

Representations of Religion and Culture in Children’s Literature

An Analysis of Othering Processes in Texts and Illustrations

ABSTRACT

Literature is an important medium for representing and communicating world-views and values. This article focuses on the representation of culture and religion and reveals constructions of identities in children’s literature. The analysis of selected contemporary German-language books considers through a discourse analytical approach the representation of the main characters and their cultural and religious backgrounds as well as their faith and its practices. The narrations analysed tend to specify difference by means of cultural and religious characteristics; instead of dissolving those categories, the narrations strengthen them. The article states the importance of literature in the mediation of knowledge, self-concepts, interpersonal perceptions and normative paradigms.

KEYWORDS

Othering, children’s literature, identity, religion, faith

Biography

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Media – and among them literature – have a significant role to play in the transmission of world-views, values and norms to children and adolescents.¹ Children’s books iterate, strengthen and reflect existing social structures. This article deals with children’s literature as it is concerned with, and constructs, “own” identities and “foreign” identities. The study examines the representa-

1 This article highlights the results of author’s unpublished Master’s thesis, Eberhardt 2017.

tion of identities in the context of immigration and religion and argues that in children's books the negotiation of values such as tolerance often paradoxically strengthens and generalises differences such as religious ones. Moreover, it illustrates modes of representation and views of cultural and religious identities in contemporary children's literature from the perspective of religious studies.

Children's and adolescent books articulate social communication for a specific biographical phase. Whereas children's books address readers aged six to twelve, adolescent literature is written for teenagers. Storybooks, produced for children between the ages of three and eight, tend to be educational and are characterised by thematic redundancy. Children's literature often has a pedagogical aim; it is intended to mediate norms, paradigms and images of society.

The article begins by outlining a theoretical framework where the concept of othering plays a central role. In a second step, after a short discussion of methodology, the results of an examination of selected children's books are presented. The analysis highlights othering processes in the representation of own and foreign culture and religion.

OTHERING, OWN IDENTITIES AND FOREIGN IDENTITIES

Constructions of own identities and foreign identities are imagined processes of demarcation that categorise individuals and groups as belonging to or not belonging to social systems. These processes of othering express constructions of identities. The analysis of children's literature illustrates that foreign identities are more clearly constituted than own processes of belonging. Conceptions of own and foreign identities are narrative and iconographic constructs which become manifest in delineations, judgments and classifications of persons and groups.²

Own identities are formulated via demarcation and differentiation from imagined foreign identities. Furthermore, foreign identities do not exist per se, but arise in confrontations between the familiar and the unknown, the confident and the unconfident.³ According to Stuart Hall, the representation of foreign identities does not occur uniquely but rather recurs in an identical or similar manner across media such as television, books or magazines. The intertextual accumulation of meaningful conceptions strengthens the representation of particular groups as different and foreign.⁴

Written and visual media are essential mediums of images, ideas and knowledge. Media devise foreign identities by means of categories such as back-

2 See Gernig 2001, 19.

3 See Gernig 2001, 15.

4 See Hall 2004, 111–112.

ground, nationality, religion and tradition, history and politics – the comprehensive framework that we term *culture* is of central importance in the construction of own and foreign identities. With the deconstructivist turn in the humanities, classifications of race, ethnicity and gender lost their postulated naturalness.⁵ However, in social reality these categories do not occur as social constructs at all times. Processes of “naturalisation” establish characteristics of foreign identities as unalterable and naturally constituted. In addition, “naturalisations” are often used to justify discrimination and exclusion. Difference and interpersonal perceptions are generated not only by experience, but also by imagination and concepts circulating in society.

Children’s and adolescent literature revises and strengthens prejudices and interpersonal perceptions in an early phase of life. Conceptions of foreign identities are not scrutinised but instead iterated as prejudged. Prejudices reduce the complexity of reality, are hard to modify and are linked with emotions. Moreover, prejudices coalesce with narratives, reports and personal anecdotes.⁶ Prejudices are similar to stereotypes, which are extenuated and undifferentiated perceptual patterns that do not allow one to draw one’s own conclusions.⁷ Whereas prejudices imply negative associations, stereotypes are utilised with both negative and positive connotations. However, positive stereotypes construct foreign identities just as do negative ones, for they oftentimes exoticise and mystify foreign cultures and religions in discourses of fascination.

