's literature and the lingering sensitivity associated with religiously informed picture books.

Being one of the first and most influential publishers on this market, the Islamic Foundation (and its publication branch Kube Publishing) remains one of the dominant actors. It is therefore useful to follow the development of this publisher during its first decades. Its production of children's literature falls into two major phases. From the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, production mainly consisted of books relating sacred history, most notably stories about the life and deeds of the Prophet Muḥammad and his companions. Almost all authors of this first phase were male and tightly connected to the organization itself. The books all had characteristics of in-house production, with long descriptions of the publisher and the pedagogic purposes of the books and low in production values: many, for example, were stapled books of poor paper quality. By contrast, from the mid-1990s, authorship became highly diversified, and the topics shifted from sacred history to stories about contemporary British Muslims. During this phase, the design of the books radically changed, as the

publisher embraced different formats and styles of production and improved the material quality of paper and production processes. Strikingly, the preoccupation with contemporary Britain of this phase coincided with the use of domestic settings for the stories, which were almost exclusively authored by female writers.

While the Islamic Foundation has been highly successful in carving out this niche market and attaining an intermediate social position despite its ideological marginality, this was not achieved overnight. The early material certainly was innovative in certain respects, but in other ways it remained cautious in its rethinking of religious pedagogy. For instance, *The Children's Book of Islam (Part One)* of 1979 was among the very first English Islamic children's books to reach a significant audience (11 reprints during the first 20 years, with 7000–11,000 copies per printing). This nonfiction, 56-page textbook explaining (Sunnī) Islam for 8- to 11-year-olds imparts doctrine in short chapters consisting of simple sentences:

A Muslim is an individual who accepts Islam as a way of life.
 Islam is the faith and the path to follow.
 A Muslim believes in what Islam tells him or her to believe.
 A Muslim acts as Islam tells him or her to act. / . . . /
 Therefore, we worship only Allāh and only upon Him do we call for help. (Ahsan 1979: 9)

Here few attempts are made to catch the imagination of the reader by either narrative or graphic means. The book's images consist of some calligraphy, a couple of figures illustrating theology and prayer times, and a photograph of the *Ka'bah* in Mecca. There is also a decorative golden frame surrounding the short sentences, rendering a strict and solemn impression not unlike the layout of many Qur'ān editions. The only interactive element of the book is a workbook section, with questions corresponding to each chapter: "1. Who is Allah? 2. How many gods are there? 3. Is God alone? 4. Does Allah have a son or a family?" (ibid.: 44). Despite such interrogative elements, the text hardly invites the child to any active dialogue or reflection. The questions are to be answered by merely repeating statements in the textbook. The book, thus, retains the authoritarian, pedagogical technique of rote memorization, in which the child is presented with an undisputed and essentially monologic truth. In this sense, it is primarily the format that makes *The Children's Book of Islam* something new: the very idea of a printed manual of religious doctrine directed at children. In other respects, the contents of the book remain quite faithful to a traditional approach to religious teaching.

After the publication of a few successful nonfiction books, however, during the early 1980s this publisher expanded its horizons. It took recourse in the rich tradition of Muslim history and storytelling, realizing that religious norms may be more efficiently conveyed to young readers through literary depiction rather than blunt injunction. Or to quote the suspenseful opening lines of Khurram Murad's *Love Your God* (1982b: 6):

The night was dark. It was already past midnight. In a few hours the first rays of sunlight would appear. Then the Quraysh would realise that Muhammad, the Prophet (Peace and Blessings be upon him), had slipped through their fingers and then the chase would be on.

Most books published within the *Muslim Children's Library* series during the 1980s consist of illustrated stories about the Prophet Muḥammad and the early Muslim community of Mecca and Medina. It is hardly incidental that the organization chose to tell stories inspired by sacred tradition when embarking on the venture of publishing literature for the purposes of religious socialization. Apart from providing captivating and exciting stories, thus meeting basic pedagogic demands, the narrative employment of early Islam conforms to central tenets of the modern Sunnī Islamic movement. These are not just any exciting stories. The book series' preoccupation with sacred history signifies the principle of "returning to the sources," so central to thinkers of the Sunnī Islamic movement and here accommodated to the children's book format. The historical canon not only functions as an inspiration for individual piety and morals; it also serves as a blueprint for an ideal society. Indeed, as pointed out by Eric Hobsbawm (1983: 1–14), it is precisely in the face of rapid social change that societies tend to look to the (real or imagined) past for authoritarian symbols and models. The claim to represent and preserve values of the past becomes an efficient strategy for carving out a new entrepreneurial niche in the present, thus inherently subverting traditional concepts of religious pedagogy. For publishers such as the Islamic Foundation to normatively employ the paradigm of the Prophet's life and early Islamic history signifies a claim to present British Muslim children with "real" and "uncorrupted" Islam, all the while accommodating religious pedagogy to an entirely new, Euro-American format of children's literature.

Khurram Murad's *Love Your God* (1982b) illustrates the interwoven benefits of teaching doctrine and historical knowledge through narration. It relates the popular story of Muḥammad's dramatic journey from Mecca to Medina, together with Abū Bakr, the Prophet's closest companion and later the first Caliph of the Muslim community. As the story goes, the two refugees flee through the hills of al-Hira and hide in a cave. The Meccan persecutors manage to track them down only to find the entrance of the cave covered with an apparently ancient cobweb, and thus conclude that no one could have entered for ages. Inside the cave, Abū Bakr nervously hears the enemies approaching, but the Prophet reassures him:

"Why are you fearful, Abu Bakr?" he chided softly. "There are not just two of us, Allah himself is the third.' /.../ There was not the slightest sign of worry on the Blessed Prophet's face, so real and intense was his faith in Allah, in His presence, in His succour. He saw with certainty that Allah was there with him, even though no material or physical help was in sight. (ibid. :11)

The towering figures of the Prophet and the first Caliph of Islam are thus employed to illustrate central themes present already in *The Children's Book of Islam*: a defining characteristic of a true Muslim is to accept Islam as an active way of life and to rely on the omnipresence, power, and benevolence of God.

Abū Bakr and Muḥammad nevertheless do provide religious and moral standards in different ways. Abū Bakr incorporates the principles of friendship, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. He relentlessly protects the Prophet, scouts for enemies, and secures the cave before letting Muḥammad enter. The Prophet, on the other hand, remains

impeccable in his composure and elevated calm (*hilm*) and pious God-conscience (*taqwā*). His behavior actually demonstrates that Abū Bakr's efforts and worries were unfounded, however loyal and praiseworthy they may have been. Ultimately, the threat from the Meccans is devoid of substance and the danger is illusory, for God will keep His servants safe provided that they completely surrender to His protection.

In the stories published during the 1980s, it is first and foremost the Prophet himself who displays elevated pious composure in the face of (apparent) danger. Instructive as he may be as an illustration of the principle of *taqwā*, the Prophet remains an unattainable ideal, the embodiment of a supreme principle. The same holds true for a range of less dramatic stories, relating how the Prophet, "in the midst of his great task," devotes attention and care to children (Kayani 1981: 7). Here, he serves less as a model for personal identification and emulation for children, and more as an advocate for children's rights. Therefore, while the stories of the 1980s took the first steps towards a narrative address of the child in the formulation of religious principles, they also retained a strong authoritarian component in their depiction of early Islam.

As noted above, the Islamic Foundation has sought out an intermediary position between the Muslim community and the cultural demands of the encompassing non-Muslim majority society. At first, the children's books were solely preoccupied with early Islamic history. This should partly be understood as illustrating the importance devoted to sacred tradition. Perhaps even more importantly, however, this historical preoccupation underscores the challenges of contemporary minority Muslim existence. For organizations preoccupied with safeguarding Muslim faith for diasporic children and youth, depictions of sacred history has provided an initial, didactic safe haven. It is a very different challenge, however, to write psychologically convincing and socially relevant stories about contemporary young British-Muslim minority identity. This challenge brings to the fore a range of highly sensitive issues, such as the stakes of cultural inclusion in multicultural society, consumerism, gender relations, religious education, racism, Islamophobia, and ethnic tensions. It is indicative that the Islamic Foundation's first stories relevant to the lives of contemporary British Muslim immigrants (published in 1993 and 1994) tell the story of how the young protagonist Adam finds and consolidates his Muslim identity during his visits to *Egypt*, his parents' country of origin (Omar 1993, 1994). The reader is however not invited to follow how Adam applies his newly confirmed Muslim identity in the diasporic setting. In fact, it took the publisher 20 years to produce its first story about a contemporary Muslim child, actually set in Britain.

