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# Imaging Islamic Identity: Negotiated Norms of Representation in British-Muslim Picture Books

Torsten Janson

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During the 1970s, safeguarding the cultural identity of the next generation of Muslims was a central question for the rapidly growing Islamic communities of Britain.<sup>1</sup> To a significant degree, this was perceived as a problem of religious socialization. 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. Adding to the problem, Muslim leadership remained fragmented since British Islamic organizations largely mirrored ethnic and sectarian affiliations of the motherland left behind. As a rule, such organizations relied on traditional forms of religious instruction for children, focusing on a mimetic learning of prayer and Koranic recitation while disregarding deeper questions of religious and cultural identity. In the face of the challenges of religious socialization, some actors embarked on the venture of producing children's literature specifically designed for an English-speaking Muslim audience. In this study, attention will be focused on the most ambitious and successful Euro-Muslim publisher of such materials: the British research and publishing organization the Islamic Foundation.<sup>2</sup>

This organization has its ideological roots in the South Asian reform movement Jamaat-i-Islami, founded in the 1940s by Abul Ala Mawdudi.<sup>3</sup> However, in essence the organization is a product of the British environment. Although the literature it produces represents a particular understanding of Islam, it is also a product of broader British-Muslim needs and concerns.

1. Muslims of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Indian background dominate British Islam. Some 85 percent of all mosques are connected to the South Asian Deobandi (65 percent) and Barelwi (20 percent) movements while a mere 3 percent are affiliated with the Jamaat-i-Islami. Roughly half of the entire British-Muslim population lives in or around London. Two-thirds of the rest have settled in the West Midlands, Yorkshire, and around Manchester. Ethnically, it may be described as "a large and varied, cosmopolitan Muslim community in London and the south-east, while outside that region the Muslims are almost synonymous with communities of Indian subcontinental origin" (Jørgen S. Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe* 2nd ed. [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995], 44). For background and statistics about Muslims and Islam in Britain, see [muslimsinbritain.org](http://muslimsinbritain.org).

2. For a detailed study of the Islamic Foundation, see Torsten Janson, *Your Cradle Is Green: The Islamic Foundation and the Call to Islam in Children's Literature* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 2003).

3. Mawdudi has become one of the key references and inspirations for the twentieth-century Islamic movement. In line with his basic ideas, British organizations spurred off from the Jamaat-i-Islami have sought out a publicly visible position both within the Muslim communities and in relation to the encompassing non-Muslim society. These organizations may be described as moderate Sunni Islamist, since they actively promote the implementation of Islamic principle in the public sphere while emphasizing the importance of embracing modern means for religious expression and an active civic and cultural participation in British public society, critical to the significantly larger but more defensive and more secluded Deobandi and Barelwi movements. For a more detailed discussion, see Janson, *Your Cradle Is Green*.

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Thus, it ultimately responds to current public debates on multicultural society and on politics of identity, gender equality, religious education, radicalism, racism, and Islamophobia. The cultural context of marginality may explain the organization's commitment to finding new, creative, and pragmatic solutions to solving the issues of religious socialization of the Muslim minorities. Yet it fails to account for the specific character of the results of this commitment, since the form as well as the content of the children's literature as it has developed testify to a complex interplay of cultural impulses.

### Conceptualizing Islamic Children's Literature

A primary concern for the literature produced by organizations like the Islamic Foundation is to answer basic questions about religious identity. What does it mean to be a Muslim? What role models should young Muslims emulate? How should one pray? What is the meaning of the Koran? How should one treat one's fellow coreligionists? While such questions have remained central, the means of conveying knowledge and norms have changed significantly over the years. Most notably, while the literature produced during the 1980s remained graphically sparse, heeding traditional Sunni Islamic norms of restrained representation, recent books tend to employ a broader range of illustrations. This development may in part be ascribed to an emulation of Euro-American or globalized commercial picture book aesthetics. Yet the imagery retains distinctive traits as well, indicating the crystallization of a specific genre of Islamic children's literature and resting on specific visual codes. The imaging of identity in current Islamic children's literature needs to be understood in terms of a contemporary negotiation of sensitive Islamic norms vis-à-vis the pedagogic needs (and opportunities) of Euro-American minority existence, resulting both in creative solutions and discursive constraints.

In order to discern the development of the concept of an Islamic children's literature, it is

instructive to pay attention to certain paratextual elements of the Islamic Foundation's books produced during the formative years of the early 1980s. In 1981, the foundation launched the *Muslim Children's Library* (MCL). The library consists of thirty-four titles; later series replaced the MCL after 2000. In the publications from the 1980s, the MCL was presented in an almost two-page-long introduction as "a new series of books, but with a difference, for children of all ages." According to Khurram Murad's introduction, which appeared in all children's books produced during the 1980s, children's books in general only aim to entertain or to train, without providing a place for God or the guidance of prophets. However, without a religious component, entertainment and skills become devoid of value and meaning. The same introduction further states that "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."<sup>4</sup> Here we find a number of key concepts indicating the foundation's theological and ideological profile. Formulations are dichotomous and strong: as opposed to the works published by the MCL, secular books convey no eternal values, but rather rob children of access to truth and ethical standards.

