

Representing the 'Other' in Indonesian Digital Children's Books: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the BUDI Platform

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ABSTRACT

Children's literature plays a significant role in shaping cultural identities and understandings of diversity. However, government-supported digital children's books may reproduce marginalizing representations despite promoting inclusive values. This study examines how the "Other" (*liyan*) is constructed in Indonesian digital children's books available on the BUDI platform and explores its implications for inclusive education. Employing qualitative critical discourse analysis, this study examined eight purposively selected children's books representing diverse cultural contexts and educational levels. Data were analyzed through Stuart Hall's representation theory, Fuad Hassan's *kami-kita* distinction, and Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal framework. Textual and visual analyses focused on narrative perspectives, character positioning, cultural representations, and inclusion-exclusion dynamics. Three representational approaches emerged: ethnographic documentation, cross-cultural encounters, and animal allegories. Although these approaches promoted cultural pride, mutual understanding, and acceptance, they also revealed patterns of *internal othering*. These patterns appeared through portrayals of traditional communities as lacking modern infrastructure, cultural practices as spectacles, and marginalized individuals as passive victims. Insider narratives emphasized cultural identity, whereas cross-cultural encounters illustrated transformations from exclusive *kami* to inclusive *kita*. The findings demonstrate that government-supported children's literature can simultaneously promote inclusivity and reproduce subtle cultural hierarchies. The study highlights the importance of critical literacy practices and culturally responsive representations in developing inclusive educational materials.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature plays a significant role in shaping how young readers understand cultural diversity, construct social identities, and negotiate their relationships with others. Beyond providing entertainment and supporting literacy development, children's books serve as cultural texts through which particular values, identities, and social norms are communicated, reinforced, or challenged

(Formen & Nuttall, 2014; Tesar, 2014). As Bishop (1997) argues, children's literature functions as both "mirrors" reflecting readers' own identities and experiences and "windows" offering perspectives on the lives of others. However, representations of cultural difference are not inherently inclusive. While diverse children's books can foster intercultural understanding, empathy, and respect, they may also reproduce stereotypes, reinforce unequal power relations, and position certain communities as culturally unfamiliar or socially marginalized (Boutte et al., 2008; Crisp et al., 2016; Garces-Bacsal, 2022). From this perspective, children's literature constitutes an important site for examining how the "Other" (*liyan*) is constructed, negotiated, and normalized through narratives and illustrations. Understanding these representational processes is particularly relevant to inclusive education, which requires not only the visibility of diverse identities but also critical attention to how differences are portrayed and whose perspectives are privileged.

Indonesia, home to more than 1,300 distinct ethnic groups and the world's largest Muslim population, presents a compelling context for investigating these representational dynamics. The nation's motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity"), captures the ongoing tension between celebrating cultural plurality and forging a cohesive national identity—a tension that resonates throughout its education policies (Formen & Nuttall, 2014). In response, the government has introduced digital platforms like BUDI (*Buku Digital Indonesia*) to expand access to children's reading materials. Managed by the Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa under the Ministry of Education, BUDI hosts thousands of resources, including storybooks, comics, and folktales in various regional languages, along with accessible features such as audiobooks and braille versions. The platform's significance for educational research lies in its role as a government-sponsored initiative that claims to promote inclusive education while simultaneously operating as a tool for shaping young citizens according to state priorities. As such, examining the representational politics embedded within these materials is crucial for understanding how state ideology is transmitted through children's literature.

The theoretical framework guiding this investigation draws primarily on Stuart Hall's (2013) theory of representation, which posits that meaning is not passively reflected but actively constructed through language and visual systems. Hall's notion of "the spectacle of the Other" illuminates how marginalized groups are frequently reduced to simplified stereotypes and positioned as objects of curiosity rather than complex subjects with agency (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013, pp. 215–267). This study also incorporates Fuad Hassan's (1974) conceptual distinction between "kami" (exclusive "we") and "kita" (inclusive "we") to analyze how narratives either reinforce or dissolve boundaries between groups. The term *liyan* (the Other) refers to individuals or groups positioned as different from a perceived norm, while "internal othering" describes the discursive process whereby authors, despite good intentions, inadvertently represent local communities as exotic, backward, or lacking, thereby reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to challenge. Additionally, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) framework for multimodal analysis provides tools for examining how images work in concert with text to construct particular meanings. Tesar's (2014) concept of childhood governance further situates children's literature within broader institutional contexts, highlighting how state-produced texts function as instruments of policy designed to shape young citizens.

