Pleasures of Islamic children’s literature?
Knowledge and representation in British-Muslim picture books

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“If children’s fiction builds an image of the child inside the book, it does so in order to secure the child who is outside the book, the one who does not come so easily within its grasp.” (Rose 1984/1993: 2) The well-known words of Jacquline Rose serve as a point of departure for Perry Nodelman’s 1992 article “The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism and Children’s Literature”. Here Nodelman discusses the ways in which children’s literature subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) exercises disciplinary power in relation to the children assumed to be its subjects and consumers (Nodelman 1992: 32). A core mechanism of children’s literature is claiming and representing knowledge of what constitutes childhood, with the hope and aspiration that actual, reading children will accept this fictional child. Through his reading of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1979), Nodelman notes that this quest to define childhood, this volonté a savoir, is quite similar to the colonizer’s civilizational strategy vis-à-vis the colonized subject. Defining the child (or the “Oriental”) as incomplete and ignorant makes it simultaneously comprehensible and justified to foster, dominate and control. In short, the fictional child aspires to put the actual child within our grasp – and to make it less threatening (Nodelman 1992).

Such reflections on the power mechanisms of children’s literature offer interesting perspectives on the brand of English “Islamic children’s literature” published in Britain from the 1970s.¹ A recurring concern of this genre is the definition of “the Muslim child”, attempting to handle the challenges of religio-cultural minority status

¹ In the following, the concept of “Islamic children’s literature” will refer to books explicitly aiming at strengthening Muslim identity, published by actors within what sometimes is referred to as the Islamic movement. “Islamic” is thus understood in its normative capacity, that is, “religiously correct” (as defined by the publisher). This conceptualization of Islamic literature does not include children’s literature (written by Muslim or non-Muslim writers) that simply deals with Islam, Muslims or Muslim experiences and history in general, without explicitly religio-ideological purposes. Then again, the demarcation lines between such categories are often unclear and methodologically dubious.
in general, and the question of religious socialization in a multicultural setting in particular. At its outset, this literature was devised as a clear-cut alternative to “non-Islamic” children’s books. For instance, when the pioneering publisher Islamic Foundation during the early 1980s launched its successful *Muslim Children’s Library* (MCL), this brand was presented as books “with a difference, for children of all ages.” According to the publisher, children’s books in general aim only to entertain or to train without any place for God or the guidance of prophets. Hence entertainment and skills become devoid of value and meaning, according to the publisher:

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.²

The question of religious socialization has been a core concern of the European Muslims ever since the establishment of significant Muslim communities from the 1960s. While the bulk of the British-Muslim communities relied on traditional religious pedagogics centered on ritualistic and mimetic learning in the mosques’ Quran education, small but industrious organizations such as the Islamic Foundation recognized the need for renewed methodologies in religious socialization.³ Hence, the emergence of a specific Islamic children’s literature and its conceptualization of “true knowledge” is intimately connected to European minority experience. To draw on the reflections of Nodelman (1992), the fictional and idealized “Islamic child” aspires to put the actual British-Muslim child within the grasp of Islamic pedagogic institutions – and to make it less threatening.

It would however be wrong to think of this literature as solely a product of local factors. Islamic children’s literature produced in Europe or US reflects larger,

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³ It should be noted that this is consistent with the strategy of the faith movement Jamaat-i-Islami from which the Islamic Foundation is an offshoot. This movement lacks significant popular following, controlling a mere 3% of the 1500 – 1600 mosques of Britain. But the entrepreneurial initiative of the organizations associated with the movement grants it a position outmatching its popular mandate. See further Janson 2003.
transnational tendencies in the Muslim world at large. Furthermore, the narration and representation of “Islamic knowledge” of this literary genre are informed by broader literary and aesthetic conventions and principles, not least the norms and constraints of figurative representation of traditional Sunni-Islamic theology.