Since the late 1990s, however, contemporary issues have dominated in children's literature. This change marks a drastic rethinking of religious pedagogy and the very concept of Islamic children's literature, folding it into the preoccupation with formulating Muslim identity in a Euro-American multicultural setting. Leaving the safe haven of sacred tradition aids in cultural navigation and negotiation. The difficulties are apparently outweighed by the pedagogic gains, since the contemporary setting provides opportunities for the literary depiction of mundane, everyday characters, with whom Muslim reading children can identify.

From a stylistic point of view, the contemporary focus also allows for the books to strike an entirely different chord:

He stopped and raised his gun. At that moment, I felt the whole world fall on top of me. I thought of my Mum and Dad and my brother and sisters. I wanted to cry. Then I thought of God, Who had made me and Who had power over everything. I calmed down. It seemed like Flinn was moving in slow motion as he raised his gun towards Gary. Suddenly a thought came to me, *bismillah*. I picked up a small log that was beside me and flung it at Flinn. What if it missed Flinn? Would he shoot me first in his anger? *Al-hamdulillah* it hit him with full force on the head and he staggered backwards. "Run!" I shouted. (Radwan 2001: 67)

This is the dramatic climax of *Rashid and the Missing Body* (2001) by Hassan Radwan. Together with a Christian and a Jewish friend, 13-year-old Rashid exposes a murderous conspiracy but manages with cleverness and courage to bring the villain to justice. In several respects, this book is very similar to most detective stories for youngsters, but there are particularities that tie the story to an Islamic horizon, quite similar to the stories of the Prophet. Rashid's sudden composure and agency may be read as the direct effect of his thought of God as his creator. Here the text indirectly draws on the same theological notions of *taqwā*, pious God-consciousness, and *hilm*, the elevated calm resulting from confidence in God. There are several points in the story where Rashid (rather than his otherwise sympathetic Abrahamic compatriots) relies on his Islamic identity for practical guidance to solve the crime. In this sense, the theological framework is identical with the books discussed above. Rashid himself is a perfect example of a contemporary British youngster who "accepts Islam as a way of life" and who acts in accordance with the principles and injunctions explicated in *The Children's Book of Islam* as well as in the historico-soteriological epic about the Prophet cited above. Yet, in *Rashid and the Missing Body* such principles remain implicit in the narrative. Rather than pinpointing theological notions and imposing moral standards on the child, the religious pedagogy of *Rashid* confidently relies on the literary depiction of a young boy to illustrate the practical benefits of being a religiously active and morally aware Muslim today. It also relies on the intellectual and emphatic abilities of young Muslim readers to draw mature, moral conclusions.

All in all, the three literary examples above illustrate the main phases in the development of producing pedagogic material specifically guided to the needs of the diasporic Muslim minority existence. First, the literature set out in a format similar to a traditional monological and mimetic pedagogy of presenting the child with a fixed set of doctrine and ritual, as illustrated by the solemn injunctions of *The Children's Book of Islam*. During a second phase, the realization of the benefits of a literary, narrative address, designed to meet the demands of contemporary Muslim identity formulation among children, led to an inventory of sacred tradition. Apart from serving the purpose of conveying knowledge of an ideal Islamic society, the historical narratives functioned as a transfer zone towards the ultimate challenge of the third phase: depicting contemporary Euro-American Muslim existence for youngsters. The following sections will explore how this challenge has invited a rich narrative and graphic creativity in the re-imagination and diversification of Islamic children's literature, but also a lingering and delicate negotiation process of cultural and religious boundaries, norms and sensitivities.

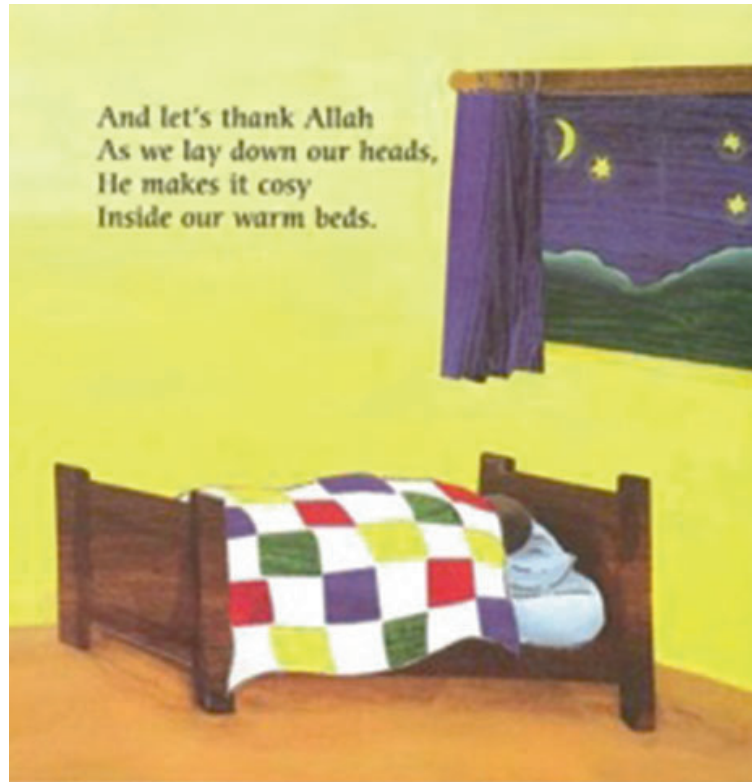
Islamizing Diasporic Space through Narration and Graphic Depiction

In the picture books produced from the mid-1990s, the narratives as well as images undergo a radical transformation. From this point, the books are filled to the brim with images of humans: pictures of adults and children, of males and females, Muslims and non-Muslims. Significantly, this coincides with a topical shift from sacred history to stories about contemporary British Muslims. Even so, public Britain remains strikingly absent in the stories published during the 1990s. And the few books that in any way touch upon public life tend to picture British institutions (such as schools and hospitals) and social relations with non-Muslims as problems and threats to Muslim identity. In contrast, the stories take refuge in the narrative and graphic staging of a number of Islamic spaces of virtue as a means of defense against social ills. The spaces of virtue consist of family ties, religious ritual, Islamic history and role models, God-created nature, the pious Muslim home, and the social space of Muslim peer relations.

The mundane depictions of school, of home and neighborhood gardens, of toys and desserts after dinner, and of the warm bed at night are all staged for the Muslim child as blessed by God's caring presence (Fig. 1). By implication, the images suggest the child's proper attitude of gratitude and piety in relation to everyday life. The effect is a sacralization of mundane space, through which everyday life becomes no less sacred than the act of praying, visiting the mosque, or reciting scripture. Graphically, this profoundly alters the entire scheme of composition. The religiousness of the earlier images was marked by a pious absence of human beings, reflecting traditional, Sunni-Islamic theological norms of representation (Janson 2012). In the recent books, children are not only depicted but exposed as the very centerpiece of the images, as individual agents in the center of the world, inviting active identification for the reading child. But they are all staged in the midst of virtuous acts, emotions, and rituals, as examples of Muslim children *Islamizing themselves*, incorporating a distinctly religious agency. The images, in short, have a distinct disciplinary effect, underscoring codes of proper religious attitude and behavior for the reading adult as well as child (Janson 2017).

Graphically, such virtuous spaces are commonly marked with references to sacred Islamic tradition. For instance, calligraphic panels sometimes decorate the walls of the domestic settings, such as the Arabic panels in the living room in *Maryam and the Trees*, reading "Allāh" (right) and "Muḥammad" (Fig. 2). To draw on Fischer and Abedi (1990), they function as "minor media," semiotically asserting an overarching meta-narrative about God's presence in the world. Quite literally they are signs, signaling "Islamic space." Or to draw on Nietzsche's reflections, they function as visual parables (*Gleichnisse*), as "names for good and evil: they do not speak out, they merely wave" (Nietzsche 1993 [1883]: 98, my translation). In this sense, the calligraphic panels may be analyzed as both playful and deeply relevant sacralizations of physical locus, inscribing religious meaning, familiarity, and purpose into an alien, secular landscape. They signal that the activities occurring here consist in "promoting the good and rejecting the evil" (*al-amr bi-al-ma'rūf wa al-*

Fig. 1 Divine presence and gratitude. Illustration by Asiya Clarke in *Thank You O Allah!* (Bint-Mahmood 2000) (Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation)



nahy ‘*an al-munkar*’), while decreasingly taking expressive recourse to such favorite formulas of Sunnī Islamic revivalism (Janson 2003). As such, the calligraphies balance the iconic depiction of living beings.