Previous scholarship has revealed persistent representational inequities in children's literature across different national contexts. Adam et al. (2024) documented the scarcity of diverse family structures in Australian picture books, while Garces-Bacsal (2022) demonstrated the potential of diverse literature to foster culturally responsive pedagogy. In Indonesia, Rofiah et al. (2023) found that inclusive early childhood provision remains limited, constrained by stigmatization, resource shortages, and inadequate teacher preparation. Durriyah and Dewayani (2024) showed that meaningful engagement with multicultural literature depends significantly on teacher encouragement and facilitation. Formen (2025) further revealed that contemporary Indonesian children's books, despite professing inclusive values, often reproduce exclusionary social paradigms through their construction of ideal childhoods. Sheehy et al. (2024) found that sign-supported resources can positively contribute to inclusive kindergarten

pedagogy. These studies underscore the urgent need to examine how government-sponsored digital platforms represent cultural diversity.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does the BUDI platform represent the "Other" in its children's storybooks? (2) What patterns of representation emerge across the selected texts? and (3) How do these representations relate to broader discourses of nationalism and state ideology? The novelty of this research lies in its focused examination of a government-sponsored digital platform, combining textual and visual analysis to uncover how the "Other" is constructed in state-produced children's literature. By integrating Hall's representation theory, Hassan's "kami-kita" framework, and Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal approach, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of representational practices in Indonesian digital children's books.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 2003) to examine eight purposively selected storybooks from the BUDI platform. Critical discourse analysis enables systematic examination of how linguistic and visual choices construct particular understandings of cultural difference, how these representations are produced within specific discursive practices, and what broader social ideologies they reflect (Fairclough, 2003). The design follows a descriptive qualitative document study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018), combining qualitative analysis of texts and images with quantitative patterns across books.

2.2. Data Sources and Sampling

The primary data sources were children's storybooks available on the BUDI platform (budi.kemendikdasmen.go.id), a government digital library managed by the Indonesian Ministry of Education. Eight books were purposively selected based on three inclusion criteria: (1) thematic relevance to cultural diversity or encounters between different groups, (2) representation of different Indonesian regions, and (3) inclusion of both elementary and early childhood level books. Books without cultural diversity themes, books from non-government platforms, and books outside the 2019-2026 publication range were excluded.

The selected books comprise *Sepasang Mata* (Veronica W., 2020), *Dodo dan Cerita Bandung Utara* (Kurnia, 2018), *Kenara, Anak Suku Gayo* (Rismawati, 2018), *Bermain di Kampung Naga* (Adhayati, 2023), and four early childhood titles: *Putri Resik* (Suyitman, 2019), *Farah dan Warna Merah* (Kuswanto, 2019), *Tarian Babo* (Falah, 2019), and *Tetangga Baru Beki* (Khoirunisa, 2019). The selection was grounded in purposive sampling logic (Patton, 2015; van Rijnsoever, 2017), following Silverman's (2017) guidance on developing a typology of cases that exemplify the social processes under investigation.

2.3. Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedure involved several stages. First, all eight books were downloaded from the BUDI platform. Second, each book was read multiple times to identify themes, characters, and narrative perspectives. Third, relevant pages addressing cultural difference, identity, inter-group relations, or social inclusion were documented, with text transcribed and illustrations described. Fourth, the selected books were read repeatedly to ensure comprehensive data capture.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data analysis followed Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2019) interactive model, consisting of four stages. The first stage, initial coding, involved assigning preliminary codes to passages and images based on theoretical concepts (e.g., "stereotype," "agency," "spectacle") and emergent patterns (e.g., "internal othering," "culture as spectacle"). Textual data were coded according to narrative perspective (insider, outsider, or third person), character positioning (central or peripheral), and representation type (spectacle, stereotype, binary opposition, or naturalization) following Hall's (2013) framework.