Media represent religious practices and cultural ways of life as well as own identities and foreign identities in processes of othering and are conducive to creating conceptions of the world.

THEORETICAL REALM AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The following analysis of children’s books focuses on texts and illustrations that represent signs and symbols encoded in the construction of own and foreign identities. According to Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, “representation is one of the central practices that produces culture and a key ‘moment’ in what has been called the ‘circuit of culture’.”⁸ The “circuit of culture” (fig. 1) illustrates how societies produce meaning in connection with representation, production, regulation, consumption and identity. According to Hall,

Our “circuit of culture” suggests that, in fact, meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices (the cul-

5 See Knapp/Klinger 2008, 10.

6 See Eickhorst 2007, 37.

7 See Krickau 2007, 16.

8 Hall/Evans/Nixon 2013, xvii.

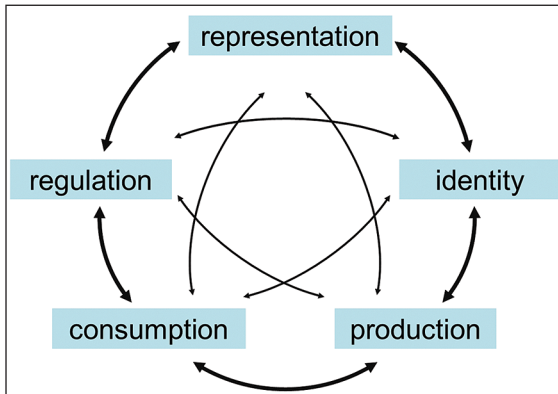


Fig. 1: The “circuit of culture” according to Stuart Hall/Paul Du Gay 2013, xvii.

tural circuit). Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we “belong” – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups.⁹

In order to examine the representation of own identities and foreign identities as well as the production of knowledge systems and narrative positions, the analysis here refers to the areas *representation* and *identity*. The article focuses on the construction of own identities and foreign identities, hence the literature is interpreted from a discourse analytical perspective. Dorien Van De Mieroop explains: “From a discursive perspective, the fluid nature of collective identity is emphasized, which means that every individual shifts in and out of diverse memberships in a multitude of social groups, resulting in a wide variety of potential collective identities that are each interactively constructed and negotiated.”¹⁰ I have chosen this methodological approach since discourse analysis is based on the assumption that societies construct reality, allowing one to analyse protagonists, identities, knowledge systems and power structures.

THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION AND CULTURE IN CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

The following analysis is based on two books in which cultural and religious identities in Germany play a central role. In their approach to religion, they are representative of a whole range of children’s literature where religions are depicted as institutions, inspired by “world religion” classifications and combined with representations of otherness in the context of migration.¹¹ Furthermore,

⁹ Hall/Evans/Nixon 2013, xix.

¹⁰ Van De Mieroop 2015, 410.

¹¹ See Eberhardt 2017, 25.

they deal with such topics not only in the text but also with plentiful illustrations. Their selection is therefore based on both their content and their style.

The children's book *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* (Lara Lustig and beloved God) was published in 2006. The author, Elisabeth Zöller, was a grammar school (*Gymnasium*) teacher who wrote numerous children's books, many of which covered "difficult" topics such as death, anger, violence and grief.¹² *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* narrates in five chapters how pupils at a primary school get to know each other with regard to faith, religious practices and cultural traditions. The protagonists represent Catholic Christianity, Judaism and Islam and discuss their ways of life in class. The chapter titles are "Cornelius und die Erstkommunion" (Cornelius and the First Communion); "Joscha und das Laubhüttenfest" (Joscha and the Feast of Booths); "Bilal und die Blumen des Korans" (Bilal and the Blossoms of the Qur'an); "Tante Berthe und das Beten" (Aunt Berthe and Praying); and "Sternennacht" (Starry Night).¹³ The book was published by cbj Verlag – which belongs to Random House – a major publisher in Germany. cbj Verlag publishes children's and adolescent books on topics like friendship, anxiety, family and relationships, love, identity and adolescence as well as societal and personal issues.¹⁴ The intended readers of *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* are between the ages of eight and ten, and the book aims to inform children about diverse religious and cultural traditions.¹⁵