Yet, the panels are never referred to in the text, creating a dynamic *counterpoint* (Nikolajeva and Scott 2001), or in Nodelman’s (1988) terms, an *ironic relation* between the written and the graphic texts of the books; that is, words and image do not completely overlap but provide complementary narrative information. Why are there calligraphies on the wall? What do they mean? Without any explicit facts or leading questions inserted into the narrative, such calligraphies invite children to explore (and dialogue with the reading adult on) central religious tenets about God and His messenger: “What does Islam mean for me?” Having said so, it appears evident that such contrapuntal or ironic relations between written text and images remain rare in Islamic children’s literature. As a rule, images serve as illustrations to the written story and rarely contain co- or counter-narrative elements.

Several picture books relate tales of Muslim youngsters helping other Muslims (and sometimes non-Muslims), thus staging virtuous social spaces for Muslim peers – in implicit critique of inadequate social security provisions of modern, diasporic societies. In stories such as *A Caring Neighbour* (Bouroubi 1996), *A Gift of Friendship* (Imtiaz 1997), *The Muslim All-Stars: Helping the Polonskys* (Muhammad 2012), and *Captain Ali and the Stormy Sea* (Ali Gator 2013), Muslim protagonists fall back on their religious ethics to come to the assistance of (Muslim or non-Muslim) peers, neighbors, or school mates. Such stories set in the present sometimes also rely on historical paradigms. One example is *Umar and the Bully* (Mir 1998), where the young protagonist takes his namesake Caliph ‘Umar as his

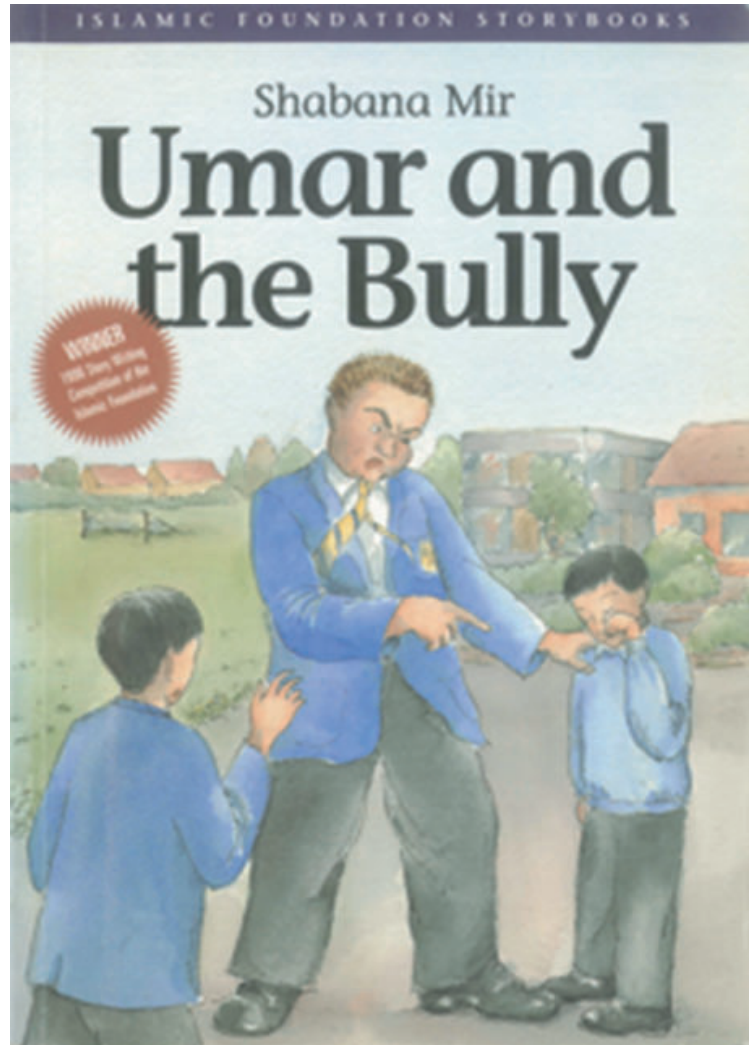
Fig. 2 Semiotic assertions of Islamic space. Illustration by Terry Norrige, in *Maryam and the Trees* (El-Magazy 2000) (Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation)



precedent, for daringly facing the local (non-Muslim) school bully in order to save a younger Muslim schoolmate (Fig. 3). This is a creative means of combining tales about sacred history and an activist understanding of religious identity, with a story dealing with the pressing British social issues of racism, community relations, and bullying. Muslim identity and proper Islamic conduct here are formulated in relation to problems, predicaments, risk: a sociocultural “wild” outside of Islamic virtues. Literary genres such as detective fiction and the “team spirit trope” of the sports story are also increasingly employed for such purposes, as in the detective books about Rashid (Radwan 2001, 2002) and Ibrahim Khan (Farheen Khan 2009, 2011a), or the football series *The Victory Boys* (Orme 2011, 2015).

The relevance of sacred history thus remains strong in Islamic children's literature, even when representing contemporary Muslim experience. Lately, picture books have sought out a variety of new ways of reinventing sacred past from the vantage point of the present, with increasing attention to attractive graphical designs, such as in Zanib Mian's recent *Migo and Ali: Love for the Prophets* (Muslim Children's Books). Here a young boy and his bear friend explore suspenseful Qur'ānic traditions about the long line of Islamic prophets, following up the stories with personal and humorous conversations between boy and bear (Mian 2016a). Another inventive narrative means to educate about Qur'ānic traditions takes everyday situations and dilemmas as a point of departure and resolves them with reference to Islamic role models. In *The People of the Cave* (2001), a father mildly and pedagogically admonishes his thoughtless sons by recourse to the popular Qur'ānic tale of the “Sleepers” (originally a Christian-Syrian tradition dating back to the second century). The story is illustrated with images of human beings, but all of the protagonists are pictured with faces turned away. Only one person's face is

Fig. 3 Historical precedence. Illustration by Asiya Clarke in *Umar and the Bully* (Mir 1998) (Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation)



depicted from the front (if blurred): the evil and Godless king of the legend, threatening the young faithful heroes of the tale (Fig. 4). While the piety of Muslims is represented by downplaying individual features and depicting them with modestly downcast gazes, the ignorance and arrogance of the evil king is graphically marked by his front-facing position, and the position of his arrogant gaze above the pious Muslims. One may note the similarity here with the depiction of the bully in *Umar and the Bully* (Fig. 3) discussed above. Pride and arrogance are distinctly pejorative terms in a Qur'ānic framework, used to describe the misguided, ungodly attitude of kings and pharaohs who resist the prophets of God.

Other “sacred pasts” are also reinvented for the means of educating religious norms. An interesting case in point is Fawzia Gilani’s Islamized adaptations of the European fairy tale canon. Largely faithful to the basic story lines of *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, an abundance of Islamized names, religious concepts, pious idiomatic phrases, and references to Islamic rituals tie the stories to an Islamic horizon (Gilani 2011, 2013). The function of such references is similar to the calligraphic panels discussed above: semiotic markers of Islamicity, but also pedagogic tools of religious learning and reflection. The books contain glossaries of Arabic terms and

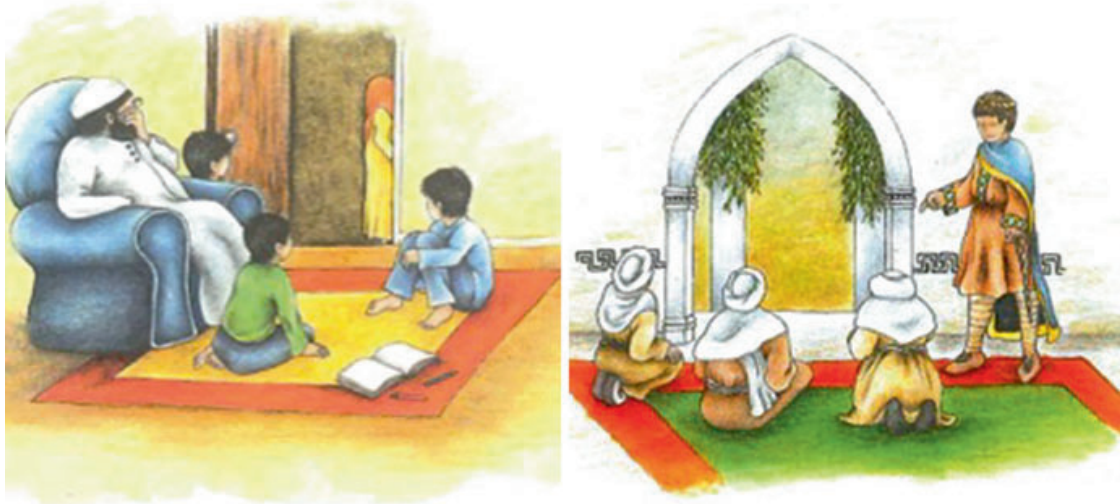


Fig. 4 Modesty versus arrogance. Illustrations by Terry Norrige, in Al-Albani's and Qalaji's *People of the Cave* (Al-Albani and Qalaji 2001) (Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation)

references to sacred texts. The moral character of the protagonists is indicated much in the same way as in the originals, underscoring their meekness and dutifulness. Adding to this, Islamic Cinderella and her parents everyday “would read the Qur’ān, and they never missed a prayer” and the images of *Cinderella* are set in medieval, Islamic Andalusia (Fig. 5).