The qualification of the ethical standards in terms of "incentives to live by what is right and refrain from what is wrong" is worth noting. This is an obvious paraphrase of the Koranic principle of *al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar* (to command that which is right and to forbid that which is wrong). This is a recurrent theme in the contemporary discourses of Islamic revival, where it functions as a metonym for underscoring the activist, public understanding of Islam.<sup>5</sup> Children's needs are tied to

4. Khurram Murad, "Muslim Children's Library: An Introduction," in Khurram Murad, *Love Your God* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1982), 3.

5. See Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 2000). Cf. the Koranic verse "Let there arise out of you a band of people [*umma*] inviting to the good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong [*al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*]: they are the ones to attain felicity" (Koran 3:104).

specific Islamic standards, while the MCL presents itself as a means for coping with contemporary society, in which Islam functions an active matrix for public life. This said, it is not enough for Islamic children's literature to be religiously and morally correct. As the MCL introduction further notes: "It is recognized that for a book to hold a child's attention, he must enjoy reading it; it should therefore arouse his curiosity and entertain him as well. The style, the language, the illustrations and the production of the books are all geared to this goal. They provide moral education, but not through sermons or ethical abstractions."<sup>6</sup> The sentences above include an obvious promotional component: irrespective of theological or ideological orientation, parents wish for their children to enjoy themselves. The entertaining dimension balances the expressively instrumental purpose of the books. But there is more to this than simply promotion. The publisher stresses awareness of the socialization processes at play in children's literature consumption, underscoring the necessity of adapting Islamic identity to the prevailing social conditions.<sup>7</sup> Murad's statement about children's books not providing sermons is thus placed into perspective. Indeed, his is another way of saying that the traditional sermon, *khutba*, and Koranic schools are simply not enough.

The type of organization represented by the foundation does not aspire to supplant the traditional mosques or to compete with their status. Rather, it aims to focus on questions of leadership, educational strategy, and dialogical and sociocultural initiative.<sup>8</sup> New associations aim at expanding the scope of religion, and thus compete with the social functions and methods of traditional Islamic institutions. They rest on the idea that Islamic identity should be an integral part of everyday life, to be equally present in the mosque, in school, and at home—an attitude that tends to stimulate new forms of com-

munication and increasingly creolized, playful modes of Islamic representation. In short, Islamic children's books in no way supplant the ritual recitation of the Koran. Instead, they complement it within a domestic setting.

Not all British Muslims have pursued an active or even affirmative religious identity. Yet, for many, the preservation of religion has been integral to the preservation of cultural identity in the face of minority existence. Indeed, the migrant experience as such has proved to accentuate the notion of "Muslimness," itself seldom conceived as such in the immigrants' countries of origin. Muslim diasporic communities must juggle multiple regional and national identities: being immigrants, Muslim parents, British citizens, and so forth.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, migration has contributed to the process of objectifying Islam; that is, the tendency of hermeneutical self-reflection on issues and categories of identity hitherto left unquestioned.<sup>10</sup>

For activist organizations in particular, Islamic theology provides a conceptual apparatus for the intellectual representation of minority society in novel, critical terms. Today, Muslim intellectuals and organizations like the Islamic Foundation are aware of the free market character of religion and morals. They are actively assuming the role of producers of religion for fastidious, independent, and flexible Muslim consumers.<sup>11</sup> 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. Paradoxically, negative experiences of social, political, cultural, and economic marginality also stimulate alternative religious entrepreneurial ventures such as publishing Islamic children's literature. William Rubinstein has drawn attention to the combination of "a high degree of marginality and a high degree of self-esteem" as a key characteristic for overproductive kinship

6. Murad, "Muslim Children's Library," 4.

7. See Khurram Murad, *Muslim Youth in the West: Some Conceptual and Methodological Aspects* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1986), 5 and following.

8. See Garbi Schmidt, *American Medina: A Study of the Sunni Muslim Immigrant Communities in Chicago* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1998), 248.

9. See Sophie Gilliat, "Back to Basics: The Place of Islam in the Self-Identity of Young British Muslims," in *New Trends and Developments in the World of Islam*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (London: Luzac Oriental, 1998), 93–103.

10. For a discussion of the effects of modernity processes on Muslim identity and political discourses, see Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

11. See Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (1967; repr., New York: MacMillan, 1974). For a more detailed argument, see Bryan S. Turner, *Religion and Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 1991).

networks in European history.<sup>12</sup> Active and entrepreneurial rethinking of Islamic transmission of norms may thus find a specific niche precisely as an effect of marginality, and groups inclined to move beyond traditional sectarianism may conceive of the emerging religious market as “liberating, empowering and creative,” as pointed out by Gregory Starrett.<sup>13</sup> The consumption of new religious commodities serves important functions in late-modern Muslim community formation and the imagination of Islamic identity. Just as important, however, Muslim identity is also formed through the consumption of non-Islamic products, which are incorporated into an Islamic superstructure.<sup>14</sup> A case in point is the listing of “Muslim food” in *The American Muslim Teenager’s Handbook* (2007): pizza and hamburgers, shwarmas and gyros, rice and curry, Chinese food, and Italian food.<sup>15</sup> Branded Islamic products are envisioned to strengthen young Muslim identity, but so is a culturally inclusive stance to secular consumer culture.

#### An Updated Format for Religious Instruction

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 (eleven reprints during the first twenty years, with seven thousand to eleven thousand copies per printing). This nonfiction, fifty-six-page textbook explaining (Sunni) Islam for eight- to eleven-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 Allah and only upon Him do we call for help.<sup>16</sup>

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’ba 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 Koran 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?”<sup>17</sup> Despite this interrogative element, 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 the organization expanded its horizons.