Starke Geschichten für alle Kinder dieser Welt (Strong stories for all the children of this world), a storybook published in 2016, operates in the same way. In six stories, five authors present religious and cultural traditions of Jewish, Christian and Muslim children from Poland, Turkey, Tanzania, Syria and China. The children meet in German-speaking environments. The anthology comprises the following individual stories: "Levent und das Zuckerfest" (Levent and the sugar feast); "Mwangaza und die Geschichte mit dem Zahn" (Mwangaza and the story with the tooth); "Lena feiert Pessach mit Alma" (Lena celebrates Pesach with Alma); "Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest" (Lili and the Chinese Spring Festival); "Jana und Teresa feiern Himmelfahrt" (Jana and Teresa celebrate Ascension Day); and "Huda bekommt ein Brüderchen" (Huda gets a baby brother). *Starke Geschichten für alle Kinder dieser Welt* was published by Carlsen and is intended for children aged three and up. The publishing house describes the content as follows:

12 <http://www.elisabeth-zoeller.de/index.php?id=0000003&SID=488458ec883812f3dc4fcc2b3fd8d682> [accessed 29 January 2018].

13 All translations of the sources from the German original are by the author.

14 <https://www.randomhouse.de/Kinder-und-Jugendbuchverlage-cbj-&-cbt/aid77972.rhd> [accessed 29 January 2018].

15 See back cover, Zöller 2006.

Six stories recount the everyday life of children from different cultures who live with us. There is laughter and food, celebration and singing everywhere. All children are curious and want to get to know each other. No matter if they are from Turkey, Syria, Africa, China or another place in the world ... Strong storybook tales to look at and read aloud together.¹⁶

Beyond that, the publisher recommends the storybook to parents and educators and states that it is “checked and accompanied by experts”.¹⁷ Some of the five authors have migration backgrounds themselves.¹⁸ “Stiftung Lesen”, a foundation that promotes literacy and reading skills, has recommended the storybook.

The analysis of *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* and *Starke Geschichten für alle Kinder dieser Welt* focuses here on the representation of identity, culture and religion by means of diegesis and point of view, spaces and settings, character conception, culture and cultural imaginaries as well as faith and religion.¹⁹

DIEGESIS AND POINTS OF VIEW

The narrative voice mediates between diegesis and the reader; it determines how the reader is made aware of characters, storylines and emotional atmospheres. The analysis of narrative positions reveals how the narrative voice constructs closeness and distance as well as foreign elements and difference.

The chapters in *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* illustrate how a schoolgirl becomes acquainted with the religious and cultural traditions of her classmates from a homodiegetic perspective. Although the narrative voice – the schoolgirl – is a minor character in the storyline, the perspective generates a personal view. Pronouns like *I* and *we* provide insight into emotions and personal views. By contrast, *Starke Geschichten für alle Kinder dieser Welt* describes characters as well as their feelings and perceptions distantly, from a heterodiegetic perspective. The internal focus on characters that represent own identities has an alienating effect. By means of narrative conceptions, texts construct interpersonal perceptions on an intradiegetic level.

SPACES AND SETTINGS

A focus on spatial settings can illuminate the construction of difference in children’s literature and in particular the creation of own identities and foreign

16 See <https://www.carlsen.de/presse/hardcover/lesemaus-sonderbaende-starke-geschichten-fuer-alle-kinder-dieser-welt/66761> [accessed 29 January 2018].

17 See cover, Halberstam 2016.

18 See for example biographies of Agatha Ngonyani: <http://www.agathangonyani.com/>, Dagmar Yu-Dembski: <http://www.bebraverlag.de/autoren/autor/257-dagmar-yu-dembski.html> and Suleman Taufiq: http://www.nrw-kultur.de/de/programme/werkproben/autor_innen_2017_18/suleman_taufiq/#/.