This article attempts to demonstrate how recent Islamic children’s literature negotiates such norms vis-à-vis the pedagogic and aesthetic demands of the contemporary setting. As a background, the article will a briefly touch upon some tendencies in current Arab children’s literature and pedagogy, as well as the legacy of traditional Sunni-Islamic aesthetics. In its main section, the article presents a number of examples of how such norms of representation have been negotiated in Islamic children’s books during the last four decades, drawing attention to both limitations inherent in the pictorial codes, and the creative solutions such limitations have given rise to. Finally, the last section of the article discusses the overall characteristics of the Islamic–normative components of the literature, taking as a point of departure Perry Nodelman’s notion of “pleasure” in his reflections on the characteristics of children’s literature.4

Patterns of religion and morality in Arab children’s literature

Needless to say, the contemporary Middle East in set in a massive and rapid process of social change. Untenable as it is to generalize the existence of any singular Middle Eastern childhood discourse or pedagogic tradition, we always risk over-homogenizing and exorcizing when using formulations like “Arab children’s literature” or “Arab childhood discourse”. Evidently, however certain patterns seem resistant to change, not least due to institutionalization in the educational system and the lingering state control of the authoring and publication of textbooks for school in much of the Arab world.

Anthropologist Gregory Starrett has contributed with some important research about Egyptian children’s literature in education, with relevance for understanding contemporary Islamic children’s literature in general. He argues that textbooks remain largely defined by traditional ways of instruction, in emphasizing for instance

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4 Nodelman 2000.
immediate, familial concerns. Through the texts, school mediated knowledge is intimately interconnected with the domestic sphere and the respect for elders. Also, 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, through the linking of events from religious history to the contemporary, familiar setting, and by interconnecting religious education with other school subjects. It should be noted that Egypt has remained firm in its emphasis of a secular education. Even so, religious education is taught in a strikingly normative fashion apparently in tension with secular principles.

In order to understand this tension, it is important to underscore that Islam in Egyptian state education is conceptualized not only in terms of individual religiosity, faith and ritual. Islam is conceived as a universal way of life, relevant to all, and intimately interconnected with Egyptian history and contemporary nation building. Hence, religious instruction is functionalized and de-ritualized. The sacred text of the Quran is transformed into lessons (dhurus) of immediate, practical relevance to the child’s health, moral and its political identity as an Egyptian subject. This religio-pedagogic attitude is coupled with a firm reliance on the capability of children’s literature to “plant doctrine in the child’s emotional life”, to quote the statement of one publisher of Egyptian textbooks (Starrett 1996: page ?).

As indicated by these examples, the idea that children’s literature needs to remain fostering and conducive to moral and religious development remain strong in Egypt, as well as in the Arab world in general. To use a nutshell description of Arab children’s literature by Sabeur Mdallel: “It is morality presented with a story.” (Mdallel 2003, page ?). Children’s literature plays a major part in the political socialization processes of Middle Eastern states, (themselves highly divergent in for instance Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Egypt). As pointed out by Mdallel, only recently has the notion of reading for pleasure gained some ground, and many literary themes and subjects remain taboo in children’s literature, such as sexuality or insubordination vis-à-vis teachers and parents. A telling example is the translator’s introduction to the
Arab translation of Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (19??): “Who bought the wolf disguise for the child? Who let him make such mistakes? How come that a mother says a word like ‘wild’? How can a writer have a child tell his mother ‘I’ll eat you up’ /…/.” (Mdallel 2003)

Again, we must be careful not to generalize this as being representative for Arab writers or translators, but it is safe to say that Arab literature largely remains cautious and socio-conservative. As we shall see, this caution evidently also informs much of the Islamic children’s literature produced in Britain.

**Legacies of traditional Sunni-Islamic norms of representation**

Not only is Islamic children’s literature cautious as concerns social norms. Producing books accommodated to a Euro-American picture book format raises the problem of figurative representation. As noted, most Islamic children’s literature flourishes within the current Sunni Islamic activist faith movement. A defining characteristic of this movement is its openness to pragmatic and novel technical solutions. Even so, the issue of figurative representation remains sensitive, since Sunni theology has tended to consider images of animated beings as infringing on the basic principle of monotheism—namely, that God is sole creator.

