



Beyond good boys and nice girls: Unpacking Childhood Ideologies of Indonesian Peaceful Islam

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Abstract

This article examines how contemporary Indonesian stories of peaceful Islam construct ideas of the “good” Muslim child, focusing on the Rahmatan Series children’s books. It explores at how these books shape children’s moral subjectivities and whether they in support of the broader campaigns fostering moderate, peaceful Islam. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the study identifies key moral themes, character roles, and ethical positions in the Series. Four dominant constructions of good Muslim children emerge: defenders of religious identity, pioneers of empathy and sacrifice, effective emotional self-regulators, and positive influencers. While the Series aims to promote peaceful Islamic values, the analysis reveals tensions, including the overrepresentation of female protagonists, the privileging of middle-class urban Muslim life, and the absence of non-Muslim moral exemplars. Theoretically, the study contributes to childhood and religious education scholarship by showing how peace-oriented narratives may simultaneously challenge and perpetuates stereotypes and biases. Practically, the findings offer insights for authors, educators, and policymakers, highlighting the need for socially inclusive and gender-balanced narratives. In alignment with SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 16 (peace and justice), the article calls for Islamic children’s literature that more fully reflects diversity, equity, and interfaith coexistence.

Keywords. childhood, children’s book, critical discourse analysis, good children, Islam, Indonesia, SDGs.

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana cerita-cerita kontemporer bercorak Islam damai di Indonesia membentuk gagasan tentang anak Muslim yang “baik”, dengan fokus pada buku anak-anak Seri Rahmatan. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana buku-buku tersebut membentuk subjektivitas moral anak-anak dan apakah buku-buku tersebut mendukung kampanye yang lebih luas dalam menumbuhkan Islam yang moderat dan damai. Dengan menggunakan Analisis Wacana Kritis, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tema-tema moral utama, peran tokoh, dan posisi etis dalam seri tersebut. Empat konstruksi dominan mengenai anak Muslim yang baik muncul: pembela identitas agama, pelopor empati dan pengorbanan, regulator emosi yang efektif, serta pemengaruh positif. Meskipun seri ini bertujuan untuk mempromosikan nilai-nilai Islam yang damai, analisis ini mengungkapkan adanya ketegangan, termasuk dominasi tokoh utama perempuan, penekanan pada kehidupan Muslim kelas menengah perkotaan, serta ketiadaan teladan moral non-Muslim. Secara teoretis, studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian pendidikan anak dan agama dengan menunjukkan bagaimana narasi yang berorientasi pada perdamaian dapat secara bersamaan menantang dan mempertabahkan stereotip serta bias. Secara praktis, temuan ini memberikan wawasan bagi penulis, pendidik, dan pembuat kebijakan, menekankan adanya kebutuhan akan narasi yang inklusif secara sosial dan adil gender. Sejalan dengan SDG 4 (pendidikan berkualitas) dan SDG 16 (perdamaian dan keadilan), artikel ini menyerukan

agar sastra anak-anak Islam lebih sungguh-sungguh dalam memancarkan keragaman, kesetaraan, dan koeksistensi antaragama.

Keywords. *masa kanak-kanak, buku anak-anak, analisis wacana kritis, anak-anak yang baik, Islam, Indonesia, SDGs.*

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is a foundation for shaping values, identities, and everyday ethics that are central to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) (Rad et al., 2022; Willockx & Dom, 2022). Together, these goals justify the contribution of early learning materials, such as children's stories, to fostering inclusive dispositions and peaceful social relations. Building on this context, this article examines how contemporary Indonesian Muslim children's literature presents images of the good and idealised Muslim child within the discourse of peaceful Islam. Drawing on the concept of childhood ideology, understood as the social expectations and qualities attributed to children (Blitzer, 1991; Hoffman, 2003), this analysis examines an Indonesian Islamic children's book series: the Rahmatan Series (2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). This study elaborates on the authors' earlier work (Formen, 2025; Formen, Rohmah, Medilianasari, & Wantoro, 2023). Using discourse-analytical tools (Paltridge, 2006; Taylor, 2013), the paper considers two guiding questions: (1) what images of "good" Muslim children are constructed in the Rahmatan Series? and (2) how do these representations align or fail to align with the discourse of peaceful Islam?