19 For narrative analysis in general see De Fina/Georgakopoulou 2015.

identities. Where are religion and migration mediated? How are spaces portrayed? Which spaces are meeting places; which spaces illustrate foreign places?

Most of the stories are not set in Germany explicitly, but the use of the German language, the narrative perspective evident, for example, in “the Chinese are celebrating spring festival”²⁰ and the description of the environment suggest Germany or another German-speaking country. In particular, the illustrations show scenes commonplace in Germany. Most of the stories about migration



Fig. 2: Spaces and settings in Yu-Dembksi/Leberer (illustr.), *Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

and religion are set in a school or a nursery school (fig. 2), meeting places where children with diverse cultural, religious and national backgrounds come together. In addition, children who represent foreign identities often invite figures who represent locals into their private living environment to make the latter familiar with specific cultural practices such as festivities and customs.

REPRESENTATION OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Characters are central elements of the narrations and acutely important for analysis of own and foreign identities. Readers identify with figures who mediate sympathy and antipathy as well as world-views. The embodiment and representation of characters has a great impact on how recipients understand a story.²¹ Whereas one half of the narrations focuses on male characters, the other half deals with female figures. The analysis indicates that gender affiliations, roles and imagery are peripheral in children’s literature that addresses religion and migration. In the representation of foreign identities, the figures often appear to be somewhat genderless. The focus on characteristics of foreigners replaces a focus on the characteristics of gender – unlike in other children’s literature – and constructs otherness by background, religion and nationality.

The representation of own and foreign identities depends crucially on visual aspects. Nearly all the narrations show characters who represent own identities with blonde or red hair. Foreign identities are illustrated by figures with dark brown or black hair and a dark complexion. Although relatively few people are

20 Yu-Dembksi 2016, n. pag., emphasis added.

21 See Van De Mieroop 2015, 412.



Fig. 3: The Jewish character Alma with her friend Lena in Halberstam/Späth (illustr.), *Lena feiert Pessach mit Alma* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.



Fig. 4: The Tanzanian character Mwangaza in Nkonyani/Flad (illustr.), *Mwangaza und die Geschichte mit dem Zahn* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.



Fig. 5: Levent and Tom in Halberstam/Tüst (illustr.), *Levent und das Zuckerfest* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

blonde, let alone red haired, the construction of own and foreign identities uses those visual representations to demarcate difference (figs. 3–5). Furthermore, names are important indicators of otherness: characters who represent foreign identities are named Levent, Bilal, Jadi or Mwangaza, whereas characters who represent own identities bear names that are commonly used in Europe, like Emma, Jana, Louis or Lisa.

In addition, the children’s books analysed here create otherness with recurring role types. Those figures who represent own identities are characterised as particularly inquisitive. As a result, those characters who represent foreign identities explain their culture and religion in detail. “Huda bekommt ein Brüderchen” is a story about Huda, a little girl who represents own identities, whereas her Syrian grandmother represents otherness. Huda does not speak Arabic very well and is not familiar with her grandmother’s customs and traditions. She explores otherness by asking a lot of questions:

Grandma put some sweets on the table at home. She made tea and in the whole flat there was a magnificent scent. “What smells so differently?” Huda asks. “That is incense,” Grandma explains. “So that God gives us luck.” “What is that?” Huda asks curiously. “What does that say, Grandma?” Huda asks. “Noom al Hana” states grandma. “This is Arabic and means *unhurried repose*” grandma answers.²²

22 Taufiq 2016, n. pag., emphasis in original.

In this case, own and foreign identities are not illustrated by characters that differ in national, religious or cultural ways, but by figures that represent difference in terms of generations. Huda depicts what intended recipients would recognise, whereas Huda's grandma illustrates otherness. Questioning and responding exhibit nescience, as do also visual illustrations. The story "Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest" exemplifies the characterisation of own identities inasmuch as Emma is always depicted as uninformed and curious about the host's Chinese traditions (figs. 6–8).