According to the Qur’an, God formed humankind from clay and gave it life by blowing spirit (ruh) into it. Accordingly, one of God’s “ninety-nine beautiful names” is al-musawwir, “The Shaper” or “The Creator.” From the same verbal root of sawwara is derived the word taswir, which has come to mean “idol,” “statue,” or “painting.” Worship of any entity other than the One God is considered illusory and tantamount to polytheism and disbelief. Since humans cannot capture the transcendent God, picturing or otherwise mediating the divine is often perceived as an act of irrelevant, meaningless strife. In addition, during recent decades, few issues have proved more controversial than the question representing the Prophet, not least illustrated by the debates and conflicts following Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1986) and the publication of the infamous Danish Muhammad cartoons in

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3 Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: p. ???
4 Qur’an 38: 71-72.
To be sure, such controversies need to be understood as resulting from complex, transnational, and post-colonial processes and power relations, and cannot be explained with reference to any “inherent” Islamic norms of representation. This is not the place to dwell on such conflicts, but they certainly have influenced internal Muslim discussions of the forms and stakes of religious visual representation. In times when Islamophobia floods the Internet, Muslim actors aspiring to forward the Islamic creed in new visual formats must carefully deliberate on how to do so in effective and acceptable pictorial ways.

The enduring relevance of such representational norms may be illustrated with the declaration in a number of books published by the Islamic Foundation during the 1980’s, assuring readers that: “The books are presented with full colour illustrations keeping in view the limitations set by Islam.” This declaration was removed from all books from 1997, reflecting the publisher’s accommodation to a Euro-American picture book format, with images and animals more or less on every page of its literature. This does however not imply that representational constraints were altogether abandoned. Rather, as shall be demonstrated below, Islamic principles are conveyed in less expressive yet no less efficient ways in recent books.

In Sunni medieval jurisprudence, the strongest ban concerned figures casting shadows, that is, solid three-dimensional statues, since they were seen as most prone to idolization. There also emerged a general theological consensus on the prohibition of two-dimensional depictions of all creatures possessing a ruh (spirit or soul), that is, human beings, animals, angels and the spirits known as jinn. This is not to say images of animated beings actually disappeared from “Islamic art” since theological principles often have been sidestepped. Rather, religious ideas have contributed to a

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9 It should be noted that Shi’i theology distinctly deviates from the stricter Sunni understandings. In Shi’i Islam, the central issue concerns intention (niya): images of animate beings, even of the prophets and imams, are forbidden only if they are made for idolization.
10 The definition of “Islamic art” is notoriously complicated and elusive and should be used with caution and reservation. Firstly, “Islamic art” denote religious as well as mundane artistic expressions. Secondly it also denotes art produced in Jewish, Christian and other religious communities of the so-called “Muslim world”. Thirdly, the uniform concept of “Islamic art” glosses over the enormous diversity of the arts produced in an area stretching (at least) from Morocco to China during 14 centuries. And lastly, “Islamic art” tends to be used somewhat patronizingly, connoting the “simple” art forms of
highly diverse aesthetic tradition with certain recurring tendencies. Images depicting animate beings tend to display a low degree of naturalism and individual features and images of human beings tend to function symbolically and illustratively, rather than attempting to represent personality iconographically. Another tendency has been the ornamentalization of figurative objects: crafted objects in animal shapes often are covered with geometrical patterns or vegetable ornamentation, again downplaying naturalism.

To some extent, it may be noted, the norms of representation that came to dominate Sunni orthodox Islamic regulations for art did reflect wider aniconic cultural trends. In short, these principles have not generically emanated from any clear-cut religio-cultural “Islamic” tradition (whatever that would mean). Neither did such definitions serve religious purposes only. Rather, the Sunni-Islamic representational principles for art have been formulated as specific, institutional orchestrations of wider tendencies. Such orchestrations were part of a politico-cultural demarcation process, through which an Islamic specificity was delineated externally, in relation to the monotheistic sister-creeds of late antiquity. Again, there are important class-related aspects inherent to be considered. The institutionalization of artistic norms also needs to be understood as a result of an internal process, through which an urban, pious and mercantile middle-class distinguished itself from the rural-popular magical veneration of talismans and tombs of the peasant underclass; and on the other hand in relation to the lavish, iconic imagery produced among the courts and aristocracy. In conclusion, representational Islamic norms have always been connected to wider, mundane and politico-cultural concerns and priorities, underscoring that the recent phenomenon of Islamic picture books stand in a long tradition of Muslim reflection on graphical representation.