Children's literature plays an important role in shaping children's moral orientations, identities, and social expectations. Research from diverse countries shows that stories are used to promote national identity (Galway, 2010), ideological loyalty (Tesar, 2012), and culturally specific values (Tesar, Tong, Gibbons, Arndt, & Sansom, 2019). In Indonesia, storytelling is a common practice of early childhood education to transmit particular views, behaviours, and self-images (Fajrie, Sutono, Purbasari, Mustofa, & Faresta, 2025; Hermawan, Inayah, Windiarti, & Hindrawati, 2022; Utamimah & Hussen, 2024). These practices position children's literature as a key site for the production and circulation of childhood ideologies.

Despite this significance, Indonesian Islamic children's literature remains comparatively underexamined critically. Existing studies have largely focused on specific regional or sectarian contexts. For example Ghaeni (2006) traces the historical development of Iranian children's literature, while Szanto (2012) analyses how Shi'i children's books construct pious subjectivities. Although valuable, these studies provide limited insight into the diversity of Islamic children's literature throughout various settings. As Williams (2020) notes, the field remains globally understudied, particularly in large Muslim-majority societies.

This gap is particularly consequential in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country, where discourses of peaceful or moderate Islam—often articulated as *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin*—have become central to national identity and policy imaginaries (Aziz (Abdullah, Amiruddin, Dewi, & Mannan, 2025; Aprilianto, Aslamiyah, Zahidi, Crisnasari, & Febbrianti, 2025; Rosela, Mulyadi, & Kusumawati, 2025) et al., 2019; Mas'ud, 2021; A. M. Zuhri, 2022). The national campaign of *moderasi beragama* positions religious moderation not merely as theological orientation but as a civic virtue to be cultivated across educational institutions (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019, 2024). In this context, children are framed as future moral citizens, and children's literature functions as a key discursive technology through which ideals of peaceful Islam are translated into everyday narratives and idealised childhood subjectivities.

The Rahmatan Series: Indonesian children's literature promoting peaceful Islam

Indonesia's call for peaceful Islam is a long-standing campaign whose echoes can be traced through various historical periods (Hilmy, 2013; Kasdi, 2019). Over time, various labels have been used to describe this orientation, including *Islam inklusif* (inclusive Islam) (Azca et al., 2021), *Islam damai* or *Islam ramah* (peaceful or friendly Islam) (Kholis & Rini, 2023), *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin* (Mas'ud, 2021), and *Islam moderat* (moderate Islam) (Aziz et al., 2019). Among these, the notion of *moderasi beragama* (religious moderation) has recently become the official framework adopted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (2019, 2024). Despite their terminological differences, these discourses share a common theological foundation: the idea of Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, or "mercy for all the worlds," as expressed in the Qur'anic verse, "We sent thee not save as a mercy for the peoples." (Quran Surah Al Anbiya')

Recently, the Indonesian government's agenda of *moderasi beragama* has explicitly targeted young children. The Ministry of Religious Affairs' (2019) official guidebook states that the vision of religious moderation should be translated into educational programs "from **Early Childhood Education** to higher education" (pp. 144-145)—emphases added. Religious moderation has also been incorporated into national curriculum standards (Ministry of Education Culture Research and Technology, 2024). This policy direction has motivated the publications of children's books that carry *moderasi* messages. Among these publications is the Rahmatan Series (2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d), which serves as the corpus for this study. The Series consists of four books containing twenty stories, which generally offer Qur'anic and Prophetic guides for young children of moderate, peaceful Islamic expressions and behaviours.

Peaceful Islam as a pedagogical discourse

Beyond its theological foundations, the discourse of peaceful, moderate Islam in Indonesia can also be understood as a pedagogical project of moral governance in a Foucauldian sense (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991; Foucault, 1991; S. Zuhri, 2021). Governmental project, or governmentality as Foucault (1991) elaborates, refers to the use of multiple means to shape the population in this context, the young Muslim children into specific, desirable subjects. Within this framework, the state-led campaign for *moderasi beragama* and peaceful Islam operates as a strategy for shaping the conduct young children (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019).

Within this process, children's literature becomes an important and governmental technology (Dean, 2010; Smith, 2012). It provides ways of translating abstract theological or political ideals into concrete everyday actions (Williams, 2020) and prescribes how a "good" child should behave, feel, and relate to others (Christensen, 2003). These scripts, however, are never neutral. They are bound in specific historical, political, and cultural settings and often express wider projects of social regulation (Tesar, 2012). In Indonesia's context of rising religious polarisation and persistent global stereotyping of Islam as incompatible with peace (Cholil, 2022; Qodir, 2016), peaceful Islamic children's books operate as counter-discursive tactic. By presenting empathetic, cooperative, and morally disciplined young Muslim characters, they resist negative portrayals of Islam while consolidating peaceful Muslim children's subjectivities as an alternative. Yet, as those working with critical childhood studies remind us, the production of idealised child figures is always followed by exclusion and normalisation (Duhn, 2018; Eddarif, 2023; Garlen, 2019). To define the "good" child is also to define the limits of acceptable childhood. In this process certain forms of childhood are celebrated as desirable, while others remain marginal, invisible, or even subjugated.