12. William Rubinstein, “The Weber Thesis, Ethnic Minorities, and British Entrepreneurship,” in *Religion, Business, and Wealth in Modern Britain*, ed. David Jeremy (London: Routledge, 1998), 176.

13. Gregory Starrett, “Muslim Identities and the Great Chain of Buying,” in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, 2nd ed., ed. Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 2003), 96.

14. See *ibid.*, 80–101.

15. Dilara Hafiz, Imran Hafiz, and Yasmine Hafiz, *The American Muslim Teenager’s Handbook* (Phoenix: Acacia Publishing, 2007), 104.

16. Muhammad Manazir Ahsan, *The Children’s Book of Islam: Part One* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1979), 9.

17. *Ibid.*, 44.

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 than by blunt injunction. Or to quote the suspenseful opening lines of Murad's *Love Your God* (1982): "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."<sup>18</sup>

Most books published within the MCL series during the 1980s consist of illustrated stories about the Prophet Muhammad 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, and thus meeting basic pedagogic demands, the narrative employment of early Islam conforms to central tenets of the modern Sunni Islamic movement. These are not just any exciting stories. The MCL's preoccupation with sacred history signifies the principle of returning to the sources, so central to thinkers of the Sunni 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, 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.<sup>19</sup> 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 organizations 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 "un-corrupted" Islam, all the while accommodating religious pedagogy to an entirely new, Euro-American format of children's literature.

Murad's *Love Your God* illustrates the interwoven benefits of teaching doctrine and historical knowledge through narration. It relates the popular story of Muhammad's dramatic escape from Mecca to Medina, together with Abu 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, Abu 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.

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

18. Murad, *Love Your God*, 6.

19. See Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.

20. Murad, *Love Your God*, 11.

and *hilm* (elevated calm) and *taqwa* (pious God-consciousness). His behavior actually demonstrates that Abu 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 *taqwa*, 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.<sup>21</sup> 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 toward 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 important, this historical preoccupation underscores the difficulty of contemporary minority Muslim existence. For migrants, history provides a safe haven. It is a very different challenge to write psychologically convincing and socially relevant stories about contemporary young British-Muslim minority identity. This issue brings to the fore a range of highly sensitive issues, such as the stakes of cultural inclusion in multicultural society, consumerism, gender relations, sexual identities, religious

education, racism, Islamophobia, and ethnic tensions. Significantly, the Islamic Foundation's first stories relevant to the lives of contemporary British-Muslim immigrants (published in 1993 and 1994) relate how young Adam finds and consolidates his Muslim identity during his visit to Egypt, his parents' country of origin.<sup>22</sup> However, we are not told anything about how Adam applies his newly confirmed Muslim identity in a British setting. In fact, it took the publisher twenty 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 European multicultural setting. Leaving the safe haven of sacred tradition thus commits the publisher to a demanding process of cultural navigation and negotiation. The difficulties are, however, 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 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.<sup>23</sup>

This is the dramatic climax of *Rashid and the Missing Body* (2001) by Hassan Radwan. Together with a Christian and a Jewish friend, thirteen-

21. M. S. Kayani, *A Great Friend of Children* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1981), 7.

22. See Susan Omar, *New Friends, New Places* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2007).

23. Hassan Radwan, *Rashid and the Missing Body* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), 67.

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 *taqwa* and *hilm*. There are several points in the story where Rashid (rather than his otherwise sympathetic Abrahamitic 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. 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 and the Missing Body* confidently relies on the literary depiction of a young boy to illustrate the practical benefits of being a religiously active and aware Muslim today. It also relies on the intellectual and empathic 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 Euro-American Muslim minority existence. The literature is 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*. The ensuing realization of the benefits of a literary, narrative address,

designed to meet the demands of contemporary Muslim identity formulation among children, leads to an inventory of sacred tradition. Apart from serving the purpose of conveying knowledge of an ideal Islamic society, the historical narratives appear to have functioned as a transfer zone toward the ultimate challenge of depicting contemporary Euro-American Muslim existence for youngsters.

### Representing a Sacred Past

"What kind of toys can we give our children?" asks an Australian parent on the conservative Deobandi website *Ask the Imam*, to which is given the response: "Generally toys that do not have any animate pictures or are not shaped in an animate form (like dolls) may be given to children. Dolls may be given if the head is removed."<sup>24</sup> The somewhat morbid suggestion to give children decapitated dolls seems to refer to the hadith reported in the *Sunan* of Abu Da'ud, in which it is reported that the angel Gabriel one day refused to enter the Prophet's house because there was a statue beside its door. The angel told Muhammad "that the head of the statue be broken off so that it resembles the trunk of a tree."<sup>25</sup> On the same web page, another parent is advised against purchasing any children's books containing drawings of animate beings. As the imam advises, "There are a number of children's books available in the UK without such pictures."<sup>26</sup> This strict interpretation of the hadith may be far from representative, but it does illustrate that orthodox Sunni Islamic ideas still play a role in the discussions of toys, images, and other aspects of children's culture.<sup>27</sup>

Producing children's literature accommodated to a Euro-American picture-book format raises the problem of figurative representation. As noted, most Islamic children's literature flourishes within the Sunni Islamic movement. A defining characteristic of this movement is its openness to pragmatic and novel technical solu-

24. Ask-Imam website, Question 5357 from Australia, 22 May 2002, <http://www.islam.tc/cgi-bin/askimam/ask.pl?q=5357&act=view>.