Representational restraint and renewal in Islamic picture books
During the last decade or so, the market of Islamic children’s literature has rapidly expanded. In the process, market identities and boundaries become less and less distinct. While Islamic children’s literature as a rule still expressively aims at

“portable” or “minor” arts, inherently set off from the history of “true” art, which is reserved for the European artistic tradition since the renaissance. See further Irving 1997; Blair & Bloom 199 .

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 for instance be noted that awarded Canadian children’s literature author Rukhsana Khan, active in the debate about the literary representation of minorities in multicultural society, has chosen not to “endorse” any Islamic books in her “Muslim Booklist” of recommended readings on Islam and Muslim faith and experience – but only ambivalently so.\(^{12}\) Khan’s 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) retains its position as one of the dominant actors. The following examples are confined to the books of this publisher, in order to demonstrate how the artistic considerations of one particular actor have developed during the last four decades.

Islamic Foundation’s production of children’s literature falls into two major phases.\(^{13}\) From the late 1970’s to the mid 1990s, the production mainly consisted of books relating sacred history, most notably stories about the life and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Almost all authors of this first phase were male and tightly connected to the organization itself. The books had all characters of in-house production, with long presentations of the publisher and the pedagogic purposes of the books and very sparse in material terms: 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 the material quality was radically improved, leaving the low-budget production behind. Strikingly, the preoccupation

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\(^{12}\) See further Khan’s discussion of the Islamic Rose book series. While underscoring that she finds distinct values in this series and that her own 12-year old son found it “mesmerizing”, she 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 webpage, “Muslim Books I Can’t "Recommend””, accessed 2013-06-17.

\(^{13}\) For a detailed analysis of the Islamic Foundation publication of children’s literature and other ventures, see Janson 2003.
with contemporary Britain of this phase coincided with a domestic setting for the stories, more or less exclusively authored by female writers.

**Negotiating traditional representational norms**

Turning to the images, the books of the first period largely avoided human pictorials altogether. For instance, a 1982 image illustrating the paradigmatic “Battle of the Trench” (where the Muslim forces led by the Prophet Muhammad conclusively beat the non-Muslim Meccan forces in 627) strictly complies with traditional Sunni orthodox principles of representation (see fig 1). Only the tips of sticks, spears, swords and shields appear in the image, thus representing human presence without iconographically depicting it.

![Figure 1: Battle of the Trench. Illustration by Shamin Shahin, in *The Brave Boy* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1982). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.](image)

Figure 2: Paradigmatic Spider. Illustration by Zainusa Gamiet, in *Love Your God* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1982). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

There are however exceptions to this rule, examples of the current negotiation of norms of representation. In an image from 1981, the fighting Meccan and Muslim soldiers are depicted in full figure (see fig 3). Yet Karo’s image illustrating the battle is heavily stylized in form and color; the image appears flat and geometric rather than rounded and realistic. Composition is simple yet effective, and color underscores the distinction between good and bad, with Muslim fighters clad in Islamic greens. While
depicting humans in conflict with a strict application of traditional principles of representation, the image also departs from a strict application of perspective and naturalism. This is an example of a different, creative way of handling Sunni Islamic norms without completely avoiding human pictorial. This tendency is even clearer in an illustration of seventh-century Medina, in the same book (see fig 4). Here, the town comprises squares and arcs in shifting yellow and purple tones, creating an impression of toy building blocks.