Against this backdrop, examining Indonesian Islamic children's literature is critical for understanding how peaceful Islam is translated into everyday moral ideals. Rather than treating them merely as didactic texts, this study views them as discursive sites, an intersection between

religious, moral, and political visions of childhood. Through this lens, the Rahmatan Series appears not only as a set of moral stories but more critically as an active element in and for the wider governance of childhood within contemporary Indonesian Islam. By analysing the *Rahmatan Series*, this paper theoretically contributes to global critical scholarship on Islamic children's literature and childhood subject formation by offering an empirically grounded analysis from Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country. More practically, this study provides critical insights for authors, educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers involved in Islamic children's literature and early childhood education, highlighting the need to design peace-oriented narratives that are not only theologically grounded but also more socially inclusive and reflective of diverse socio-religious realities in contemporary Indonesia.

METHOD

This paper draws on discourse analysis (Paltridge, 2006; Taylor, 2013) to examine how linguistic and visual representations in the Rahmatan Series construct images of the “good” Muslim child. Discourse analysis is understood here as the study of language use as evidence of social practices and ideological formations (Taylor, 2013). In this study, the Series' linguistic aspects and images are treated as discursive artefacts embedded within the wider campaign for peaceful, moderate Islam in Indonesia. This approach allows the analysis of how childhood ideology—understood as normative expectations about children's qualities and behaviours (Blitzer, 1991; Hoffman, 2003)—is constructed through narrative frameworks, character roles, and moral discourses.

Corpus selection and data coding

The authors chose the Rahmatan Series as the corpus of this study for the following reasons. First, as its very name explicitly states, the Series is intentionally designed to teach young children the values of *Islam rahmatan lil 'alamin*, the peaceful Islam. Second, as a thematically coherent set of stories produced within the same framework, the peaceful Islam, the Series provides a focused corpus for examining patterns of childhood subject formation. It is important to note too here that since the Series include many references to Quranic verses and Prophetic *hadiths* provided in Indonesian, the English versions used in this paper come from Pickthall's (2001) translation of the Qur'an, as well as English versions of *Shahih Muslim* (2007), *Shahih Bukhari* (1997), *Riyadhus Shalihin* (2003), and *Arba'in Nawawi* (2008).

The stories' texts and images were manually coded through collective, iterative, and dialogic readings to enhance analytical reflexivity. Initial codes were generated inductively from both the books' visual and textual elements. For example, character attributes such as gender, age group, and religious markers were coded based on names, clothing, and narrative roles. This stage also involved attention to framing: the structure of the stories, the perspectives used, and the linguistic and visual construction of relationships between characters.

All stories underwent two cycles of coding. In the first cycle, codes were assigned to the text' segments to capture their immediate meanings. For example, the lines such as “But I must go to church in the morning” and “In the afternoon I am going to Qur'anic class at the musalla” from the *Waiting for Mary* story (Rahmatan Series, 2020b, BD-3, p. 2-3) were coded “Christian child's interest” and “Muslim child's interest” respectively. In the second cycle, initial codes from all stories were compared and clustered into more general categories sharing common meanings; for example, segments from *Waiting for Mary*, *Princess Salimah*, and *No Snacks for Today* were clustered under “Muslim children's religious interest.”

Alongside this cross-text comparison, close attention to each story's overarching frame and plot enabled the identification of thematic patterns in how good children are characterised and positioned. Furthermore, by iteratively rereading and revisiting the texts, codes, categories,

and emerging themes—to aimed at “get[ting] the holistic idea...and the emerging themes within their context” (Tavallai, 2023, p. 75)—the authors worked toward shared interpretive agreement and minimised bias. Four dominant thematic constructions of the “good” Muslim child emerged from this process: defenders of religious identity, pioneers of empathy and sacrifice, effective emotional self-regulators, and positive influencers. These themes capture recurring moral subject positions across the series and constitute forms of childhood ideology as conceptualised by Blitzer (1991) and Hoffman (2003).

In the final stage, these thematic constructions were further critically examined in relation to the wider discourse of peaceful Islam. Drawing on critical childhood studies (Cannella, 1997) and ideological readings of children’s literature (Saltmarsh, 2007), the analysis examined the coherence, tensions, and contradictions (Nicholson, 2017), considering both the alignments and tensions between the series’ portrayals of good children and the ideals of *Islam rahmatan lil ‘alamin*. This step enabled a critical interpretation of how peace-oriented narratives may privilege particular forms of childhood subjectivity while marginalising others.