25. Quoted in Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Indianapolis, IN: American Trust, 1980), [web.youngmuslims.ca/online\\_library/books/the\\_lawful\\_and\\_prohibition\\_in\\_islam/ch25p3-5.htm](http://web.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/the_lawful_and_prohibition_in_islam/ch25p3-5.htm).

26. Ask-Imam website, Question 9832 from United Kingdom, 07 October 2003, [www.islam.tc/cgi-bin/askimam/ask.pl?q=9832&act=view](http://www.islam.tc/cgi-bin/askimam/ask.pl?q=9832&act=view).

27. The influential Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi does, for instance, interpret this hadith differently, underscoring that the significance of the beheading lies in the debasement of the statue. That is, it is not to be

regarded as a symbolic killing of the statue. While Al-Qaradawi also is strict in his affirmation of the prohibition of statues in Islam, he exempts children's toys from this rule. See al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*.



tions. Even so, the issue of figurative representation remains highly 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 2005.<sup>29</sup> To be sure, such controversies need to be understood as resulting from complex, transnational, and post-colonial processes and power relations, and they 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.

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 jinn.<sup>30</sup> This is not to say images of animated beings have disappeared, since theological principles often have been sidestepped in Islamic art. Rather, religious ideas have contributed to a highly diverse Islamic 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.<sup>31</sup>

The Islamic Foundation's children's books reveal interesting ways of handling, explicitly or implicitly, transgressions of accepted norms of representation in Islamic traditions. Respect of the confines gives rise to creative artistic solutions rather than poverty of artistic expression. At first glance, it is hard to discern any consistent pictorial strategy at work in the children's literature produced by the foundation. Among the more than fifty books produced since the late 1970s, some are devoid of images altogether, while others only contain decorative elements in the form of calligraphy. There also are illustrated stories about the Prophet and early caliphs that do not include any illustrations of animated beings. Others include merely symbolic representations of human beings or else include naturalistic images of human figures on more or less every page.

On closer scrutiny, it is possible to discern certain patterns, which are in accord with what today is perceived as acceptable Sunni norms of representation. All in all, the books produced from the late 1970s through the 1980s observe aniconic traditions more strictly than books produced from the early 2000s onward. Fourteen of the forty-seven story books published before 2001 were completely devoid of human imagery, while a few contain only pictures of people seen

28. According to the Koran (38:71–72), God formed humankind from clay and gave it life by blowing *ruh* (spirit) 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 human beings cannot capture the transcendent God, picturing or otherwise mediating the divine is often perceived as an act of irrelevant, meaningless strife.

29. See Jytte Klausen, *The Cartoons That Shook the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

30. It should be noted that Shi'i theology distinctly deviates from the stricter Sunni understandings. In Shi'i Islam, the central issue concerns *niya* (intention): images of animate beings, even of the prophets and imams, are forbidden only if they are made for idolization.

31. To some extent, the norms of representation that came to dominate Sunni orthodox Islamic aesthetics did reflect wider aniconic cultural trends. On the other hand, the specific Islamic orchestration of such norms was part of a politico-cultural demarcation process, through which an Islamic specificity was delineated in relation to the monotheistic sister-creeds of late antiquity. The institutionalization of such re-

ligious norms in law needs to be understood as the result of an internal Muslim process, through which an urban, pious middle class distinguished itself vis-à-vis magical, popular veneration of talismans and tombs of saints as well as vis-à-vis the lavish, iconic imagery produced in the courts and aristocracy. See Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 95 and following.

from a distance or avoid images of faces. Almost all of these books were produced during the 1980s. The avoidance of human imagery correlated with a distinctly centralized authorship, most notably Murad, one of Mawdudi's closest disciples and director of the Islamic Foundation from 1978 to 1986. Murad authored twelve of the children's books published during the 1980s. Indeed, male authors wrote almost all books of this period, while female authors have completely dominated the Islamic Foundation's children's literature since the 1990s. There is furthermore a close correlation between chronology and content. While a historical and hagiographic focus dominates the publication during the 1980s, books published after this period deal more or less exclusively with contemporary issues. Finally, the paratextual elements of the early books are extensive; these include a detailed presentation of the Islamic Foundation and its MCL series.

During this first period, when developing its concept of children's literature, the Islamic Foundation thus appears to have sought safety in a male transmission of the sacred tradition, which consisted in stories of the Prophet and the early caliphs. Additional textual elements have functioned as a similar safety zone. Bracketing the books with declarations of underlying ideas and ambitions seems to have been a way for a new, entrepreneurial actor to discursively integrate the potentially controversial format of Islamic children's literature into an overarching project of religious socialization, aiming at promoting Islamic norms and identity among the young in a secular cultural setting. The importance devoted to paratexts also underscores that the books during the initial phase were part of a centralized, organizational output. According to the distinction put forward by children's literature theorist Maria Nikolajeva, the books of the first phase can be characterized as genre children's literature rather than auteur children's literature, that is, retaining a static and conventional relationship to literary norms and narrative models.<sup>32</sup>

The early literature likewise displays a variety of strategies in order to abide by Sunni