In the Western tradition of art, the principles of perspective, often presented as the “laws” of perspective, rest on quasi-objective principles of graphic representation. Perspective orders the viewing subject in relation to depicted reality, imbuing vision with a sense of objectivity. This is a technique for presenting images as faithful copies of empirical reality (Kress & van Leuwen 2006). Therefore, to reject or to subtly adjust perspective, as in the images of the buildings of Medina, is a way to reject any pretense to an objective depiction of reality. An objectified depiction could be seen as tantamount to creation, and thus risk to be infringing on God’s domain as the musawwir, the shaper of the world. In short, to highlight the stylistic, naïve, toy building block like character of the images, may be seen as a symbolic defense of a theocentric worldview.

Figure 3: Non-naturalistic Enemies. Illustration by Jerzy Karo, in A Great Friend of Children (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1981). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

Figure 4: Building Block Medina. Illustration by Jerzy Karo, in A Great Friend of Children (Markfield, UK: The

Comment (2): Uncertain about this argument. Why the stylization of buildings – not having souls? I seem to imply that depiction of humans begs stylization – something which then spills over on the depiction of buildings? Tenable? And on a deeper level: from an etic point of view we see of course (in the adjustment of perspective) a replacing of one culturally-inflected view with a different one, rather than an eschewing of “objectivity”? Is that running against my argument? Do I need to clarify what graphically “goes on” in the images, on the one hand, and how this on the other hand may be handling ideological concerns emically?
We find yet an example of a creative strategy for handling the Sunni Islamic norms of representations in Khurram Murad’s *Love your God* (1982), relating the popular story of Prophet Muhammad’s and the first caliph Abu Bakr’s paradigmatic flight (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina. In Islamic historiography, this is a paradigmatic event not least since it marks the establishment of a free Muslim community and the beginning of the Islamic era, the year 0 of the Hijra calendar. 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. The image illustrating this story actually does depict the spider of the miraculous cobweb, and thus it departs from a strict application of Sunni Islamic principles (see fig 2). However, in the illustration, the spider has become the centerpiece of an ornamental pattern in sharply contrasting blue and orange. Rather than denoting a spider as part of nature, it has been converted into a stylistic, non-naturalistic symbol of sacred history: it connotes the beginning of the Islamic era. The image relies on pre-modern artistic traditions of ornamental design that are updated and accommodated to the new format of Islamic illustrated children’s books.

**Sacralizing mundane space**

Turning to the picture books produced from the mid-1990s, the images undergo a radical transformation. From now on, the books are filled to the brim with images of humans: pictures of adults and children; of males and females; Muslims and non-Muslims. As noted, 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. 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 a number of Islamic free-zones, as means of defense against social ills. The free-zones consist of family ties, religious ritual, Islamic history and role-models, God-created nature, the pious Muslim home, and peer relations among Muslims. Consequently, the graphic means of Islamic particularism shifts focus, moving from an accommodation to traditional Sunni-Islamic norms of representation to an
acceptance of “forbidden” entities supplanted in a religiously coded setting. In short: “non-Islamic” images of humans and animals are converted to Islamic principles by means of contextualization and the priority of pedagogic purpose over norms of representation deemed outdated.

The mundane depictions of school, of home and neighborhood gardens, of toys and desserts after dinner, of the warm bed at night, are all presented to the Muslim child as blessed by God’s caring presence (see fig. 5). By implication, the images suggest the child’s proper attitude of gratitude and piety in relation to everyday life. The effect is a sacrilization of mundane space, through which everyday life becomes no less sacred than the act of praying, visiting the mosque or reciting scripture. Another graphic means of symbolically underscoring the sanctified mundane space are the calligraphic panels decorating the walls of the domestic settings (see fig. 6). The calligraphies partly function as symbolic assertions of the overarching meta-narrative about God’s presence in the world. As such, the calligraphies are balancing the iconic depiction of living beings. However, the calligraphic panels are never referred to in the text, creating a dynamic counterpoint 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 central religious tenets about God and His messenger. It may however be noted that such counterpointal relations between written text and images remains rare in the Islamic children’s literature. As a rule, images merely serve as illustrations to the written story and rarely contain co- or counter narrative elements.

Several picture books are relating tales of Muslim youngsters helping other Muslims, thus creating an image of Muslim minority morality among peers. One example is the story of young Umar, taking his namesake Caliph Umar as his precedent, for daringly facing the local (non-Muslim) school bully, and saving his young Muslim schoolmate (see fig 7). 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 issue of racism, community relations and bullying.