As described by the author Fawzia Gilani, the Islamic adaptations originated from a pedagogical project in a Canadian preschool. As a professional educator, Gilani had noted the overwhelmingly Anglocentric orientation among the Muslim pupils, who never referred to their cultural and religious heritages in their schoolwork: “These children were not visible in their own writing” (Gilani-Williams and Bigger 2010). On closer scrutiny, however apart from the adaptation to new historico-cultural settings, the Islamized books also adjust certain aspects of the normative or ideological underpinnings of the originals. We see this in the staging of gender roles and how social spaces are informed by Islamic virtues, but also in the foundational ontologies of the tales. In *Snow White*, for instance, the protagonist lives with “seven dwarf sisters-in-faith” (Gilani 2013: 15). And Cinderella and her vicious sisters are not invited to any ball, but to celebrate the first day of ‘*Eid al-Adhā* in the king’s palace. Hence there is no dancing taking place, but the observance of religious rituals. Again, the Prince certainly notices Cinderella’s beauty but is equally impressed by her *taqwā* (piety). And instead of a fairy, Cinderella’s long lost Grandmother turns up and provides her “with a dress, a green *abayah* [cloak], a headscarf, and two glass slippers” (Gilani 2011: 24) (Fig. 5). Thus, the magic component of the story is replaced with religious observance and morality, leading to the eventual vindication of Cinderella as an effect of her Islamic virtues. The story is tied to a theistic worldview, blessed by God’s caring presence, but devoid of magic.

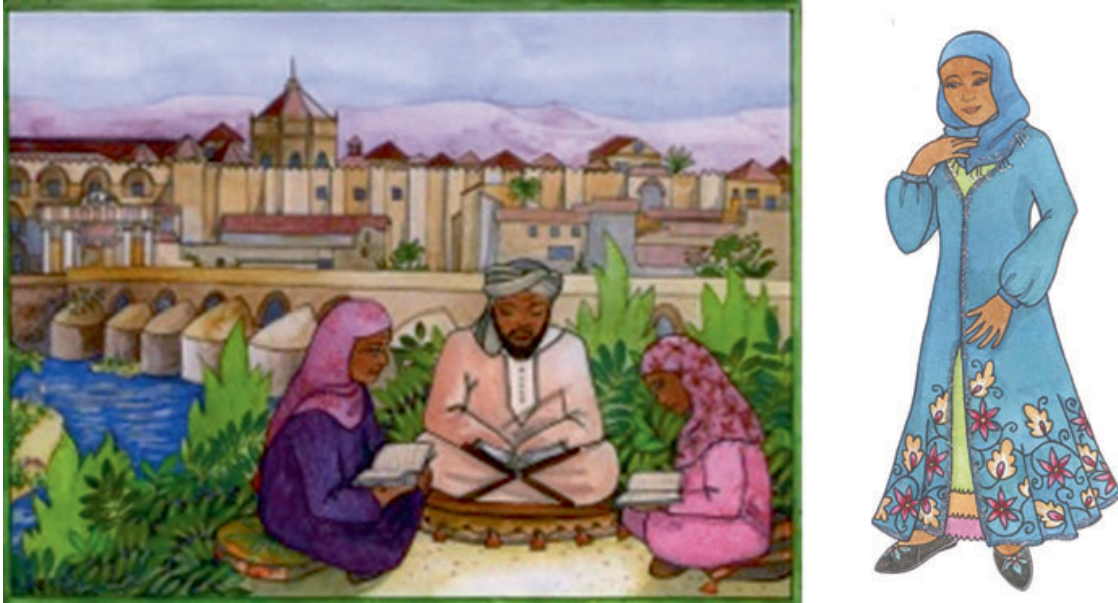


Fig. 5 Islamizing the Grimm Brothers. Illustrations by Shireen Adams in *Cinderella an Islamic Tale* (Gilani 2011) (Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation)

The perhaps most notable example of the recent employment of fantastic or fairy tale literary formats is the comic series *The 99*, published by the Kuwaiti media company Teshkeel Media Group (TMG) from 2006, deeply inspired by the narrative and graphic profile of Marvel Comics (Fig. 6). This is an intriguing example of the current blurring of religious and secular borders in innovative literary-cum-educational products, primarily but not solely targeting a young Muslim audience. Clearly, the comic draws on Islamic motives, in reference to *al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā* (the 99 names of Allāh). Yet the storyline of the series keeps aloft of distinct and exclusive religious norms, aspiring to formulate universal ethical mores. The comic became an immediate success and attracted global media attention, but has also incurred critique and been banned as blasphemous by religious authorities in Saudi Arabia (for detailed analysis, see Deeb 2012).

The narrative of *The 99* takes the Mongol sacking of Baghdad in 1258 as its point of departure, when the literary treasure of the library was tossed into the Tigris. Through alchemy, however, the wise of the city were able to save the essence of the caliphate's wisdom in 99 gems, the Noor stones, "crafted to absorb the very light of reason, the very depths of a culture's collective soul" (Al-Muwata et al. 2006). The power of the stones is eventually transferred to 99 young, contemporary heroes from all corners of the world, powers that are employed in face of current problems, conflicts, and disasters. Notably, however, superpowers and violence alone is never enough to solve the problems. The main theme of *The 99* is teamwork, and the heroes of Jabbar the Powerful, Noorah the Light, or Hadya the Guide are not idealized as any morally perfect role models but are depicted as regular young individuals with complex personal histories, human flaws, and weaknesses. Neither are all of them Muslim: The 99 heroes comprise a worldwide network of young, human responsibility and activism, held together by universal ethics, compassion,



Fig. 6 The 99: Islamic superheroes incorporating global ethics. Illustration by June Brigman, Roy Richardson and Monica Kubina. Image courtesy of Teshkeel Media Group

and team spirit. Noteworthy is also the variety of clothing codes among the Muslim heroines. Whether unveiled, clad in hijab or burqa, all underscore the idea that “what people wear is not important. What is important is how they behave and how they treat others” (Deeb 2012: 406).

We find something of a combined version of the Islamized Cinderella and *The 99* in the *Princess* series produced by the Australian publisher Ali Gator. Designed for a young audience (recommended for 0–5 year olds), and graphically inspired by Disney rather than Marvel Comics, this series of eight picture books are presented as “inspired by the *al-Asmā’ al-Ḥusnā*, the 99 names of Allāh.” In each book, a princess heroine resolves a worldly challenge and succeeds through relying on the moral and religious virtue associated with her name – each referring to one God’s 99 attributes. Thus, Princess Karima (The Generous) hastens to a remote corner of her kingdom to rescue her people from an earthquake (Ali Gator 2014a). Princess Shahida (The Witness) witnesses how evil horsemen raid the local market place and mobilizes in force of her name the courage to face the villains, embodying the Islamic principle of *ḥiṣbah* (accountability/verification), the protection of public moral (Ali Gator 2014b). From a gender analytical point of view, the series comes across as ambiguous. On the one hand, the divine principles empower the heroines’ public, moral agency, thus breaking the pattern in most Islamic children’s literature where girls are depicted as emotional rather than active or courageous (Janson 2003). Then again, visually the books display all the characters of a glossy, stereotypical “princess-aesthetics,” with over dimensioned eyes, flashing eyelashes, and rosy cheeks (Fig. 7). The images tend to centerpiece the princesses’ physical attributes more than their worldly agency. This is only further underscored by the marketing