Researcher reflexivity and interpretive stance

As with all qualitative and discourse-oriented studies, the analysis presented here is led by the researchers’ interpretive positions. The authors are situated within the Indonesian contexts of early childhood and Islamic education. They are familiar with the discourses, pedagogical practices, and policy agendas surrounding peaceful Islam and *moderasi beragama*. As Berger (2015) suggests, this positionality provides contextual insight into the cultural meanings embedded in the texts. Still, it also requires reflexive awareness of the normative assumptions that may accompany such familiarity.

Throughout the analysis, the researchers adopted a dialogic and iterative reading process to maintain trustworthiness and to interrogate their own assumptions (White, Marsh, Marsh, & White, 2006) about what constitutes “good” Muslim childhood. Rather than taking the moral messages of the stories at face value, the analysis examined how particular subjectivities were constructed, normalised, or marginalised within the narratives.

RESULTS

The Rahmatan Series consists of four books and 20 stories. Their back cover shows the U5+ symbol, indicating they are for children aged 4 to 6, the kindergarteners. Each main page includes both narratives and illustrations. There are 49 characters in total throughout the four books, including 47 human characters (male = 19, female = 28) and animals (cats = 1; fish = 1). Of the 47 human characters, 34 are children, and the remaining 13 are adults (male = 4, female = 9). Unlike the common practice in children’s literature, where animals dominate stories and are depicted anthropomorphically (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004), the Series features only two animal characters; none are anthropomorphized.

As mentioned earlier, from the iterative reading of the stories, four dominant constructions of the “good” Muslim children emerge, namely: defenders of religious identity and mindful observers of difference, pioneers of empathy and sacrifice, effective emotional regulators, and positive influencers—each articulated consistently across the Series through textual and visual representations. The following section discusses each of these four constructions.