The second stage, thematic categorization, grouped codes into broader themes such as "ethnographic documentation," "cross-cultural encounter," and "animal allegory." The third stage, multimodal analysis, examined representative examples by analyzing linguistic choices, visual composition, and text-image interaction using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) visual grammar framework. Visual data were coded examining social distance (intimate, medium, or distant), point of view (eye-to-eye, from above, or from below), composition (center/margin placement), and color usage. The "Kami-Kita" dynamic (Hassan, 1974) was coded as exclusive (kami), inclusive (kita), or transformational (kami→kita).

The fourth stage, comparative analysis, compared findings across books to identify patterns by age level and narrative perspective. Table 1 illustrates examples of coding categories and analytical procedures.

Table 1. Coding Categories and Analytical Procedures

Coding Category	Description	Example from Data
Narrative Perspective	Insider/Outsider/Third person	First-person narrator in <i>Kenara, Anak Suku Gayo</i>
Representation Type	Spectacle/Stereotype/Binary Opposition	"Cataloguing" approach to Gayo culture
Kami-Kita Dynamic	Exclusive/Inclusive/Transformation	Shift from "kami" to "kita" in <i>Sepasang Mata</i>
Visual Social Distance	Intimate/Medium/Distant	Medium distance in <i>Bermain di Kampung Naga</i>
Visual Composition	Center/Margin	Traditional artifacts in center, people in margin

Source: Authors' analysis (2026)

2.5. Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To ensure credibility, several strategies were employed. First, triangulation involved using multiple theoretical perspectives—drawing on Hall (2013), Hassan (1974), and Kress and van Leeuwen (2021)—to interpret the same data from different angles. Second, peer debriefing was conducted with two colleagues experienced in children's literature and discourse analysis. Three debriefing sessions were held during the analysis phase (February, March, and April 2026), during which preliminary findings, coding decisions, and interpretive challenges were discussed. These sessions helped refine the analytical framework and reduce potential researcher bias.

Third, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the analysis process, documenting assumptions, interpretive decisions, and emerging insights. This reflexive practice acknowledged the researcher's position as an Indonesian early childhood education scholar with prior experience in children's literature research, which shaped the interpretive lens applied in this study. Fourth, thick description was used throughout the analysis, providing detailed evidence and context for each interpretation so that readers can assess the validity of the claims.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of eight purposively selected children's storybooks from the BUDI platform revealed three main findings: (1) three representational approaches to the "Other," (2) patterns of "internal othering," and (3) the governance function of state-produced literature.

3.1. Overview of the Books

The eight books analyzed vary in target age, narrative style, and regional focus. Table 2 provides a summary of their key characteristics.

Table 2. Summary of Books' Key Characteristics

No	Title	Author	Year	Level	Region	Narrative Perspective
1	<i>Sepasang Mata</i>	Veronica W.	2020	Elementary	Papua-Java	Outsider (Javanese girl in Papua)
2	<i>Dodo dan Cerita Bandung Utara</i>	Nia Kurnia	2018	Elementary	West Java	Insider (local child)
3	<i>Kenara, Anak Suku Gayo</i>	Rismawati	2018	Elementary	Aceh	Insider (Gayo child)
4	<i>Bermain di Kampung Naga</i>	Tuti Adhayati	2023	Elementary	West Java	Outsider (city child visiting)
5	<i>Putri Resik</i>	Suyitman	2019	PAUD	General	Third-person
6	<i>Farah dan Warna Merah</i>	Redy Kuswanto	2019	PAUD	General	Third-person
7	<i>Tarian Babo</i>	Malikul Falah	2019	PAUD	Halmahera	Animal allegory
8	<i>Tetangga Baru Beki</i>	Lutfia Khoirunisa	2019	PAUD	General	Animal allegory

Source: Authors' analysis of eight purposively selected children's storybooks from the BUDI platform (2026)

3.2. Representational Approaches to the "Other"

Three distinct representational approaches emerged from the analysis: ethnographic documentation, cross-cultural encounter narratives, and animal allegories