CULTURE AND CULTURAL IMAGINARIES

The term "culture" is often used imprecisely in both academic and popular spheres. However, culture is a concept frequently used in contemporary children's literature in connection with religion and migration, employed to represent differences between own and foreign identities. Here the analysis focuses on the production of cultural meaning in light of the *cultural imaginary*. According to Hall, a group's identity is based on shared meanings that distinguish members of one group from members of another group.²³ Elena Croitoru notes,

The cultural imaginary can be said to make up for the loss of the sense of belonging, thus leading to the concepts of a nation as an "imagined community" (nationhood) and identity. Therefore, cultural imaginary is socially constructed to suit the needs of a community, of a particu-



Fig.6–8: A facial expression of nescience and admiration in Yu-Dembckj/Leberer (illustr.), *Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest* (n. pag) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

23 Kramer 2008, 272.



Fig. 9: Emma perceives Chinese letters as "strange signs" in Yu-Dembski/Leberer (illustr.), *Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.



Fig. 10: Arabic language and lettering in Taufiq/ Spanjardt (illustr.), *Huda bekommt ein Brüderchen* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

lar group, on the one hand, and to form the sense of belonging to the community, on the other.²⁴

Traditions and customs as well as material culture keep communities together. This analysis focuses on cultural semantics with regard to language, tradition, clothing and interior design.

Language and lettering are important factors in the construction of cultural difference between own identities and foreign identities. The short story "Mwangaza und die Geschichte mit dem Zahn" was written in German and complemented with sentences in Kiswahili to represent the Tanzanian background: "'Sala ya Watoto wadogo, Mungu mwema nijalie...'" This is Tanzanian language and means that God may bless the children.²⁵ A character in "Bilal und die Blüten des Korans" states, "Bilal speaks German very well. His parents were born in Germany and attended school there."²⁶ Bilal, a third-generation descendant of immigrants, is of course able to speak German fluently. The mention of his ability is deployed to mark otherness. Similarly, the illustration of writing systems represents cultural difference.

Emma, a character in "Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest", calls Chinese letters "strange signs" (fig. 9).²⁷ The author of "Huda bekommt ein Brüderchen" uses Arabic letters and explains, "أنا هدى" means "I am Huda" (fig. 10).²⁸

In both text and illustration, traditions and customs are strongly linked with otherness. The characters describe their activities in detail, which leads us to as-

24 Croitoru 2013, 28.

25 Ngonyani 2016, n. pag.

26 Zöller 2006, 87.

27 Yu Dembski 2016, n. pag.

28 Taufiq 2016, n. pag.

sume that they are not known to the intended reader. Thus, for example, we read, “Aunt Martha hangs a bunch of flowers behind the corner seat. ‘Now it will protect us from illness’, she explains” (fig. 11).²⁹

Those characters that represent own identities often visit the characters that represent foreign identities on religious holidays to learn about traditions and rituals. Each narration informs the reader about particular dishes that are prepared and eaten in specific foreign countries. The authors compare traditional dishes with food the reader may know: “Family Wang eat *Jiaozi* at the spring festival. This is pasta filled with meat and vegetables like ravioli or *Maultaschen*.”³⁰



Fig. 11: Customs and traditions in Pana/Bandlow (illustr.), *Jana und Teresa feiern Himmelfahrt* (n. pag.).

The illustrations of tableware and cooking utensils along with the interior design represent material culture and visualise own and foreign identities. The objects depicted are often accompanied by religious symbols. Levent’s Turkish background is evident from the many postcards from Turkey, posters with football players wearing the shirts of the Turkish national team, a doormat with the inscription “Merhaba” and an alarm clock in the shape of a mosque. An image of the *Basmala* “مي حرلا نم حرلا هللا مسب” (“In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”) decorates his grandparents’ living room (fig. 12).