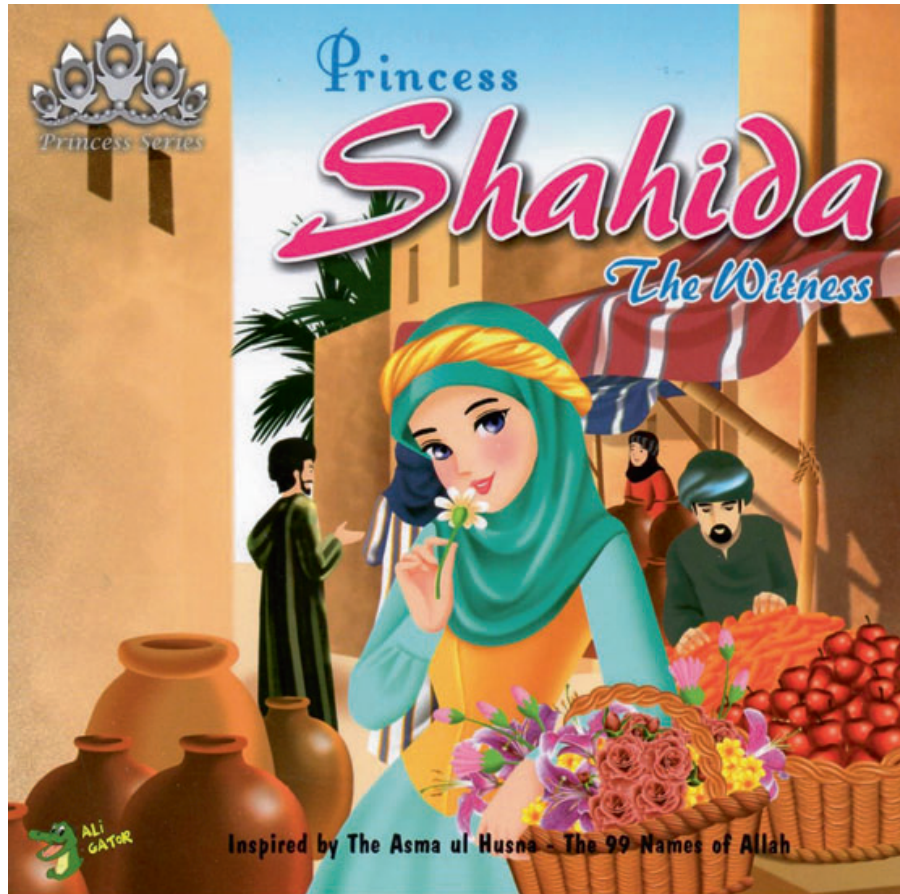


Fig. 7 Female social agency? Picture courtesy of Ali Gator

strategy of the publisher, where the books are marketed with plastic, silver-colored prayer beads and entirely pink “Princess” party merchandise.

Despite the increasing interest for fantastic or fairy tale literary staging, the bulk of recent Islamic fiction for children remains set in domestic space and in nature. The home is staged and depicted as a primarily feminine sphere, revolving around the catering, mild, and deeply pious Mother. Female characters are pictured with headscarves even when at home (Fig. 8). Adult male characters are almost completely absent in domestic space. And when fathers, male school teachers, or other adult male characters occasionally enter the scene, they do so by exercising justice or by teaching sacred tradition (as in *The People of the Cave*). Individual piety and ritual observance stand in the center, but it should be underscored that it is the *domestic* setting that is presented as the primary stage for learning and enacting religious virtues – not the mosque. The Muslim child matures into an active, aware Islamic child through the disciplines of mundane, everyday life.

As mentioned, socio-conservative and stratified paradigms remain prevalent in the staging of gender norms in most Islamic children’s literature. Returning once again to the detective story *Rashid and the Missing Body*, this book mainly revolves around the friendship of Rashid and two non-Muslim boys, Christian Chris and Jewish Gary. The problem at hand is entirely external: one missing body. However, a

Fig. 8 Pious Mum.
Illustration by Rukiah
Peckham, in *My mum Is a
Wonder* (Messaoudi 1999)
(Image courtesy of Kube
Publishing and The Islamic
Foundation)



secondary narrative in *Rashid and the Missing Body* revolves around problems in the domestic sphere. Rashid's rebellious older sister, Nur, disagrees with their father on Islamic dress codes. Rashid is depicted as active, rational, and heroic, moving up and down the town until he ultimately solves the crime. In contrast, his sister is exclusively depicted in the domestic environment, screaming, raging, and ultimately failing to come up with a functional negotiation of her Muslim and British self. Indeed, her father is depicted as equally incompetent, incapable of making the (favorite revivalist) distinction between "Islam" and "culture" and clinging to a "traditionally Pakistani" idea of proper dress code. In the concluding pages of the book, it is little brother Rashid who manages to solve this conflict:

"And you, Nur," I interrupted, "you are right when you say this country is your home, but that doesn't mean you have to reject everything about our parents' culture, now does it? Surely it would be better to take the good from both cultures and come up with a sensible balance." Nur and Dad stared at me in shocked silence. Finally, Nur spoke up. "Since when did you become the voice of reason?" she said. I just smiled. (Radwan 2001: 80)

These are the final words of the book. We have not been told anything about the boyish triumph of catching the crook. Rashid neither receives nor seeks any recognition for solving the mystery at hand. Instead, his moment of triumph arrives here, in the living room, in relation to his sister and father. The adventurous experiences pay off in the form of (adult enough) abilities of intercultural negotiation. The secondary narrative thus channels the cultural negotiation at play and connects it with the central narrative. An originally playful, boyish adventure has been converted into a moral tale of a maturing male British-Muslim identity. The driving

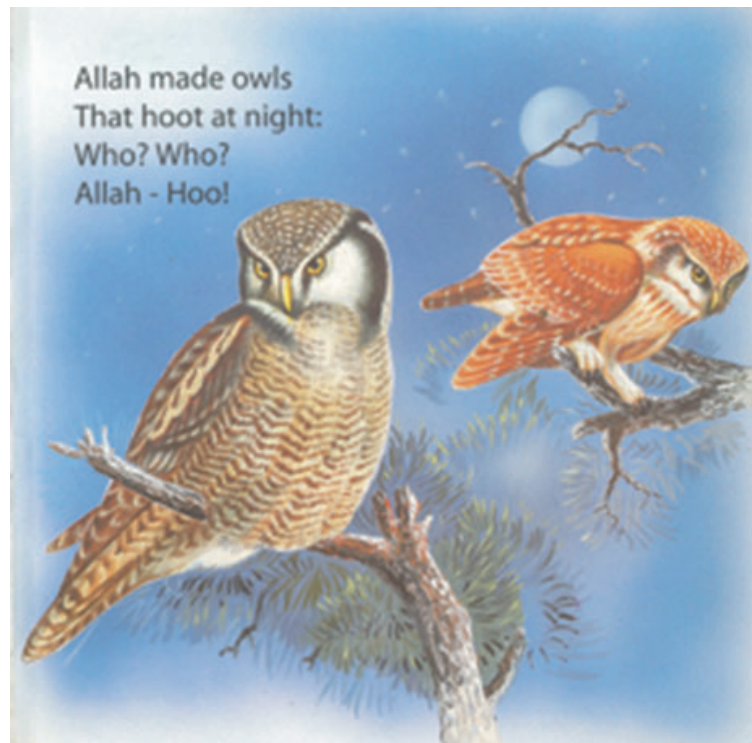
force in this process of conversion is, not surprisingly, Islam itself. From a gender perspective, the pattern is obvious enough: the female of the domestic sphere *incorporates* the problem. The male remains committed to worldly agency but occasionally enters the domestic sphere in order to settle any dispute with logical thought based on sound Islamic principles (Janson 2003).

But also in this field there are tendencies towards more nuanced depictions of female piety-cum-agency. In Michelle Khan's *The Hijab Boutique* (2011b), female protagonist Farah despairs on how to match her schoolmates' presentations of their glamorous mothers in the school assignment for International Women's Day. Through the assignment work, she however comes to realize her mother's skill as an independent business woman. The story thus semiotically remains within a pietistic and disciplinary motive of proper dress codes but expands the denotative scope from the domestic space to a semi-public sphere of Islamic entrepreneurship and retail.

Nature (created by God) is another recurring didactic stage for the narrative and graphic representation of Islamic virtue. The images of living creatures underscore divine presence in the world. The central idea of God as the creator for all life thus is upheld in the books on nature, but with inventive narrative and graphic means. Instead of imbuing the depiction of nature with normative constraints, naturalistic depiction is converted into a celebration of God's creative powers – interconnected to religious pedagogics. Protagonists explore nature in search of both scientific and religious knowledge, thus blurring the border between religious and scientific studies. Or, rather, implying that scientific, natural knowledge is in complete harmony with, and ultimately is subordinate to, Islam. One example is El-Magazy's *Maryam and the Trees* (2000), where the protagonist is educated by her grandfather about how nature testifies to the glory of God, through a combination of religious principles conveyed by examples from the life of the Prophet, TV science programs, and Maryam's own, active research when exploring the house for "things made of trees" (see Fig. 2 above). Other books employ similar narrative techniques. In *A Day with the Dinosaurs* (1998) published by Seerah Foundation, a fossil find inspires two children to explore God's creation (Shamsi 1998). Also fable like formats are employed. In Kube Publishing's seven books of the *Hilmo the Hippo* series (2002–2007), the savannah becomes the stage of universal, Islamic values (Norridge 2002, 2003a, b, 2004a, b, 2005, 2007), and in *Aisha Goes in Search for Colour* (Dhar 2008) the creationist worldview is explored from a caterpillar girl's perspective.