3.2.1 Ethnographic Documentation: Pride and Its Risks

Books employing ethnographic documentation—particularly *Kenara, Anak Suku Gayo*—present local cultures with pride and detailed observation. The first-person narrator repeatedly uses "kami" (we) to refer to her tribe, positioning herself firmly within the community she describes:

"Suku Gayo adalah suku yang fenomenal dengan dua warisan dunia yang dimilikinya, yaitu Gunung Leuser dan Tari Saman." (Kenara, p. 2)

"The Gayo tribe is a phenomenal tribe with two world heritage sites: Mount Leuser and the Saman Dance."

The word "fenomenal" and the emphasis on UNESCO recognition place Gayo culture within a framework of external validation. This representational choice is significant: the culture's value is established through international recognition rather than intrinsic worth, subtly positioning Western institutions as arbiters of cultural significance (Hall, 2013). Visually, *Kenara* presents Gayo culture through a "cataloguing" approach. Detailed illustrations show traditional clothing, musical instruments, and houses, resembling encyclopedia entries more than invitations into a lived world. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) concept of "visual grammar," these images function as "information" presented to an outside viewer. The reader is positioned as a learner acquiring knowledge about a culture rather than as a participant in it. This visual framing inadvertently positions Gayo culture as an object of study—illustrating Hall's (2013) "spectacle of the Other."

In *Dodo dan Cerita Bandung Utara*, the insider perspective is more complex. Dodo is a local child, but the narrative also includes voices like Abah Komar, an elderly farmer who represents traditional ways threatened by modernization:

"Sawah dan kebun yang dulu begitu luas, secara perlahan mulai habis dan berubah menjadi rumah mewah dan hotel. Petani penggarap dan petani pemilik pun sudah tidak ada lagi." (Dodo, p. 10)

"Rice fields and gardens that were once so vast slowly began to disappear and turn into luxury houses and hotels. Tenant farmers and landowning farmers are gone."

This passage constructs farmers as passive victims of development, evoking sympathy but not agency. Hall's (2013) discussion of representation and power is relevant here: when marginalized groups are represented primarily as victims, they are positioned as needing help from others rather than as capable of acting on their own behalf. This aligns with Formen's (2025) finding that seemingly inclusive Indonesian children's books can reproduce exclusive views by denying agency to marginalized groups.

3.2.2 Cross-Cultural Encounter Narratives: Discovery and Transformation

Books with outsider protagonists—*Sepasang Mata* and *Bermain di Kampung Naga*—dramatize the process of encountering difference and overcoming initial prejudice. These narratives follow a pattern: initial discomfort, gradual exposure and learning, and eventual acceptance.

In *Bermain di Kampung Naga*, the city child Gagas arrives with clear anxieties:

"Tidak ada listrik? mendengarnya aku langsung panik. Aku jadi ragu, jangan-jangan jelajah desa ini bakal membosankan." (Bermain, p. 3)

"No electricity? Hearing that, I immediately panicked. I started to doubt, what if this village exploration turns out to be boring."

This initial framing is significant because it positions the village and its way of life as lacking something essential. The absence of electricity marks Kampung Naga as "behind"—a classic example of what Hall (2013) calls "the spectacle of the Other"—the tendency to define difference in terms of lack or deficiency. The narrative works to reverse this impression: Gagas discovers that the village offers experiences city life cannot match. By the end, his perspective has shifted:

"Jelajah desa ke Kampung Naga sama sekali tidak membosankan. ... Oleh-olehku permainan dan bahasa Sunda." (Bermain, p. 34)

"Exploring the village at Kampung Naga was not boring at all. ... My souvenirs are traditional games and the Sundanese language."

The power dynamic shifts: Gagas, initially the observer, becomes the learner, while Ajat, the village child, becomes the teacher. This represents what Hassan (1974) would describe as a movement from "kami" (exclusive) to "kita" (inclusive)—the boundaries between self and other begin to dissolve through genuine encounter.