Islamic norms of representation. Several books avoid depictions of animate beings altogether. In Murad's *The Brave Boy* (1982), which relates the heroic feats of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, one of Shamin Shahin's illustrations depicts the Battle of the Trench by merely showing the tips of sticks, spears, and swords of the soldiers, whose figural presence otherwise remains undetected in the scene (fig. 1). There are, however, exceptions to such an approach and alternative ways of handling Sunni Islamic norms of representation. One example is Jerzy Karo's illustration of another battle scene in M. S. Kayani's *A Great Friend of Children* (1981), where green Muslim warriors fight the purple-clad Meccans (fig. 2). Karo's image is heavily stylized in form and color; the image appears flat and geometric rather than rounded and realistic. Despite depicting human beings, the image thus departs from a strict application of perspective and naturalism.

This tendency toward abstraction becomes even more clear in Karo's illustration of seventh-century Medina. Here, the town comprises squares and arcs in shifting yellow and purple tones, creating an impression of toy building blocks (fig. 3). The function of perspective is to mark the viewing subject's relation to the depicted object. Even though images are informed by subjective points of view, the "laws" of perspective came to rest on impersonal, geometric, quasi-mechanic and quasi-objective principles of graphic representation. In short, perspective signifies a subjective and social ordering of the visual, through which socially coded viewpoints can be objectified, naturalized, and presented as faithful copies of empirical reality.<sup>33</sup> To reject or to subtly adjust perspective thus may function as a religious or philosophical rejection of anthropocentrism as well as a symbolic defense of a theocentric worldview. As a result, highlighting the stylistic and symbolic character of represented nature, such as in the battlefield depicted by Karo, serves as a strategy to maintain the depiction of human beings while marking a distance from any pretense of usurping God's unique role as the *musawwir* (shaper) of empirical reality.

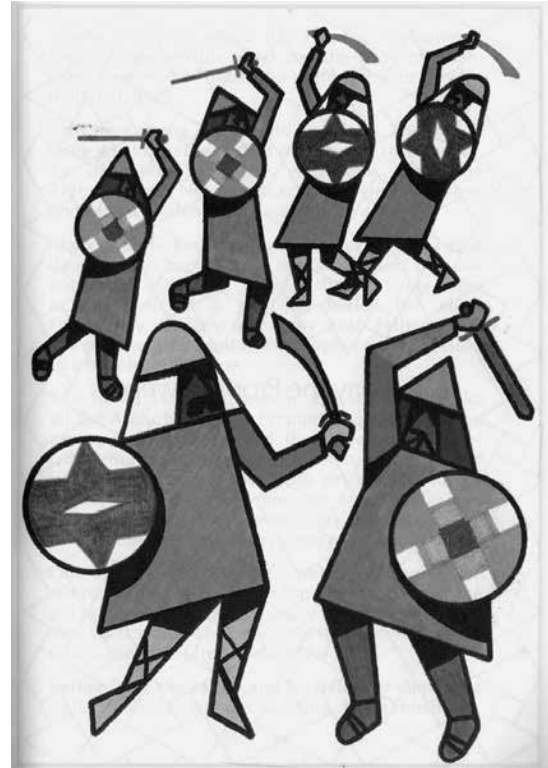
32. See Maria Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature Comes of Age: Toward a New Aesthetic* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

33. See Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).



**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.

An image illustrating the Prophet's and Abu Bakr's flight from Mecca in the previously discussed *Love Your God* creates a similar effect. Zainusa Gamiet's illustration depicts the spider of the cobweb saving the refugees in the cave, thus conflicting with a strict application of Sunni Islamic principles of not depicting animate beings (fig. 4). However, in Gamiet's illustration, the spider is 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 is not an image of a spider but rather a connotative symbol of the *hijra*, the migration of the Prophet to Medina, which marks the construction of the ideal Islamic society and the very beginning of the Islamic era. The animate being is denaturalized through a process of ornamentalization. In Gamiet's illustration, the negotiation of Islamic principles does not rest

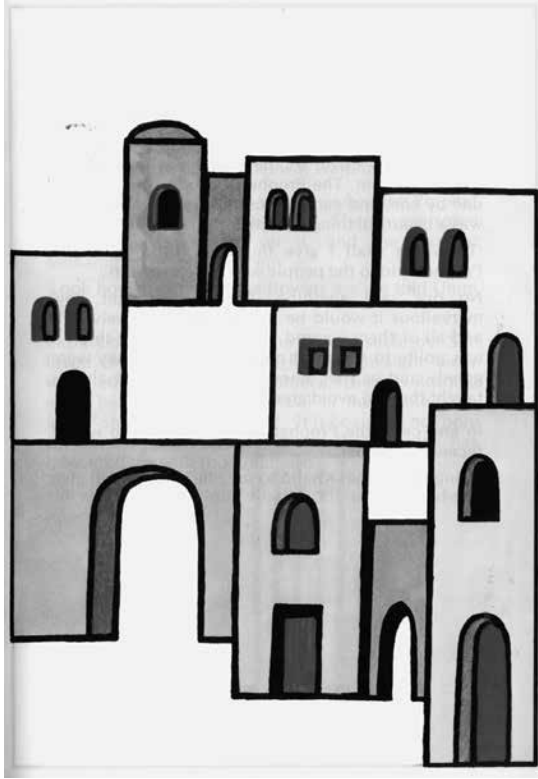


**Figure 2: Muslim-Meccan Fighters.** Illustration by Jerzy Karo, in *A Great Friend of Children* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1981). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

merely on stylistic symbolization, as in Karo's warriors. More significant, it relies on premodern traditions of ornamental design that are updated and accommodated to the new format of Islamic illustrated children's books.