Creationism also underpins picture books for the very youngest. Farah Sardar's *Animals* (1997) introduces an assortment of animal species in lovely, naturalistic images. The only difference to non-Islamic picture books is the narrative, creationist prefix added to each picture: "Allah made squirrels" and "Allah made elephants," etc. In the final image of the book, two owls are depicted not only as examples of God's creation (Fig. 9). They also carry a specific message to the child, a message that is part of their very nature, implied in the hooting itself: *Allah-Hoo*. In Islamic mystic traditional and rituals of Sufism, *Allāh-hū* (literally meaning "God is") is used as a repetitive formula in meditative chants (*dhikr*), meant to incur a heightened

Fig. 9 Testifying owls.
Illustration by Vinay
Ahluwalia, in *Animals* (Sardar
1997) (Image courtesy of
Kube Publishing and The
Islamic Foundation)



awareness of God's existence, not least in the South Asian *qawwālī* musical meditations. In this sense, the depicted owls are essentially no representations or replicas of nature, for God is the sole creator of nature, the only *muṣawwir*, the shaper of life. This is an image of the glory and benevolence of God itself, and, by implication, an image of the child and its role as a *khalīfah*, the dutiful caretaker of God's creation. The picture book thus inherently interconnects theological teachings about God and nature with a disciplinary message to the child: As a Muslim, you inhabit a glorious and beautiful world created by God but also the virtuous social space of Islam. Accepting an affirmative, Islamic identity implies taking the witnessing owls as your example. Through virtuous conduct you fulfill your duty as a caretaker – for nature, family, and friends.

An Islamic Diction for Everyday Life

As illustrated above, publishers of Islamic children's literature increasingly have taken recourse to fiction and a narrative and graphically updated format for Islamic education. This does however not imply that nonfictional literature has been abandoned as a pedagogical tool. To the contrary, a visit to any Islamic online book retailer illustrates the prominence of nonfiction intended to educate young people about Islamic doctrine, ritual, history, and ethics (*akhlāq*). Such books employing a more formal educational address of the child do however also testify to interesting literary developments in the staging of virtue in Islamic pedagogy and didactics. A recurrent tendency is the disciplinary ambition to formulate life ethical principles

based on Islamic creed, going beyond rote learning and ritualized religious behavior associated with traditional Islamic education.

Apart from early textbooks such as the previously discussed *The Children's Book of Islam* (Ahsan 1979) or Ahmad von Denffer's *Islam for Children* (1981), both of which describe Islamic faith and principles through factual (if normative) diction, other books employ innovative means of educating children in central religious tenants and moral conduct. A recent publication is *30 Hadith for Children* (Mian 2016b), introducing the moral precedent of the Prophet in simple texts and vivid imagery for 5–7-year-olds.

Another innovative literary format introduces *ad'īyah* (prayers, sing. *du'ā*) for daily use, both idiomatic formulas such as the greeting phrase *al-salāmu 'alaykum* and more complex prayer formulas. Noorah Kathry Abdullah's *What Do We Say... (A Guide to Islamic Manners)* (2000 [1996]: 4, 6) poses on each page a question, answered with an appropriate *du'ā*, to the following effect: "What do we say when we begin something? We say Bismillah (Bism-i-llah)"; or "What do we say when we finish eating? We say Al-Hamdulliah (Al-Ham-du-lil-lah)." Simple graphical elements indicate the depicted children's Muslimness: all the boys wear caps; all the girls wear *hijāb* and sometimes Islamic calligraphies decorate the walls. Otherwise the sceneries are mundane, quotidian, and neutral: a kitchen, a bus stop, a boy playing with Lego at a table. Notably, the text refrains from presenting the literal meaning or the theological implications of the *ad'īyah*. This renders the narrative an airy and swift character. Then again, the foreword declares the intention not only to teach children suitable expressions but "to instil into their mind and heart the Islamic worldview, the Islamic value system, and above all, the consciousness that whatever they think or do, they should be guided all along by the Islamic teachings" (ibid.: 2). Thus, despite the narrative's absence of theological explanations, the book carries expressive educational, if pedagogically mimetic, purposes. It is concerned with *what* to say and *when* to say it, leaving any reflections on what the *ad'īyah* actually can be taken to mean to the curiosity of the child or the explanation of the reading adult.

The sequel, *What Should We Say? A Selection of Prayers for Daily Use* (Kidwai and D'Oyen 2002 [1999]) targets an older reader and explicates the meaning of each *du'ā*. It is more adult both in tone, content and in design. Instead of referential illustrations, the book is beautifully decorated with innovatively designed mosaics and arabesques. The aquarelles make the edges of the patterns somewhat uneven yet symmetrical, and the surface of each mosaic element is slightly diffuse. The result is a living, luminous texture, which simultaneously is "modern" in inventiveness and "traditional" in reference (Fig. 10). The book offers *ad'īyah* for a number of situations, both ritual and mundane ones: what should we say when we start ritual ablution (*wudhū*'), when we go to the toilet, when we get dressed, when we get sick, etc. In this sense, the book functions as a manual for prayer for the young, but also, given its beautiful design and decorations, as a ritual object as such, for use in religious contemplation and active prayer.

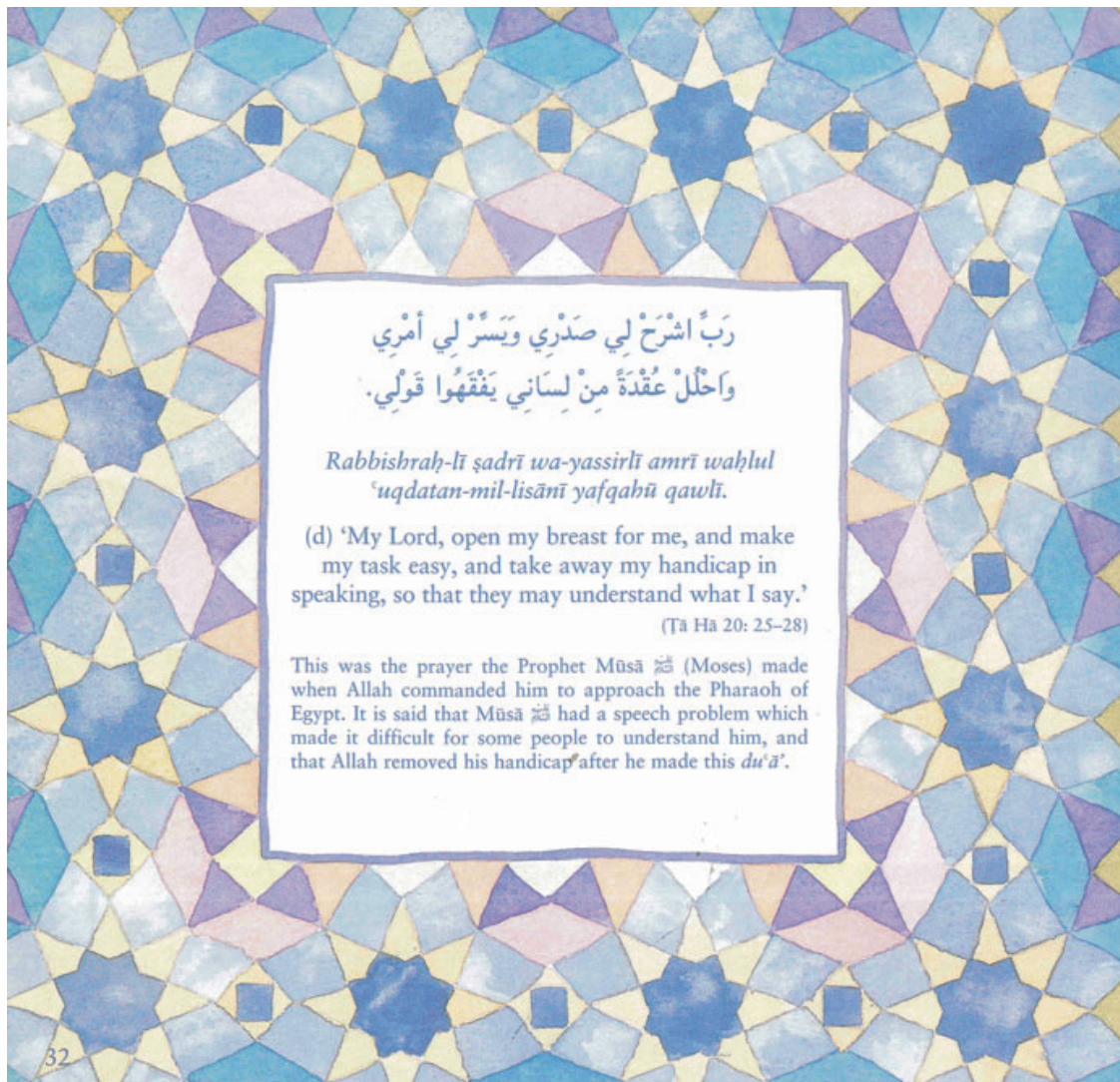


Fig. 10 Innovating arabesque. Illustration by Stevan Straford in *What Should We Say? A Selection of Prayers for Daily Use* (Kidwai and D'Oyen 2002 [1999]) (Image courtesy of Islamic Foundation and Kube Publishing)