Table 1. Brief overview of the materials

Books	Stories	Characters, mentions	Main plots and frames
Beautiful Differences (BD) 520 words	Waiting for Mary (BD-1), 117 words, 6 pages	F (3): Fitri, Mary, female teacher	Muslim girls and their Christian friend faced a time-dilemma to work on a project as the proposed schedules coincided with the time for mass at the church or Quranic session at the <i>musalla</i> .
	Beautiful cards (BD-2), 84 words, 6 pages	M (1): Ra'uf; F (1): Wina	A Muslim male student consoled her Christian female friend who is afraid of her different art-work project
	One Day in Bali (BD-3), 126 words, 6 pages	M (1): Karima's little brother; F (3): Karima, Karima's mother, Balinese Lady, (unnamed)	A Muslim girl family visited Bali. Her brother was tempted by the fruits brought by the Balinese women heading to the temple. Her mother reminded him. The girl consoled herself, realising that the fruits were for worship.
	No Snacks for Today (BD-4), 85 words, 6 pages	M (2): Ahsan, Jojo	A Muslim boy learning to fast outside Ramadan and managed to deal with snack temptation
	Princess Salimah (BD-5), 108 words, 6 pages	F (2): Salimah, Salimah's Sister	A Muslim girl managed to secure her hijab while tasked to act as a princess, conventionally depicted as non- <i>hijabi</i> , in a dramatic class
Love of the Motherland (LM) 668 words	For the Sake of the Red and White Flag (LM-1), 170 words, 7 pages	F (1): Kanya; M: Teacher	A female Muslim successfully completed an assignment to be a flag raiser in the face of her teacher's doubt during the rehearsal
	Alif and Three Little Guests (LM-2), 117 words, 6 pages	M (1): Alif	A Muslim boy living in a tourist village bothered by the white young visitors but managed to be a good host
	Piggy Bank of Love (LM-3), 133 words, 6 pages	F (1): Nur	A Muslim, hijabi girl leading her diverse friends to donate her savings to help people impacted by the earthquake
	The Bamboo-Spear Fighters (LM-4), 122 words, 5 pages	M (2): Ilham, Ilham's Grandfather	A Muslim boy who managed to overcome his disappointment in a drama project, as he wanted a role of an armed soldier, but was assigned instead as a fighter with a bamboo spear.
	A Stilt House with A Low Door (LM-5), 126 words, 5 pages	F (2): Butet, Alya	A Muslim girl visited a traditional house with a low door that made her bowing when entering it. The local custom says bowing is the way to show respect to the host; for the girl saying salam is the way to do so.
Being good with the neighbours (BGN) 496 words	The mango from Oma (BGN-1), 93 words, 6 pages	F (2): Azizah, Oma Tuti	A Muslim girl was tempted by a fallen mango. She managed to overcome the temptation and delivered it to her neighbour, an old Chinese lady. She was given a bucket of mangoes in return for her honesty.
	The The Guests of the Blue House (BGN-2) 84 words, 6 pages	M (1): Fatih	A Muslim boy and his friends went out for soccer but found the ground occupied by cars of the guests from a nearby house. They moved to another spot to avoid disturbing the guests or hitting the cars with the ball.
	Belang the Cat (BGN-3), 99 words, 6 pages	M (2): Azam, Azam's father; F (1): Masyita; Non-humans: cat (1), fish (1)	A Muslim boy went fishing with his father. A cat sneaked and stole the big catch. Tired of chasing the cat, he met the cat's owner, a Muslim girl, who was scared and apologized for her cat. The boy then forgave her.
	Crispy Tempeh (BGN-4), 98 words, 6 pages	M (1): Abyan; F (3): Isna, Isna's grandmother, Isna's mother	A Muslim girl returned from her grandma's village with lots of crackers. Her neighbour's son came, offering a little plate of the same crackers. Initially showing an underrating gesture, she respectfully accepted the gift.
	More Broth (BGN-5), 122 words, 6 pages	M (1): Doni; F (3): Alma, Alma's mother, Siti	A Muslim girl learned to cook; then she wanted to share the food with her neighbour's children. But she only had a little soup. Her mother suggested that she add water, so that there would be enough broth to share.
Love Your Friends (LYF) 464 words	Shhh (LYF-1), 96 words, 6 pages	M (2): Aldy, Dokter	A boy with a bad habit of shouting and high tone when talking to others ended in sore throat and later learned to control his emotions.
	Adelia's Secret (LYF-2), 87 words, 6 pages	F (2): Hana, Adelia	A Muslim hijabi girl, Hana, who tried to cover up her friend's shame of bedwetting
	When Rafi was angry (LYF-3), 97 words, 6 pages	M (2): Rafi, Yusuf; F (1): Rafi's mother	A Muslim boy who learned to control his anger in the way it was taught by the Prophet
	Whispers (LYF-4), 101 words, 6 pages	M (1): Azmi; F (2): Kinan, Rahma	Three young Muslim girls learned not to exclude each other in a group situation.
	Because I'm Your Friend (LYF-5), 83 words, 6 pages	M (1): Mahren; F (1) Syifa	A young Muslim girl who tried to advise her friend to save him from danger.
Total male characters (19); female characters (28); children (34); adults (13); non-human (2).			

Defender of identities, mindful observer of diversities

The first dominant construction positions the good Muslim child as a defender of religious identity while remaining attentive to social, cultural, and religious differences. This theme appears across stories depicting both interreligious and intrareligious encounters.

In *Waiting for Mary*, Muslim girls negotiate a group-work schedule with their Christian classmate so each can attend their respective religious activities. The story frames prayer as a non-negotiable religious obligation, while also promoting cooperative coexistence. Similarly, *No Snacks for Today* presents a boy's voluntary fasting as a test of moral discipline, where resisting peer temptation becomes a sign of religious integrity. In *Princess Salimah*, the protagonist maintains her hijab while playing the role of a princess, resolving the tension between conventional fairy-tale imagery and Islamic modesty norms.

Alongside these identity-defending roles, several stories portray Muslim children as mindful observers of difference. In *Beautiful Cards*, a Muslim boy reassures a Christian classmate who feels excluded because of her Christmas-themed artwork. In *Alif and the Three Little Guests*, the protagonist learns to welcome foreign visitors by recalling the Prophet's teaching on hospitality: "Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, then let him generously honour his guest" (Rahmatan Series, 2020c, LM-2, p. 13).¹ Likewise, in *A Stilt House with a Low Door*, a Muslim girl encounters a different cultural practice and reflects on it in relation to her own religious customs.

Across these stories, the ideal child is constructed as both firmly grounded in Islamic identity and capable of respectful engagement with difference.

Pioneer of empathy and sacrifice

The second construction portrays the good Muslim child as a pioneer of empathy, generosity, and self-sacrifice. This theme is apparent in stories centred on sharing, protecting others' dignity, and prioritising collective needs over personal comfort.