Sepasang Mata follows a similar arc but with greater emotional complexity. The Javanese protagonist Kinan's discomfort is not just about missing modern amenities but about navigating genuine cultural difference. The Papuan character Edita's initial avoidance is rooted in trauma from tribal conflict and past discrimination:

"Tak ada perang, tetapi teman-teman tidak bisa menerima saya. Mereka bilang, saya beda suku, saya dari pedalaman, saya dari hutan." (Sepasang Mata, p. 34)

"There was no war, but friends couldn't accept me. They said I'm from a different tribe, I'm from the interior, I'm from the forest."

This moment is crucial: it shows that the "Other" is not just an object of curiosity but a person with a history of being marginalized. The transformation from "kami" to "kita" happens when Kinan understands this history and when Edita allows herself to trust. The barapen ceremony, described as "a symbol of peace and brotherhood" (p. 38), becomes the narrative's resolution—a moment where Papuan cultural practice becomes the medium of reconciliation.

3.2.3 Animal Allegories: Safe Introductions to Difference

The four PAUD books use animals to explore ideas about difference and acceptance. This choice makes sense developmentally: young children can engage with themes of otherness through stories that are not directly about human social categories.

In *Tetangga Baru Beki*, the difference between Beki (a duck) and Kila (a bat) is presented as a simple matter of habits. The resolution comes through mutual understanding:

"Meski berbeda, mereka masih bisa berteman." (*Tetangga Baru Beki*, p. 21)

"Even though they are different, they can still be friends."

The visual presentation reinforces this message. Both animals are drawn in a friendly, cartoonish style. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) concept of "modality" helps explain this choice: the low modality (non-realistic style) signals that this is a story about ideas, not about real animals or, by extension, real human groups. In *Tarian Babo*, the difference is about skill and confidence. The peacock offers help rather than ridicule:

"Hai! Mengapa kamu di situ? Ayo, berlatih menari bersamaku." (*Tarian Babo*, p. 14)

"Hey! Why are you there? Come on, practice dancing with me."

The message is about inclusion regardless of current ability—not about tolerating difference but about actively supporting others to develop. However, as Boutte et al. (2008) caution, animal stories can reinforce "colour-blind" notions that avoid direct engagement with race and cultural difference. By displacing human diversity onto animals, these books may teach basic acceptance without preparing children for the complexities of real-world cultural encounter.

3.3 The "Kami" to "Kita" Transformation

Fuad Hassan's (1974) distinction between exclusive "kami" and inclusive "kita" provides a useful lens for understanding narrative resolution across the books.

In both *Sepasang Mata* and *Bermain di Kampung Naga*, the narrative arc moves from initial separation toward eventual connection. In *Sepasang Mata*, the turning point is the *barapen* ceremony, described explicitly as a symbol of peace:

"Barapen adalah lambang perdamaian. Di tengah upacara barapen itu, Kinan dan Edita menjalin sebuah persahabatan yang hangat dan damai. Tak ada lagi prasangka. Tak ada lagi curiga." (*Sepasang Mata*, p. 38)

"Barapen is a symbol of peace. In the midst of that barapen ceremony, Kinan and Edita formed a warm and peaceful friendship. No more prejudice. No more suspicion."

The ceremony, a traditional Papuan practice, becomes the site where "kami" becomes "kita." This is significant because it uses local culture as the medium of reconciliation, not something external.

Kenara does not offer a transformation narrative. The book begins and ends with Kenara's pride in her culture. There is no initial prejudice to overcome, no conflict to resolve. The reader is invited to admire and learn, but not to undergo any fundamental shift in perspective. The PAUD books achieve "kita" through simple resolutions. In *Tetangga Baru Beki*, Beki and Kila become friends despite their different habits. In *Tarian Babo*, Babo and the peacock work together. These are "kita" moments appropriate for young children: inclusion through friendship and cooperation.

3.4 Patterns of "Internal Othering"

A recurring pattern of "internal othering" emerged across multiple books—moments where local communities were inadvertently positioned as exotic or backward despite good intentions. This pattern manifested through three mechanisms.