Qur'ānic Revelation Made Relevant for Children

As illustrated earlier, there are several examples of how children's literature has sought out innovative formats for narrating Qur'ānic traditions. But how can the Qur'ānic text itself be presented in a pedagogically adjusted form for a young diasporic audience? Producing English translations of the Qur'ān was a primary purpose of many Euro-American organizations such as the Islamic Foundation from the 1970s. In 1993, this priority intersected with the publication of children's literature, resulting in the publication of *The Qur'an in Plain English. Part 30 with Surah al-Fatihah*. This is an English translation specifically designed for children of the last 37 of the 114 *sūrah*s of the Qur'ān, plus the opening *sūrah* (*al-Fātiḥah*). The "Part 30" of the subtitle refers to the way the Qur'ān is edited. After

the opening *surah al-Fātiḥah*, the chapters are (roughly) edited according to length in falling order. Normally, Muslim children learn *al-Fātiḥah* first, being a mandatory part of *ṣalāt*. After this, they learn the shorter *sūrah*s towards the end of the scripture. Those *sūrah*s thus compose the book at hand. So far, no other parts have been produced, and it seems unlikely that the Qur’ān will be published in its entirety in any children’s version. The introduction declares that the book aspires to provide “a simple, fluent translation of the meaning of the Qur’ān in contemporary English,” allowing “the young readers to grasp fully what they recite and remember” (Torres al-Haneef 1999 [1993]: 7, 8).

Hence, the author formulates an implicit critique of a traditional pedagogic of mimetic recitation in much Islamic education. According to the author, available Qur’ān translations are “written in formal ‘Shakespearian’ English which not many young people today understand, with a vocabulary which can even be unclear to many adults” (ibid.: 9). The author thus implicates that everyone should have access the Revelation. The Qur’ān must be *comprehensible*, not only translated correctly. Accordingly, generous notes explain difficult words and ambiguities, with reference to the views of established Islamic scholars. In addition, the author introduces the context, basic motives, and topics of each *sūrah* in one to three pages, thus providing a rudimentary, child-adapted, yet unmistakable *tafsīr* (interpretation). For instance, when the author introduces *al-Nab’a* (Sūrah LXXVIII, translated as “The Awesome News”), the author explains that the Meccans refusing Islamic conversion had reacted against the notion of resurrection, and therefore this *sūrah* ensures God’s omnipotence and purpose. Here the author becomes a mediator, conveying the (alleged) meaning of the text, and by extension, of life itself:

Look around you! See the earth with its firm mountains, grain, vegetables, and plentiful rain, the heavens above and the blazing sun, the changing of night and day which allows us to work in light and rest in dark. Is it possible in a world in which everything has been made so perfectly, with so much care, that the whole purpose of life is simply to eat, drink, sleep, work, marry, grow old and die? No. This life is rather a test; those who pass it will be richly rewarded, and those who fail will regret it bitterly. (ibid.: 21)

Islam is intended for humankind. Islam contains nothing strange or alien, neither excessive nor disproportional. The notion of *dīn al-fiṭrah*, Islam as “the natural religion for humankind,” is prominent. Interconnected with this is the notion of the Qur’ān’s relevance and immediate applicability for contemporary issues. When Sūrah LXXXI (al-Takwīr) condemns the murder of baby girls, the author interconnects this with the issue of abortion (ibid.: 52). Similarly, God’s omnipotence and eschatological purpose becomes a critique of mundane, secular values: the reverence of money, strength, power, and beauty. Such comments serve to hermeneutically familiarize the child with a reflection of the *meaning* of the Qur’ān, rather than stressing its sacredness as a mere object of veneration. The Qur’ān essentially provides an education for life.

Navigating Diasporic Adolescence: Multiculturalism and Sex Education

Such moral, applied components in the commentary of the Qur'ānic text are the immediate topic for books on Islamic ethics for the young, specifically addressing questions about how to lead life in diasporic communities. As previously noted, the challenges of multicultural society have been an important mechanism behind the very genre of Islamic children's literature. However, such challenges not only present organizations rethinking educational methodologies with problems but also with opportunities. Innovative organizations may also be thought of in entrepreneurial terms, as producers of religion for fastidious, independent, and flexible Muslim consumers (Luckmann 1974; Turner 1991). Religious products must be designed and marketed in compliance with the demands of contemporary markets and models: it is both a strategy for survival and a factor of success (Rubinstein 1998). Active and entrepreneurial rethinking of Islamic transmission of norms thus find a specific niche precisely as an effect of marginality, and groups inclined to move beyond traditional sectarianism also conceive of the emerging religious market as "liberating, empowering and creative," as pointed out by Gregory Starrett (2003). The consumption of new religious commodities serves important functions in late modern Muslim community formation and the imagination of Islamic identity. Just as importantly, however, Muslim identity is also formed through the consumption of *non-Islamic* products, which are incorporated into an Islamic superstructure (ibid.).

As illustrated above, publishers of Islamic children's literature have built their vision of Islamic pedagogics from the vantage point of diasporic society, in active affirmation of its sociocultural and political bedrock. Following thinkers such as Tariq Ramadan (1999), they reject isolationism and apologetics, while relating to diasporic experience as an opportunity for formulating an updated and contemporary interpretation of Islam. This in no way means abandoning core Islamic principles, but opens for a continual cultural negotiation process. But what are the limits of such negotiations, and how far may new interpretations go? Some answers are found in the literature attempting to formulate and literary stage Islamic norms specifically for a diasporic, Muslim adolescence.

In *The American Muslim Teenager's Handbook* (2007), coauthored by Dilara Hafiz and her two children Imran and Yasmine, the authors apply a direct, personal address of their readers, raising a long list of situations and problems one may encounter as a Muslim teenager in the contemporary United States. It provides reflections and solutions in a candid and sometimes humorous way, with ironizing references to prevalent stereotypes about Islam in the United States. Its approach to "Western vs. Muslim culture" may be illustrated with the list of "Muslim food": pizza and hamburgers, shwarmas/gyros, rice and curry, Chinese food, Italian food (Hafiz et al. 2007: 104). In short, the book maintains, there are no "cultural" constraints for what constitutes Islamic tenets or a Muslim way of life. This said, certain Islamic principles remain nonnegotiable, such as *ḥalāl* food provisions and abstaining from alcohol and premarital sex. Such principles are however not solely justified with reference to Islamic rules but are staged as a remedy to social ills such

as drug abuse, alcoholism, and teenage pregnancy. Overall, however, the manual imparts, Islamic faith as such never provides any obstacle for immersing in current American society. To the contrary, again implicitly drawing on the idea of *dīn al-ḥiṭrah*, Islam facilitates life, assists the young with moral standards for navigating the complexities of multicultural society, and provides a solid foundation for life.

Sexuality remains a taboo in Middle Eastern education as well as a trope in Arabic children's literature (Mdallel 2004). And in diasporic communities, sex education has commonly been perceived as deeply problematical, sometimes considered to encourage premarital sexual relations and generally in conflict with norms of decency and modesty (see further chapter "► [Islam, Sexualities and Education](#)" in this volume). All the more notable is Fatima D'Oyen's, *The Miracle of Life: A Guide on Islamic Family Life and Sex Education* (2000). Reflecting such taboos, the author goes at length to justify the book in the foreword. She does so in reference to new communication technology and diasporic Muslim children's exposure to secular education "where discussions of condoms and AIDS are part of the curriculum." Moreover, in everyday life, young Muslims witness "explicit commercials and billboards" as well as "teenagers who fondle each other in the streets and people who use profanity in almost every sentence" (D'Oyen 2000: 2). Parents have no prospects of protecting children from such exposure and "threats of hell or punishment may have little effect." Rather, the author maintains, children growing up in "liberal" societies need basic and correct information about sexuality and reproduction, in order to be able to handle the environment.