Figure 5: Divine Presence and Gratitude. Illustration by Asiya Clarke in Thank you Allah! (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation 2000). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

Figure 6: Supervised explorations. Illustration by Terry Norrige, in Maryam and the Trees (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1999). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

Figure 7: Historical precedence. Illustration by Asiya Clarke in Umar and the Bully (Markfield, UK: The Islamic
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 new ways of re-inventing sacred past from the vantage point of the present. Everyday situations and dilemmas are resolved with reference to Islamic role models. In *The people of the cave* (2001), a father admonishes his thoughtless sons, by taking recourse to the popular Quranic tale of the “Sleepers” (originally a Christian-Syrian tradition dating back to the 2nd century). The story is illustrated with images of human beings, but the all protagonists are pictured with faces turned away (see fig 8). Only one person’s face is depicted from front (if blurred): the evil and God-less king of the legend, threatening the young faithful heroes of the tale (see fig. 9). While the piety of Muslims is represented by downplaying individual features and depicting them with modestly down-cast gazes, the ignorance and arrogance of the evil king is graphically marked by his front-ward position, and arrogant gaze from above.

Two recent additions to the Islamic Foundation’s line of production are re-inventing “sacred” past in a different way: Fazia Gilani’s Islamized adaptations of the European fairytale canon. Faithful to the basic story lines of *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, Islamized names and recurring pious idiomatic phrases and invocations tie down the stories to an Islamic horizon. 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, however, Islamic Cinderella and her parents everyday
"would read the Qur’an, and they never missed a prayer” and the images of *Cinderella* are set in medieval, Islamic Andalusia (see Fig 10).15

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**Figure 10:** Islamizing Grim Brothers. Illustration by Shireen Adams in *Cinderella an Islamic Tale* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation 2010). Permission not acquired yet!

**Figure 11:** Pious Mum. Illustration by Rukiah Peckham, in *My Mum Is a Wonder* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1999). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

Most stories with iconic depictions are however set in the domestic setting and in nature. The home is described and depicted as a primarily feminine sphere, revolving around the catering, mild, and deeply pious Mother. Female characters are pictured with headscarves, also when at home (see fig. 11). Male characters are almost completely absent from the domestic sphere. And when they occasionally enter the domestic scene, they do so by exercising justice or by teaching sacred tradition (as in *The People of the Cave*). Children’s relation to created nature is put in an explicit didactic context. The images of living creatures underscore God’s presence in the world, and thus legitimize pictorial representation. Protagonists are exploring nature, in search for both scientific and religious knowledge, thus blurring the border between religious and scientific studies. Or rather: implicating that scientific, natural knowledge is in complete harmony with, and ultimately is subordinate to Islam. One example is *Maryam and the trees* (1999), where the protagonist is educated by her grandfather about how nature testifies to the glory of God, through a combination of

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15 Gilani 2010; Gilani 2013. According to an article by the author, the background of this line of production was a pedagogic project in a Canadian Islamic preschool. Gilani realized that despite all pupils of the school were Muslim, they were completely Anglocentric in their story writing, and never referred to their own cultural or religious backgrounds: “These children were not visible in their own writing.” Gilani-Williams & Best 2010.
religious principles conveyed by examples from the life of the Prophet, TV science programs and her own, active research when exploring the house for “things made of wood” (see fig. 6 above).  

We find something similar but for young children in the colorful animal picture book *Animals* (1997). It is similar to most picture books for the very young, introducing an assortment of animal species in lovely, naturalistic images. The only difference is the narrative prefix added to each picture: Allah made squirrels… Allah made elephants… And then, in the final image of the book, the two owls are depicted not only as examples of God’s creation (see fig 12). They are carrying a specific message to the child, a message that is part of their very nature, implied in the hooting itself: *Allah-hu*. This is no representation or replica of nature, for God is the sole creator of nature, the only *musawwir*, the shaper of life. This is an image of the glory and benevolence of God himself, and by implication, an image of the child and its role as a *khalifa*, the dutiful caretaker of God’s creation.