In *More Broth*, a young girl and her mother decide to dilute their soup so it can be shared with neighbours, a decision that proclaims a moral ethic of generosity despite limited resources. This action, so the story goes, is inspired by the Prophet saying: "If you cook meat, increase its water and spoon (give some) to your neighbours" (Rahmatan Series, 2020a, BGN-5, p. 31).² In *Adelia's Secret*, a girl protects her friend's dignity by keeping her bedwetting condition confidential, presenting compassion as a moral obligation. The story is built on the Muslim ethic the Prophet taught: "No one conceals another person in this world, but Allah will conceal him on the Day of Resurrection" (Rahmatan Series, 2020d, LYF-2, p. 13).³ Similarly, in *Piggy Bank of Love*, a girl leads her peers to donate their savings to earthquake victims, presenting her as a moral initiator within the peer group. Moreover, the theme of sacrifice appears in *For the Sake of the Red and White Flag*, where a girl perseveres through flag-raising rehearsals despite physical strain. Here, perseverance and devotion to collective duty are framed as moral virtues.

Across the stories, the good Muslim child is portrayed not simply as caring but as actively initiating acts of care, empathy, and sacrifice, often influencing others to follow similar actions.

Effective emotional regulator

The third construction presents the good Muslim child as someone capable of emotional self-control, restraint, and moral discipline. This capacity appears in various situations involving temptation, anger, disappointment, or social conflict.

¹ Taken from An-Nawawi (2008, p. 74).

² Taken from *Riyâdhus Shâlihîn* (2003, p. 323).

³ Taken from *Shabîh Muslim* (2007, p. 453).

Several stories portray restraint in relation to material desires. In *The Mango of Oma*, a girl resists the temptation to keep a fallen mango and instead returns it to its owner. In *The Guests of the Blue House*, a boy persuades his friends to move their football game to avoid disturbing a neighbour's event. The boy, so the story shows, was inspired by the Prophetic teaching that "Whosoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should not harm his neighbour" (Rahmatan Series, 2020a, BGN-2, p. 13).⁴ In *Crispy Tempel*, a girl suppresses her pride and accepts a neighbour's gift graciously, even though she already has the same food.

The ideal of effective emotional management is also presented in situations involving anger or disappointment. In *Belang the Cat*, a boy forgives a neighbour's cat that has stolen his fish. His forgiving gesture is associated with the Quranic ethic of emotional management: "those who control their wrath and are forgiving toward mankind; Allah loveth the good".⁵ In *When Rafi is Angry*, a boy practices the Prophet's teachings on anger management by performing ablution to calm himself. Similarly, in *The Bamboo Spear Fighter*, a boy overcomes disappointment with his assigned drama role after pondering on his grandparents' stories of national struggle. The story mobilises a Qur'anic reminder about the limits of emotional judgement: "but it may happen that ye hate a thing which is bad for ye, and it may happen that ye love a thing which is bad for you. Allah knoweth, ye know not" (Rahmatan Series, 2020c, LM-4, p. 24).⁶

Throughout these stories, emotional self-control is framed as a key moral competence, grounded in religious teachings and resulting from adult carers' guidance.

The positive influencer

The fourth construction portrays the good Muslim child as a positive influencer who guides peers toward better behaviour and social harmony. Unlike the previous themes, which emphasise internal virtues, this construction emphasises the children's outward social impacts. In *Sbbb*, a boy who damages his vocal cords through excessive shouting eventually changes his behaviour after encouragement from friends. In the story of *Whispers*, a girl resolves social exclusion by inviting a friend to join her in a shared activity. In *Because I'm Your Friend* story, a girl warns her friend about the dangers of climbing a tree infested with ants, explaining that friendship involves reminding each other of potential harm, representing the Quranic ethic "Lo man is in a state of loss, save those who believe and do good works, and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance" (Rahmatan Series, 2020d, LYF-5, p. 31).⁷

These stories clearly show that good Muslim children must be morally influential and contagious: the good child not only behaves well but likewise encourages others to do so. The ideal child thus appears as an agent of moral influence within peer relationships.

DISCUSSION

Beyond good boys and nice girls: agency, moral subjectivities, and the politics of representation

Before turning to the tensions identified in the Rahmatan Series, it is useful to locate the findings within broader theoretical discussions of children's moral governance (Cannella, 1997; Tesar et al., 2019), childhood agency (Varpanen, 2019), and postcolonial counter-representation (Jiwani, 2011). From a critical childhood studies perspective, children's literature is not merely a neutral vehicle for moral lessons; it functions as a governing technology through which social norms and desirable identities are produced and circulated (Cannella, 1997; Tesar et al., 2019). In this sense, the Rahmatan Series participates in Indonesia's wider project of

⁴ Taken from *Shahih al-Bukhari* (1997, p. 92).