#### Reimagining Sacred Space in a Migrant Setting

While the books produced during the 1980s either were devoid of human images or experimented with various ways of graphically adjusting the images to comply with renegotiated Islamic norms, during the following decade the Islamic Foundation changed its pictorial contents. The vast majority of the books produced from the 1990s contain images of human beings: pictures of adults and children, men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims. Correlating with this shift in imagery, during the early 1990s the publisher inserted the following sentence in its presentation of the MCL: "The books are presented with full color illustrations keeping in



**Figure 3: Medina Buildings.** 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.

view the limitations set by Islam.”<sup>34</sup> This notice appeared only in the seven books containing no human imagery published or reprinted during the 1990s. Paradoxically, the warrant appears to be testimony to the fact that the publisher actually had begun publishing other children’s books containing figural depiction, while these seven books do not.

One might expect that such cultural negotiation of Islamic norms and European means of narration and design would intensify with the recent preoccupation with contemporary topics. As it turns out, however, Britain remains strikingly absent in the stories. As noted above, it was not until 1996, after twenty years of publishing children’s literature, that the Islamic Foundation published a book for Muslim children set in Britain. While there followed a steady flow of books dealing with British-Muslim minority experiences after this date, the litera-



**Figure 4: Ornamental Spider.** Illustration by Zainusa Gamiet, in *Love Your God* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1982). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

ture remained distinctly constrained in various ways. In fact, despite the contemporary focus, very few books narratively depict young British-Muslim public life at all. Rather, most are set in various free zones, relating creationist tales about nature, instructing religious rituals, or depicting confined, domestic space. Again, the few books that in any way touch on public life tend to picture public institutions (schools and hospitals) and social relations with non-Muslims as problems and threats to Muslim identity. In contrast, the few narrative books, just as in the nonfictional ones, take refuge in Islamic principles, family ties, religious ritual and Islamic history, God-created nature, and the pious Muslim home as well as peer relations among Muslims as means of defense against social ills.

While the early textbooks on Islamic faith contained few and solely nonfigurative images, the newer nonfiction books take full recourse

34. Omar, *New Friends, New Places*, 3.

**Figure 5: Insha Allah.**  
Illustration by Noorah  
Kathryn Abdullah, in  
*What Do We Say: A  
Guide to Islamic Manners*  
(Markfield, UK: The Islamic  
Foundation, 2000).  
Image courtesy of Kube  
Publishing and The Islamic  
Foundation.



in colorful, playful, figurative imagery. For instance, the volume *What Do We Say: A Guide to Islamic Manners* (2000) introduces Arabic idiomatic phrases—in original Arabic, transliterations, and translations—coupled with everyday contextualizations and illustrations (fig. 5).<sup>35</sup> As a handbook of phrases, the narrative component is constrained, but here the images are co-narrative and slightly counterpointal; that is, words and image do not completely overlap, but provide complementary narrative information.<sup>36</sup> The illustrations thus invite the child to actively co-read the images with the text, itself presumably read out loud by an adult.

In this and in other books, we also find a slightly different kind of counterpoint in the images. Terry Norrige's illustrations of *Maryam and the Trees* (1999), for instance, depict several interiors where calligraphic panels, reading "Allah" and "Muhammad," decorate the walls of the house (fig. 6). First, while there is no dynamic counterpoint between the completely overlap-

ping illustrations of the children and the written text, the dynamic between the former elements and calligraphies is all the more striking and conspicuous. Why are there calligraphies on the wall? What do they mean? Without any explicit facts or leading questions inserted into the narrative, children are invited to explore central religious tenets about God and His messenger. Second, the calligraphies are disconnected from the narrative of the books, but they form part of an overarching metanarrative, the same narrative that discursively interconnects the entire line of children's Islamic literature of the publisher: the neverending story of God's creation of the world.

*Maryam and the Trees* relates how Maryam and her younger brother learn to respect nature: "Isn't Allah Merciful, to fill your lungs with air, and to give you life? He loves you, and He loves the plants, too. He wants us to take care of them, not hurt them. They also praise Allah."<sup>37</sup> The text here alludes to the Is-

35. See Noorah Kathryn Abdullah, *What Do We Say: A Guide to Islamic Manners* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2000).

36. See Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, *How Picturebooks Work* (London: Garland Publishing, 2001).

37. Rowaa El-Magazy, *Maryam and the Trees* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1999), 5.

So off the children went to search the house from top to bottom.



Figure 6: Living Room Calligraphies. Illustration by Terry Norridge, in *Maryam and the Trees* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1999).

Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.

Torsten Janson

Imagining Islamic Identity: Negotiated Norms of Representation in Euro-Muslim Picture Books

lamic principles of God as the creator of life; of human beings as His *khalifa* (caliphs), that is, His vicegerents on earth responsible for caring for his creation; and of nature's testimony of the power and glory of God. In the story, Maryam and her brother are encouraged to scientifically explore the world of trees, to enjoy their fruits and discover their importance for wild life. Granddad also finds an opportunity to relate the popular tale of Muhammad and the crying tree, before the children finally rush into the garden, "ready to plant their first tree for the sake of Allah!"<sup>38</sup> The illustrated calligraphies of "Allah" and "Muhammad" thus may be seen as symbols tying down not only the story at hand but also humankind and the world in its totality, to a cosmological metanarrative resting on a creationist ontology, accommodated to a children's format.