Fig. 12: Representation of Muslim identities in Halberstam/Tust (illustr.), *Levent und das Zuckerfest* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

29 Pana 2016, n. pag.

30 Yu-Dembski 2016, n. pag., emphasis in original.

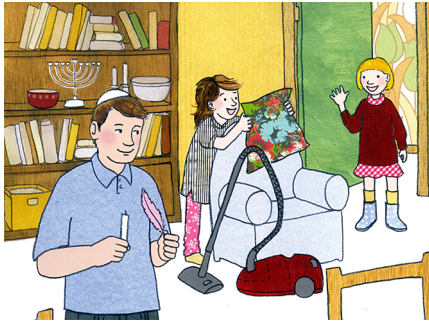


Fig. 13: Interior design and material culture in Halberstam/Späth (illustr.), *Lena feiert Pessach mit Alma* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

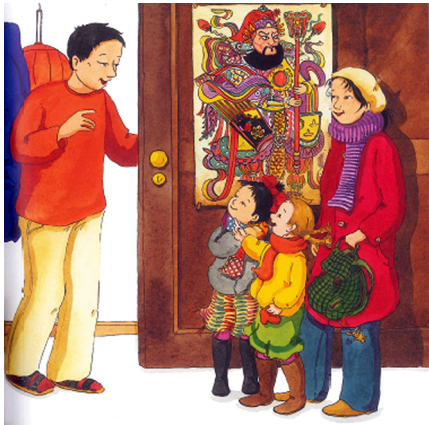


Fig. 14: Interior design in Yu-Dembksi/Leberer (illustr.), *Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.



Fig. 15: Fashion and clothing in Pana/Bandlow (illustr.), *Jana und Teresa feiern Himmelfahrt* (n. pag.).

The stories “Lena feiert Pessach mit Alma” and “Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest” represent religious otherness too (fig. 13–14).

Only a few stories illustrate the spaces in which the characters who represent own identities live, and such illustrations are not linked with any specific religious or traditional material culture. This conceptual decision suggests a need to represent foreign identities, whereas own traditions appear natural. This statement applies to fashion and clothing too. All the children – irrespective of national, cultural or religious background – wear similar clothes, whether trousers, skirts, blouses or shirts. The reader perceives the characters as equal. Instead parents and grandparents are the characters who tend to represent otherness in their clothing (fig. 15–17). This conception suggests that culture and religion are located in family structures.



Fig. 16: Representing the grandmother's Muslim identity in Taufiq/Spangardt (illust.), *Huda bekommt ein Brüderchen* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

Fig. 17: Jewish fashion and clothing in Halberstam/Späth (illust.), *Lena feiert Pessach mit Alma* (n. pag.) © Carlsen Verlag GmbH, Hamburg 2011.

FAITH AND RELIGION

The analysis's approach to faith and religion assumes a non-restrictive concept of religion. However, the authors of the books examined here use institutionalised conceptions of religion. Specifically, the narrations refer to Catholic Christianity, Jewish traditions and Islamic ways of life. The short story "Lili und das chinesische Frühlingsfest" mentions various gods; they are set in a context that is not religious but national. Religion is displayed as something special and uncommon as the characters learn about religious traditions on festive days and at celebrations.

The books discussed here presuppose either a Protestant or a general, unspecific Christian perspective. In *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott*, we read, "Most of us are Protestant, like me. Only four are Catholic."³¹ The story "Lena feiert Pessach mit Alma" juxtaposes Jewish Pessach and Christian Easter. Own identities are clearly conceptualised as Christian: "Pessach is the Jewish festival of the matzah, we Jews celebrate it at the same time you celebrate Easter", Alma explains smiling.³² Religious otherness is constructed by using unknown terms: "The most important Jewish festivities are Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot; Hanukka, Pessach and Purim also belong to it.' 'Strange words!', Louis shouts."³³

The reader identifies religious rituals and festivities as unusual as they are pointed out with exoticising comments:

Everybody was dressed nicely: the girls with long white dresses, with flowers and floral wreaths in their hair, the boys in dark suits. And each child holds a beautifully

31 Zöller 2006, 7.

32 Halberstam 2016, n. pag., emphasis in original.

33 Zöller 2006, 53.

decorated white candle. It almost made us envious, because we do not have such a festival in our church.³⁴

While the character admires the clothing of the children who celebrate their First Communion, she considers the Jewish identity of another classmate fascinating: “Joscha does not belong to our group primarily, but Cornelius and Joscha get along well and often talk to each other. Joscha is Jewish, and this is a little mysterious for us.”³⁵ The characters use first-person personal pronouns in narrations to mark religious affiliations: “Our Jewish religion looks back on a three-thousand-years old history. We Jews believe in *one* holy, invisible God who created and guides all creatures.”³⁶