![Testifying owls](image)

Figure 12: Testifying owls. Illustration by Vinay Ahluwalia, in *Animals* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1997). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

**Pleasures of Islamic 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

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intending to teach 5 year 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 does however commend newer books such as Na’ima bint Roberts The Swirling Hijab, and how it avoids gendered stereotypes in depicting, for instance, the protagonist as a “warrior princess”. Islamic children’s literature is currently in a rapid process of development, reflecting the attitudes of a new generation of Muslim authors in Europe and North America. Overall, however, Islamic children’s literature remains marked by particularism and a lack of confidence in dealing with (what is perceived of as) controversial issues. It remains clearly authoritarian in its explicit imparting of religious and ethical norms on reading children (and parents). The following discussion draws attention to four interrelated aspects of this particularism, taking Perry Nodelman’s article “Pleasure and genre: speculations on the characteristics of children’s literature” as a point of departure.

1. One-dimensionally didactic

Nodelman notes that the books that pleases him the best are the ones that are able to combine a didactic stance (defining the child as ignorant and incomplete, in need of adult instruction) with a wish-fulfillment stance (resting on the notion that children are good as they are, able to identify their own needs, innocent and creative). The Islamic children’s literature is however more or less entirely based on the didactic stance. As concerns religious truth in particular, children are conceived of as ignorant and the children’s literature first and foremost is devised to teach. We find few opportunities for children to enjoy identification with innocently narrated and morally flawed characters – and hence opportunities for the pleasure of acknowledging the limitations of such innocence. Rather the child confronts morally perfected role models simply to emulate. The literature remains authoritative. Accordingly, the reader remains subordinate and essentially mimetic. In this way, despite its generic accommodation of a children’s literature format, from a stylistic point of view the books essentially reproduces the mimetic educational paradigm of the formal traditional Quran instruction in the mosque. Which is ironic, since it is precisely that

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pedagogic environment and paradigm the publishers of children’s literature deemed inadequate.

2. Intuitive wisdom and modality

Nodelman further notes that: “most children's books end quickly, shortly after the point at which wisdom is gained, for the activities of the wise are simply less interesting to contemplate than those of the unwise.”

In the Islamic children’s literature, however, the wisdom of the protagonist is commonly established at the very outset. Therefore the reading child is seldom invited to take part of any dynamic process of moral development in the protagonist. There are however several examples of protagonists gaining wisdom. Returning for instance to Umar’s struggle with the school bully, it is evident that Umar’s character is flawless from the outset – himself never a subject to doubt or malice. Even as a small boy, one assumes, he would never have dreamt of chasing dogs with forks. Umar’s ignorance is purely academic and the insights he gains only serves to corroborate his intuitive sense of moral. This may be thought of as a reflection the Islamic principle of of din al-fitra, of Islam being the “natural religion” for which every living individual is naturally disposed. Character flaw hence is conceptualized as a deviation from “the straight path” of Islam, al-sirat al-mustaqim.

There seem however to be more to this than literary style. Islamic picture books are more than a mere variation of the genre of didactic children’s literature. Umar not only reflects a limited writing technique, not only a highly idealized conception of childhood. More profoundly, the Islamic books enact a different, literary modality, that is, the ways in which the literature semiotically claims to represent ontological truth and reality.

Ultimately, the books are placing the child into a sacred framework, linking it to sacred past and individual salvation. Even when the books emulate genres such as adventure or detective stories they remain, in essence, homilies. They are neither so much interpretations of sacred tradition and (dialogic, vulnerable) explorations of what constitutes young Muslim identity – but expositions of established, divine truth. Or to reiterate Mdalle’s formulation: moralities presented with stories.