While some of the more recent books, such as the strikingly naturalist depictions by Vinay Ahluvalia in *Animals* (1997), may appear to have completely departed from any observation

of Islamic norms of representations, this creationist metanarrative tells a different story. To the contrary, the iconographic depictions of zebras, monkeys, and squirrels testify to the glory of the One, Divine, Eternal *Musawwir*. Far from infringing on God's domain, the artist thus is seen as celebrating God's creation through the production of naturalistic images. Indeed, the owls on the final pages of *Animals* do not merely hoot but mysteriously (and humorously) recite the name of God: "Allah made owls that hoot in the night: Who? Who? Allah-Hoo!" (fig. 7).<sup>39</sup>

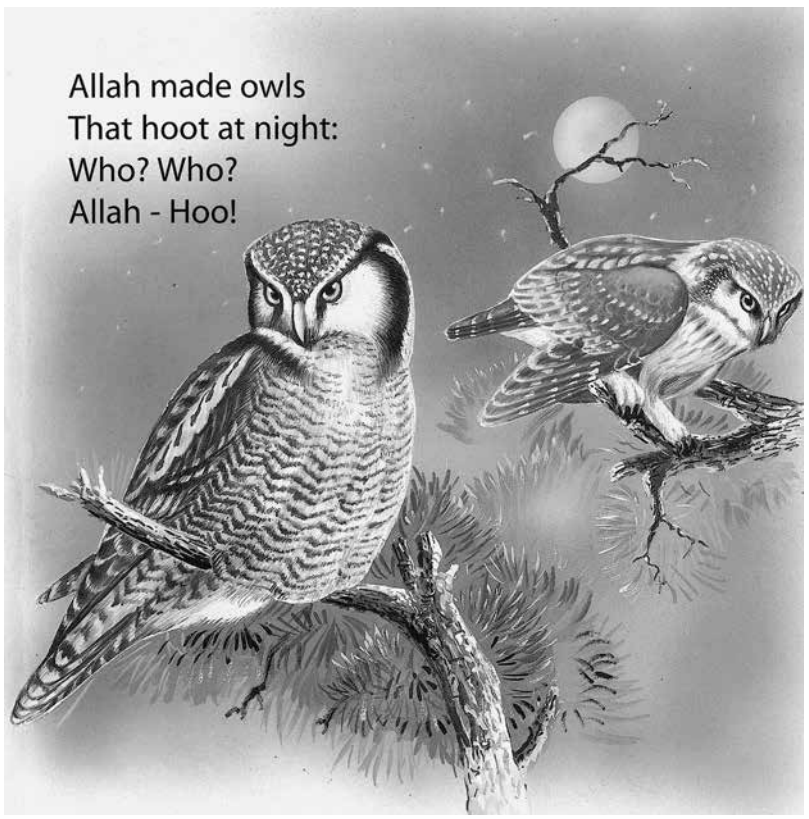
Another important Islamic free zone is the home. It is described and depicted as a primarily feminine sphere, revolving around the catering, mild, and deeply pious mother (fig. 8), as in *My Mum Is a Wonder* (1999).<sup>40</sup> In this illustrated book and others like it, female characters are pictured with headscarves, even when at home. 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

38. Ibid., 21.

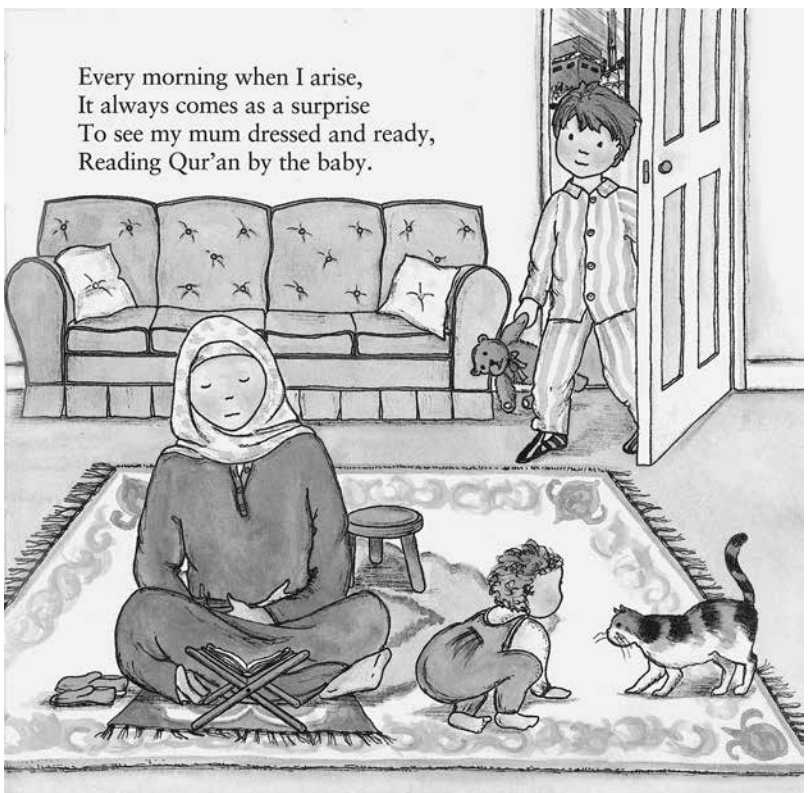
39. Farah Sardar, *Animals* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1997), 23.