⁵ The Qur'an surah Al 'Imran [3]: 134.

⁶ The Qur'an surah Al Baqarah [2]: 216.

⁷ The Qur'an surah Al Ashr [103]: 2-3.

peaceful Islam by offering narrative and visual scripts that invite identification, empathy, and imitation, translating the ideals of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* into everyday practices of kindness, patience, and social responsibility. Such textual governance works less through overt discipline than through subtle forms of regulation that shape how children come to understand themselves as moral subjects (Duhn, 2018; Tesar et al., 2019).

This regulatory work is particularly visible in how the Series frames children's agency. Consistent with the "new sociology of childhood," the stories depict children as competent and agentic social actors (James, Jenks, & Prout, 2001; Jenks, 2004; Kehily, 2004; Mayall, 2000) who make ethical decisions, negotiate difference, and influence peers. These constructions challenge earlier developmentalist assumptions that position children primarily as innocent, passive, or cognitively immature beings (Blitzer, 1991; Varpanen, 2019). Accordingly, such visions of good children align with Varpanen's (2019) notion of children's agency as the "capacity to act intentionally" and the capability of "influencing what happens in their environment" (pp. 2, 4). This agentic positioning of children further challenges long-standing portrayals of Indonesian childhood as passive—for example, Hilda Geertz's (1961) classic study of Javanese children, which characterises them as being much directed toward "passivity" and led "to choose inaction rather than action" (p. 150) from an early age. Yet the agency made available in the Rahmatan Series is not open-ended. It is cultivated and recognised insofar as it enacts virtues authorised by religious teachings and the moral prescriptions of peaceful, *rahmatan lil 'alamin* Islam.

When read against Indonesia's contemporary contestations between moderate and puritan orientations—popularly framed as *Islam ramah* versus *Islam marah* (Ali-Fauzi, 2018) and situated within wider debates about moderation and extremism (El Fadl, 2005)—the Rahmatan Series can be seen as a moral and political project aimed at cultivating peaceful Muslim subjectivities. A postcolonial lens further suggests that this cultivation also operates as counter-representation: in global contexts where Islam is frequently associated with violence or intolerance, portraying morally exemplary Muslim children becomes a narrative strategy (Elbih, 2015) or a "tactical response" (Jiwani, 2011, p. 347) for reclaiming peaceful religious identity. At the same time, counter-narratives can generate new norms of respectability, privileging particular identities, lifestyles, and moral directions while marginalising others. It is within this framework—moral governance, normatively channelled agency, and postcolonial counter-representation—that the Series' tensions around class, gender, and interfaith representation can be more clearly interpreted.

Through its critical analysis, the study unpacks several tensions that can blur the Series' inclusive aspirations. While the books offer compelling moral pedagogies and circulate a coherent vision of peaceful Islam, they show that the notion of inclusivity is unevenly distributed across the characters, relationships, and moral evaluations they privilege. The following shows how these tensions emerge in the Series' narrative and visual representations, in which certain forms of good Muslim childhood are normalised and celebrated, while others are rendered less visible or less legitimate.

First, the stories predominantly depict middle-class, urban childhoods as the normative context of moral agency. Visual settings refer to modern homes, organised kitchens, inter-island travel, and structured extracurricular activities implicitly frame middle-class life as the natural environment for good children. From a postcolonial and critical childhood perspective, this representation risks universalising a particular socio-economic experience while marginalising the diversity of Muslim children's real lives, where many of whom live in contexts characterised by poverty, rural livelihoods, or social conflicts (Monshipouri & Kayaoglu, 2015; Panjwani, 2020; UNICEF, 2005). Accordingly, such representations may unintentionally align moral virtue with middle-class lifestyles, thereby normalising class-based exclusions and undermining the inclusive and egalitarian principles central to Islamic teachings.