In particular, *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* focuses on historical background and critical aspects of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Although the pupils discuss the extent to which the Catholic Church is responsible for wars against innocent people, the aunt of one schoolgirl relativises the discussion and emphasises the substantial message of Christianity. Unlike Christianity and Judaism, Islamic ways of life are quite clearly criticised in the narrations. The accusations concern gender roles, Ramadan and terrorism, with the pupils expressing their positions in a highly emotional manner: “‘Ramadan’ he [Bilal] says, ‘Muslims fast during Ramadan.’ Louis insults him, calling him a dunce.”³⁷ The emphasis on Islamic traditions results in the construction of the collective singular “Islam”. In this respect, this children’s literature is including itself in a popular critical discourse about Islamic ways of life.

The author of *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* describes religious traditions according to “Abrahamic religions”. The narrator expresses a view critical of religion and questions whether it is necessary:

“Why do people need religion?”, “It is a difficult question,” Aunt Berthe responds, but I noticed that she was thinking about it. “It is not easy to answer. But we will try.” [...] “Religions” she started “are bound to the big questions of humanity.” “Which questions?” “Where am I from? Where am I going? What is the goal, the sense of life? What happens after death? Why is there good and evil? Where does evil come from? Religions try to answer these questions. Different religions offer very similar answers.”³⁸

In addition, the characters ask about agnostic or atheistic positions:

“And those who think they can only believe in things for which there is evidence – what about them?” “That is a difficult question” mama responds. “It is the old con-

34 Zöller 2006, 10.

35 Zöller 2006, 16.

36 Zöller 2006, 64, emphasis in original.

37 Zöller 2006, 87–88.

38 Zöller 2006, 109.

flict between faith and rationality. We cannot prove or fathom logically whether God exists, but there is no evidence that God does not exist.”³⁹

The pupils spend one night at school, where they talk about faith, God and the infinity of the universe. The last part of the story demonstrates the author’s intention to represent faith in God as a proper way of life, with monotheistic religions portrayed as the ideal: “The one great God, the God of Christians, Jews and Muslims. The God in whom so many people of different religions believe in. All of them were looking for a way to God. Maybe those who did not believe also found a way to him.”⁴⁰ The narration constructs otherness by contrasting people who believe in God with those who do not.

CONSTRUCTING OTHERNESS

Analysis of these two children’s books in light of culture, religion and migration reveals processes of othering. All the authors and graphic illustrators tend to stereotype and exaggerate difference similarly. Although the narrations broach difference as a central paradigm, each story refers to friendship and sympathy. Understanding of foreign identities is a product of knowledge about different ways of life. The teacher in *Lara Lustig und der liebe Gott* insists upon tolerance as the children should know each other’s religious practices and cultural traditions and accept each other’s ways of life. The narrator – a schoolgirl – states:

And when I looked back in the hall, I saw Lara Lustig and our class. Everybody was different. Everybody has his legs, his nose, his thinking and feeling and also his culture and religion. And everybody had a mind full of images and ideas. Though, we were all together. Below the great, infinite starry sky.⁴¹

Although the narrator mentions difference beyond religion and culture, the demand for broad-mindedness and tolerance of foreigners consolidates and naturalises categories of difference such as culture and religion. People are diverse and prefer different ways of life, habits and moral concepts. The categorisation of culture and religion results in a construction of collective singulars, which are culturalising and essentialising. Culture and religion are fields that appear inalterable. But identities are interdependent – they are not based solely on nationality, culture and religion.