40. See Michèle Messaoudi, *My Mum Is a Wonder* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1999).

**Figure 7: Testifying Owls.**  
Illustration by Vinay Ahluvalia, in *Maryam and the Trees* (Markfield, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1997). Image courtesy of Kube Publishing and The Islamic Foundation.



**Figure 8: 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.



tradition. As it turns out, this ideal, feminine space has become the dominant arena for the negotiation of Islamic identity within European cultural pluralism in recent children's literature. Ritual space and nature remain prominent themes as well, but they generally provide thematic free zones for *not* having to deal with pressing cultural issues. Thus feminine symbolism and female authorship reveal a preoccupation with minority issues and contexts.

To illustrate this problematic, we may once again return to *Rashid and the Missing Body*. This story 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 secondary narrative 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.<sup>41</sup>

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 girl of the domestic sphere incorporates the problem. The boy 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.

### Images of a Sanctified Childhood

Active and organized British Muslims have agreed on the importance of formulating functional strategies of religious socialization for contemporary Muslim children and youth. Ever since the establishment of large Muslim communities in Britain, however, there have emerged distinct childhood discourses, defined by different ideas about the sociopolitical function of religion as well as the interpretation and accommodation of religious forms of identity to the cultural and social circumstances at hand. Despite ideological differences, the religious commodities produced by organizations such as the Islamic Foundation remain useful for a broad range of consumers (even those who are not in agreement with the ideological motives behind the products). Actors with roots in the Sunni Islamic movement have skillfully utilized the free market of contemporary religious consumption and identity formation. This has paid off in granting such initiatives an influence surpassing their popular mandate. In short, religious commodities such as the children's books discussed in this study remain fairly open and adjustable to individual worldviews. In order to assess the full significance of the success of such entrepreneurial ventures on the markets of Islamic identity, however, the question of how Muslim children and parents consume Islamic literature must be addressed. This virtually unexplored ethnographic field of research promises to yield rich scholarly results.

41. Radwan, *Rashid and the Missing Body*, 80.



In the future, further conclusions about the development of the norms of representation that have unfolded during the establishment, consolidation, and diversification of a Euro-Islamic children's literature can be offered. Based on preliminary evidence, it is clear that it is untenable to conceptualize the contemporary visual norms of representation of Sunni Islamic children's literature in terms of any fixed set of visual rules and regulations. Rather, visual norms should be thought of in terms of a distinct discursive point of departure, grounded in classic, Sunni principles of monotheism and resistance to subjectivist anthropocentrism. Through the experiences of migration and minority existence, this point of departure has been negotiated in relation to the pedagogic needs and communicational opportunities within a new cultural setting. The overall effect has been the unfolding of a rich diversity of representational strategies.

Some solutions of representational negotiation recall visual strategies drawn from pre-modern Islamic artistic traditions; such is the tendency to ornamentize forms and flatten perspective. Another significant tendency is the formulation, transformation, and final dissolution of the extensive paratextual elements of the literature. A case in point is the somewhat randomly inserted calligraphies in depicted interiors. Such concepts and symbols perform functions similar to the paratexts in discursively marking affinity with particular Islamic themes, historiographies, and social sentiments, yet in infinitely more subtle forms. Other strategies may be understood as responses to distinctly modern circumstances and the experiences of migration. The depiction of human beings in the books dealing with contemporary issues thus tends to be balanced with a preoccupation with confined Islamic spaces: the pious, domestic setting, the observation of religious rituals, the social setting of Muslim peer relations, and, last but certainly not least, the sanctuary of created nature that testifies to the glory and omnipotence of the one single God.

"The past of lost attachment remains a loss. What to do? Shrug. And pickle the past in

books."<sup>42</sup> Rushdie's words eloquently pay tribute to central concerns underlying Islamic children's literature. But what attachment does the Islamic Foundation agree to shrug at, and what past is pickled in the books? Essentially, the very concept of an Islamic literature is a result of a Sunni Islamic revivalist ideology, resting on an idea of universal Islamic values transcending local, regional, and national Muslim particularity. While the Islamic Foundation thus may shrug at the loss of South Asian attachments, the idea of a common Islamic past becomes all the more essential. But the preservation of a sacred symbolic stock is not perceived as an end in itself. To the contrary, for the Islamic Foundation, pickling of the past in books signifies a resacralization of the present. It is the cultural process of negotiation that gives the literature its particular Islamic character and appeal on an open market of religious consumption via the emulation of pedagogically functional models combined with a creative adherence to Islamic aesthetic programs. In the final analysis, we need to think of this phenomenon in terms of style. When opening an Islamic children's book, the child does not only encounter a tale illustrating religious principles, introducing central historical characters, or depicting correct religious behavior. The child also encounters an Islamic ambience, a less tangible sense of being part of something out of the ordinary. The ultimate goal of Islamic children's literature is not only the sacralization of the British present, but the sanctification of the Muslim child itself. S

42. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 277.