Second, the Series emphasises female protagonists, most of whom are depicted wearing hijabs. On one level, this confronts stereotypes that portray Muslim girls as passive or oppressed (Seedat, 2013; Syed, 2008), instead regarding them as morally agentic and socially influential. Yet the exclusive association between female virtue and the hijab risks confining Muslim femininity to a singular visual marker. Non-hijabi female characters tend to occupy marginal or less morally prominent roles, which may implicitly suggest that visible religious markers are the primary indicators of moral worth. While the hijab indeed serves as a distinguishing and recognisable symbol of Muslim identity, hijab-based framing of good young female Muslims may foster the misconception that all Muslim women wear it—and that only women in hijab embody moral virtues. Such representations simplify the diversity of female Muslims' lived experience.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the Series constructs a Muslim-centric model of moral agency. Although non-Muslim characters occasionally appear in the stories, they are rarely portrayed as moral exemplars or central agents of goodness. Instead, Muslim children consistently occupy the position of ethical initiators, helpers, and moral vanguards. While this approach may be understandable, given that the books are intended primarily for Muslim audiences, it provokes important questions from the SGD 4-perspective of quality-inclusive education (United Nations, 2015). From the standpoint of peaceful Islamic discourse, the absence of non-Muslim moral exemplars creates a subtle tension: it may perpetuate stereotypes and limit interfaith understanding.

Furthermore, such non-Muslim exclusion contradicts the Series' espoused vision of *rahmatan lil aalamin* (mercy to all worlds), which calls for more inclusion and compassion across differences. This tension is especially stark when viewed against Indonesia's greater efforts to promote peaceful Islam, considering that the Ministry of Religious Affairs' *moderasi beragama* campaign clearly advances *musāwāh* (equality) as its core principle (Mukarromah & Astutik, 2022; Sumbulah, Purnomo, & Jami (Ilham & Ramadani, 2024; Kader, Rofiq, & Ma'arif, 2024; Ratnah, Shah, & Alam, 2024)lah, 2022). Taken together, the Muslim-centric representation of moral agency risks continuing the idea that goodness is religiously bounded, rather than a common human capacity across faiths.

Taken together, these tensions suggest that the Rahmatan Series performs a dual ideological function. On the one hand, it promotes a progressive vision of agentic, empathetic, and socially responsible Muslim children aligned with peaceful Islamic discourse. On the other hand, it reproduces highly selective social imaginaries formed by middle-class norms, gendered visual markers, and Muslim-centric moral agency.

The findings presented here have greater implications for inclusive values education. If peaceful Islam is to function genuinely, children's narratives may need to move beyond models where Muslim characters are the sole moral agents. Instead, stronger inclusive representations presenting diverse socio-economic backgrounds, multiple expressions of Muslim identity, and non-Muslim moral exemplars—could better reflect the ideals of coexistence embedded in *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and SDG-aligned inclusive education agendas. In this sense, the study highlights the importance of critically examining not only the presence of religious-based, peace-oriented narratives but also the social and ideological boundaries within which those narratives are produced and operate.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined how the *Rahmatan Series* constructs the figure of the “good” Muslim child within contemporary Indonesian peaceful Islam discourse. Grounded in Qur’anic teachings and prophetic traditions, the Series promotes a vision of agentic Muslim childhood through four dominant subjectivities: defenders of religious identity; pioneers of care, empathy, and sacrifice; competent emotional regulators; and positive influencers. These constructions position children not as idle, passive recipients of instruction but as socially responsive and ethically capable actors.

Theoretically, the present study contributes to the ongoing body of critical childhood studies by demonstrating how religious children’s literature operates as a technology of moral governance. While the Series aligns with the new sociology of childhood in portraying children as active social agents, it simultaneously illustrates how that agency is shaped within a broader ideological project Indonesia’s *Islam rahmatan lil ‘alamin*. Children’s literature thus emerges as a key tool and site for the construction and circulation of particular religious, moral, and political visions of childhood.

At the same time, the analysis unpacks several internal conflicts within the Series’ inclusive aspirations. The predominance of middle-class urban settings, the strong association between female virtue and the hijab, and the absence of non-Muslim moral exemplars indicate that the imagined good child remains socially and religiously bounded. These results indicate that peaceful Islamic narratives may simultaneously foster empathy and peaceful coexistence while reproducing selective social imaginaries. The study, therefore, calls for stronger inclusive narrative strategies expanding socio-economic representation, diversifying Muslim identities, and positioning non-Muslim characters as active moral agents would better reflect the egalitarian ethos of *Islam rahmatan lil ‘alamin* in general, and to meet the demand for childhood sectors’ more substantial contribution to the achievement of quality education, peace, and social justice outlined in the SDG 4 and SDG 16 (United Nations, 2015). Future research should pursue comparative cross-regional analysis, reception studies of involving children, parents, and teachers, and longitudinal and classroom-based research could, examining how peace-oriented narratives shape children’s social attitudes, interfaith relations, and moral thinking over time.

Taken together, the findings show the need to rigorously engage with children’s literature as a formative site of ideological and moral education. As Indonesia continues to promote *Islam rahmatan lil aalamin*, the production and analysis of children’s peaceful Islamic narratives will remain central to future generations.

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