The narrations focus on a strong correlation of national, cultural and religious affiliations in their construction of own and foreign identities. Characters that represent own identities are not explicitly constituted as German, but, by con-

39 Zöller 2006, 49, emphasis in original.

40 Zöller 2006, 123.

41 Zöller 2006, 122–123.

trast, the representation of foreign characters is linked with national localisations: “This is Mwangaza. He is four years old. He has five sisters. Mwangaza’s mama comes from Tanzania, his papa comes from Germany.”⁴² “Teresa was born in Poland and lives with her family in Germany.”⁴³ “This is Huda. She is five years old and still attends nursery school. Huda was born in Germany, but her parents come from Syria.”⁴⁴ According to the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, a person has an immigrant background if he or she or at least one of his or her parents was not born with German citizenship.⁴⁵ On this basis, the characters that represent foreign identities have immigrant backgrounds. The narrations are unable to discuss the characters’ interdependent national identities since their speech produces a monolithic representation of otherness. The exploration of whether characters belong to specific groups or are foreigners presupposes a social collectivity or a majority within society that determines imaginaries, rules and norms and dictates inclusion and exclusion to regulate constructions of collective affiliation.⁴⁶ Although most of the characters were born in Germany, the readers perceive them not as German, but as foreigners.

Sociologist Minna-Kristiina Ruokonen-Engler points to important perspectives concerning immigration and globalisation: social realities, affiliations and behaviour patterns are no longer understood within the framework of nation states; rather, they operate in contexts of migration, diverse social realities, transnationalities, globalised economies and affiliations beyond the nation state.⁴⁷ The narrations examined here presume a strong connection between nationality and cultural identity. Cultural identity “can be defined as the broad range of worldviews and behavioural practices that one shares with the members of one’s community. Beside everyday practices, morals and religion take prominent roles in the individual’s conception of cultural identity.”⁴⁸ However, the books discussed here restrict the cultural identities represented and disregard individual conceptions of culture and religion; religions are conceptualised as monolithic entities that are related to the concept of world religions. Yet, as Tomoko Masuzawa has written,

These so-called great religions of the world – though what makes them “great” remains unclear – are often arranged by means of one or the other of various systems of classification, with binary, tripartite, or even more multifarious divisions. What

42 Ngonyani 2016, n. pag.

43 Pana 2016, n. pag.

44 Taufiq 2016, n. pag.

45 https://www.bamf.de/DE/Service/Left/Glossary/_function/glossar.html?lv3=3198544 [accessed 2 February 2018].

46 See Ruokonen-Engler 2016, 248.

47 See Ruokonen-Engler 2016, 250.

48 Thomas/Al-Dawaf/Weissmann 2016, 218.

these systems do, regardless of the variation, is to distinguish the West from the rest, even though the distinction is usually effected in more complicated ways than the still frequently used, easy language of “East and West” suggests.⁴⁹

The representation of religion in light of the idea of “world religions” fails to acknowledge individual faith and world-views and determines groups in apparently immutable constructions of othering. Media – including literature – contribute significantly to the transmission of those constructions.

Literature is an important instrument for enculturating and socialising children. Enculturation is a process of “growing into culture”; it comprises basic cultural skills such as language, communication and lettering.⁵⁰ In comparison to enculturation, socialisation includes the development of personality, knowledge and values, which enable individuals to act in society.⁵¹ Children’s literature is an important protagonist in enculturation as well as socialisation. Such books teach cultural skills as children read the texts and look at the illustrations. Literature, as an important form of communication, conveys knowledge, self-concepts, interpersonal perceptions and normative paradigms – this is particularly the case with children’s books. Unlike other forms of media, children’s books are often read many times. Their contents are repeated over and over again – and they include world-views, values and representations of otherness.

The narrations analysed in this article tend to specify difference by means of cultural and religious characteristics. But instead of dissolving those categories, the narrations strengthen them. Their claim to present national, religious and cultural diversity as “normal” and commonplace contradicts their explicit representation of own and foreign identities since, in fact, the books deal clearly with religious, cultural and national difference. To relate diversity as a commonplace, children’s literature could recount typical stories – about friendship, hobbies or adventures – with diverse characters and obviate distinct constructions of identity in terms of cultural background. To this end, literature might do better to assess culture and religion in a non-deterministic manner, as one of many constituents of an individual’s identity.

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49 Masuzawa 2005, 2.

50 See Wurzbacher 1963, 15.

51 See Plath/Richter 2012, 485–486.

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