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3. Impossibility and miracle
This triggers an interesting question relating to another aspect of the pleasure of children’s literature mapped out by Perry Nodelman: the attraction of fantasy and impossibility, and especially so when the fantastic seamlessly takes place in the midst of everyday reality: the woods grows out of Max’s bedroom; the land of Elidor boundlessly flows into Manchester. Islamic children’s literature is full of mysterious events and divine interventions, in sacred history as well as the contemporary present. And authors take steps to ensure that the reading child never runs the risk to misinterpret them. When Nadira in A Gift of Friendship selflessly gives up her only toy to a less fortunate schoolmate, she is ultimately compensated, when her grandmother gives her a lovely doll in the final pages of the book:

'Nadira,' said her father, 'see how Allah has rewarded you for you kindness to Bushra!’ ‘Do you really think that this doll is a reward from Allah?’ asked Nadira, a look of wonder on her face. 'Yes, I believe so,’ replied her father. /…/

'It was Allah Who inspired your grandmother to buy this doll for you,’ her father continued. 'People who believe in Allah and do good deeds are rewarded by Him many times over, both in this life and the Next. /…/’ (27f.)

What happens when the fantastic and impossible is presented as miraculous truth? Is not the fantastic implicitly interconnected to the reading or playing child’s “what if”, “just imagine if I could”? But the religious literature once and for all sets the ontological score, essentially transplanting fascination with awe. And this inhibits what Nodelman refers to as a pleasurable “knowledge game”. In Where the wild things are, the reader knows, essentially, that the narrator lies or is ignorant when claiming that a forest grows out of Max’s bedroom. But the Islamic books assert that the narrator testifies to divine truth. As an effect, ideally, the child may recognize the books as true – but are they pleasing? Or even worse, are they even to be conceived of children’s literature at all, contemplating Nodelman’s words: ‘Indeed, I might almost commit myself to the position that the main subject of children’s fiction is just that:

22 Imtiaz 1997: 27f.
impossible things happening.

4. Staying home, inhabiting virtue

Lastly, Nodelman identifies the pleasing binary organization of children’s literature, revolving around the opposition and confrontation between the safety and constraints of the home, and the excitement and dangers of the away. Neither in this respect does Islamic children’s literature offer many opportunities for explorations into the wild. To the contrary, over and over again the books assert that the child is at home in Islam, part of the global faith community and safe and sound as long as he or she abides by the regulations and priorities defined by Islam. This may be hammered in with square injunctions and articles of faith in the early books of the 1970; or it may be disguised in detective stories, where the protagonist solves the mystery thanks to his Islamic virtues of courage, honesty, faith and solidarity.24 But the overall result is the same.

In an article on Shia Islamic children’s literature, Edith Szanto draws attention to the centrality of the notion of taqlid, to follow the precedent of religious role models. Moral agency lies in the subject’s capacity to inhabit virtue, building a foundation for a complete life.25 Adulthood thus connotes an ability to follow – not the liberal idea of individual, independent, critical choice. Appropriating social norms makes the child intelligible qua Muslim child – and of keeping it at home. In this sense, we may think of the entire project of Islamic children’s literature as a means of securing the child’s place and identity as part of a transhistoric, global faith community. And this is underscored by the diasporic experiences of marginality and the difficulties and conflicts associated with forging a European or North American Muslim identity.

Returning to the initial quote of Jacqueline Rose, the depiction of Muslim children as conceptually at home in their faith, and little prone to sail off in the wild, reflects the challenges of grasping the specifics of Euro-Muslim childhood. The threatening, culturally and politically complex British-Muslim child is simultaneously avoided and captured through its literary rendering as Islamic. As is suggested by the examples of this article, in terms of artistic expression, the Islamic children’s literature offers a number of creative and innovative solutions, giving the literature its particular Islamic

24 See for instance Radwan’s Rashid and the missing body (2000).
25 Szanto 2013.
character, and thus, its appeal on an open market of religious consumption. In essence, however, in terms of the representation of the world and the child’s ontology, the books rests on a modality informed by traditional Islamic-Arab educational principles and a theo-centric conception of truth, reality and virtue.

Whether this is perceived as pleasing for children, and if so, what kind of pleasure the religious component of the reading entails remains to be researched. But in the final analysis, the aphorism of Swedish Poet Lennart Helsing most probably will hold true: “All pedagogic art is bad art – and all good art is pedagogic.”26

26 Helsing: xxxx