The book is divided in two sections: "The Life Cycle" and "Growing Up." In the first part, the book sets out from a cosmological perspective. The question of the section "How it all began" is answered with an account of Qur'ānic ideas on God's creation of the world. Already here we see an attempt of negotiating Qur'ānic ideas with scientific observations or perspectives. The book emulates an air of documentary and facticity, while simultaneously providing a normative, creationist critique. Despite being presented in books and on TV as a fact, the theory of evolution "was made up by scientists, most of whom do not believe in Allah." Contrary to this, "a Muslim is certain of the Qur'ān," while keeping an open mind about other ideas, for "Islam is not against science," according to the author (ibid.: 18).

From this cosmological perspective the author discusses biological reproduction. D'Oyen sets out with an emotionally detached and frank description of the reproduction of animals. When it comes to human reproduction, the frankness prevails in the depiction of the *physical* aspects of sex, without shunning descriptions of sexual arousal, erection, or intercourse. The author argues that sexual lust is a God-given pleasure and, as such, *ḥalāl*. The normative, pejorative component is rather found in the perspective and framework, putting human sexuality in a normative, social framework. The narrative means are sometimes subtle: "When a young men and woman are ready for the responsibilities of family life they look for a suitable marriage partner" (ibid.: 22). The pejorative perspectives are elaborated in the discussion of adolescence, gender relations, and sexual maturity. Friendship is depicted in terms of "meaningfulness" and an ideal of "healthy, clean fun" (ibid.: 54), while discarding "falling in love" as an overestimated liberal myth. Just as in the

Teenager's Handbook, the references go beyond religious injunctions. Thus, premarital sexual relations are described as “forbidden by Islam (and many other religions) because of the terrible social problems it creates” (ibid.: 66). Premarital pregnancy is described as a “disaster for her and her child, and a disgrace for her family.” And as an argument against premarital sexual relations, the author resorts to drastic analogies: “Which would you rather have: /. . . / Your own ice cream cone or an ice-cream that a stranger has already licked? A present which has been beautifully gift-wrapped, or a present already out to the package” (ibid.: 67). Family honor, venereal diseases (“Allāh’s punishment”), and the risks of receiving “harsh punishment” based on the *sharī’ah* are presented as other arguments for refraining from premarital sexual relations.

All in all, *The Miracle of Life* indeed is innovatively challenging taboos in its very recognition of young sexuality, yet remains deeply socio-conservative in its elaboration of adolescent ethics. While we see examples of a culturally inclusive stance in recent Islamic literature with regard to topics such as food and clothing, as illustrated with the *Teenagers Handbook*, alcohol consumption, nonheterosexual and otherwise “illegitimate” young romance and sexuality so far remain taboo in nonfictional Islamic educational resources.

Conclusion: Beyond Islamic Children's Literature

As pointed out in much literary theory, a defining quality of all children's literature, whether secular or confessional, is its dual literary-pedagogic nature. It is meaningless to separate its literary and pedagogic elements (Nodelman 1988, 2000). In this sense, children's literature provides “a specific semiosphere, or system of signs, which is heavily stratified and emerges and develops in interaction with mainstream literature” (Nikolajeva 1996: 7). Children's literature has always reflected the cultural history of *adults* (Rhedin 1992: 21 f.). And as elaborated by Karimi and Gruber (2012: 290), discussing the image of the child in the Middle East, the study of children's culture is “fundamental in enhancing our understanding of the implicit and explicit meanings of not only the condition of childhood but also the way in which power structures operate /. . . /.” However, children's literature cannot be understood only in terms of a passive reflection of political, religious, or sociocultural values, but should be thought of as “one of the central means through which we regulate our relationship to language and images as such,” to quote Jaqueline Rose's (1984: 138f.) analysis of *Peter Pan*.

In line with this, rather than understanding the examples discussed in this chapter as mere adaptations of new literary formats for the purposes of religious education, Islamic children's literature provides an important mode for cultural negotiation in and of itself. Taken as a whole, this literature ambiguously balances between a defensive-exclusive and offensive-inclusive cultural stance.

On the one hand, the literature is employed as a defense of religious and moral principles in a sociocultural context defined as threatening and subversive. This is highlighted in the literature's recurrent preoccupation with Islamic creed and ritual;

the semiotic references to Islamic particularism through clothing codes, greeting phrases, and calligraphy; the topical preoccupation with individual moral, civic duty and modesty; the references to Islamic sacrosanct history; and the narrative contextualization of the stories in gendered, domestic space or the sphere of divinely created nature. And just as observed in normative Christian children's literature from the first part of the twentieth century (Toijer-Nilsson 1976), Islamic children's literature often depicts young Muslims as idealized precedents, of higher moral stature than adults. Another tendency is the depiction of Muslims as victims of various types of social or cultural ills, in face of which Islam is mobilized as a safety mechanism, whether in detective stories, moral tales of virtuous social agency, or nonfiction about proper ethics. In all these aspects, Islamic children's literature produced in response to diasporic needs and concerns essentially reproduces literary patterns in the Arab and/or Muslim world at large.

Precisely such tendencies are however increasingly called into question in internal Muslim debates about children's literature. In a piece on the market of Islamic children's books, the Islamic-feminist blogger "wood turtle" strongly objects to the traditional gender roles, the general preachiness, and the (most often archaic) Arabian setting of the bulk of this literature:

Books intending to teach 5 years olds how to make ritual ablutions before prayer, or encouraging them to fast, were littered with secondary dialogue on how to be a "good Muslim" or having characters shouting, "I love being a Muslim!" from the rooftops. I bristled each time. (Wood Turtle 2013)

The blogger calls for another kind of literature, depicting Muslim identity and Islamic principles connecting to actual, lived Muslim experience, without the explicitly normative components defining much of the Islamic children's literature so far produced. She commends how newer books such as Na'ima bint Roberts' *The Swirling Hijaab* (2002) avoid gendered stereotypes in depicting, for instance, its protagonist as a "warrior princess." This blogger voices concerns she shares with many religiously active Muslim debaters today, who insist that traditional gender roles are not part of Islam. Islam, in terms of institutions and social values, is always in a process of change, and the interpretation of the Qur'ān must be adjusted to the ideals and politics of equal rights and opportunities for men and women (Ahmed 1992; Badran 2002).

Indeed, Islamic children's literature is currently set in a rapid process of development, reflecting the attitudes of a new generation of Muslim authors in Europe and North America. Apart from gender aspects, this new generation underscores the necessity of formulating Muslim identity and Islamic tenets from the *point of departure* of diasporic existence and experience. Indeed, in several respects, diasporic Islamic children's literature produced for means of informal, supplementary religious education provides an internal, religious critique in and of itself. The very format calls into question not only non-Muslim, secular norms and practices. It also subverts (or complements) traditional forms of Islamic education and rote learning practices, in favor of a religious didactics through which Islamic creed and practice is

highlighted as a practical and rational matrix for life. The sacred scripture of the Qur'ān, the normative canon of *ḥadīth* literature, as well as *du'ā* prayer formulas are represented through innovative, hermeneutical formats, underscoring reflection and practical implementation. Increasingly, core religious principles and virtues are staged through vivid narrative as well as graphic representation, and in inclusive appropriation of popular Euro-American literary formats such as the detective story, the world of sports, the comic book, the fable, and the fairy tale.

Such appropriations go beyond formal, instrumental adaptation. The innovative formats also invite culturally inclusive depictions of diasporic existence. In recent Islamic children's literature, the non-Muslim, secular, multicultural setting is decreasingly portrayed as a threat in face of which a predefined notion of Islamic faith is mobilized as a rigid, monolithic safety mechanism. Increasingly, Islamic literature confidently represents diasporic space in an open and vulnerable exploration of what Muslim identity and Islamic faith may come to mean for a young mind.

In the process, in recent production the borders become less and less distinct between the Islamic children's literature and books representing the lives of young Muslims with less explicit religious purposes, very much in line with wood turtle's critique cited above. A recent example is Kube Publisher's romance story *She Wore Red Trainers* (2014), authored by Na'ima bint Robert (who also wrote *The Swirling Hijaab*, praised by the blogger). This teenagers' novel about the love of Amirah and Ali has won considerable praise for its innovative exploration of young love in relation to religious identity and complex family relations – and is promoted by *The Guardian* (2014). Somewhat ironically, such successful blurring of borders renders the notion of Islamic children's literature increasingly problematical, both as a distinct brand of Islamic entrepreneurship and as an academic, analytical category. Then again, this may also be thought of as the literary-cum-pedagogical coming of age of Islamic children's literature. The literary staging of young Muslim diasporic experience in less ideologically constrained artistic explorations promises to bring out the full potential of the genre as a resource of informal Islamic education.

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