First, modernity functioned as a marker of deficiency. In *Bermain di Kampung Naga*, the repeated mention that the village has no electricity (pp. 2, 8) sets up a contrast between "modern" (urban, with electricity) and "traditional" (rural, without). Even though the narrative ultimately shows the value of village life, the initial framing lingers. The visual presentation reinforces this contrast. Kampung Naga is shown with traditional houses, green hills, and people in simple clothing. This visual coding of "tradition" versus "modernity" inadvertently positions the village as frozen in time—what Fabian (1983) called the "denial of coevalness," the tendency to represent other cultures as existing in a different time.

Second, culture was presented as spectacle. In *Kenara*, the detailed cataloguing of Gayo culture—dances, musical instruments, foods, kinship terminology—creates what Hall (2013) would call a "spectacle." The culture is presented as something to be looked at and admired, but not necessarily as a living reality that includes the reader. The book's structure reinforces this: each section introduces a new aspect of Gayo culture in a textbook-like format. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) concept of "information structure" applies here: the book positions readers as learners acquiring knowledge about a culture, rather than as participants in that culture.

Third, marginalized groups were depicted as passive victims. In *Dodo dan Cerita Bandung Utara*, the farmers displaced by development are presented sympathetically but without agency. Abah Komar is a figure of pathos:

"Entah pekerjaan apa yang akan dilakukan Abah Komar jika pemilik tanah sudah mengambil tanah yang sedang ia garap." (Dodo, p. 10)

"What kind of work will Abah Komar do if the landowner takes back the land he is cultivating?"

This representation evokes sympathy but not necessarily solidarity. The farmers are victims, not agents. Hall's (2013) discussion of representation and power is relevant here: when marginalized groups are represented primarily as victims, they are positioned as needing help from others, rather than as capable of acting on their own behalf.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that representations of the "Other" in Indonesian digital children's literature are shaped by complex relationships among cultural identity, narrative perspective, and educational values. Across the eight books examined, three representational approaches emerged: ethnographic documentation, cross-cultural encounters, and animal allegories. Although these approaches communicate cultural pride, mutual understanding, and social acceptance, they also reveal tensions between celebrating diversity and reproducing cultural hierarchies. This finding supports Hall's (2013) argument that representation does not merely reflect social realities but actively constructs meanings through language and visual practices. From an educational perspective, the presence of culturally diverse characters and traditions does not necessarily guarantee inclusive representation. Rather, inclusivity depends on how characters are positioned, whose perspectives are privileged, and whether cultural differences are portrayed as legitimate expressions of identity or as deviations from dominant social norms.

Ethnographic narratives illustrate these tensions particularly clearly. In *Kenara, Anak Suku Gayo*, detailed descriptions of traditional clothing, dances, and cultural heritage affirm local identity while presenting culture primarily as an object of observation. Such representations may encourage cultural appreciation but can also reduce complex cultural experiences to recognizable traditions and symbols. This tendency resonates with Hall's (2013) concept of the spectacle of the "Other," in which cultural difference becomes an object of fascination. Similarly, Fabian's (1983) notion of the denial of coevalness helps explain how representations emphasizing traditional practices may position communities outside contemporary social life. However, cultural documentation should not automatically be interpreted as exoticization. Its implications depend on whether narratives also recognize community members as active participants in contemporary society. This distinction is important for educational

materials intended to promote cultural understanding rather than reinforce simplified images of cultural groups.

Cross-cultural encounter narratives offer a different representational pattern by portraying inclusion as a process of changing perceptions and negotiating relationships. In *Sepasang Mata* and *Bermain di Kampung Naga*, protagonists initially approach unfamiliar communities through assumptions shaped by their previous experiences. Subsequent interactions challenge these assumptions and create opportunities for mutual recognition. These narrative developments can be interpreted through Hassan's (1974) distinction between *kami*, an exclusive sense of collective belonging, and *kita*, an inclusive understanding of shared identity. The movement from *kami* to *kita* suggests that inclusion involves more than acknowledging difference; it requires reconsidering boundaries separating oneself from others. Nevertheless, these narratives may retain unequal representational positions when unfamiliar communities primarily function as settings for outsiders' personal development. Their educational significance therefore lies not only in portraying acceptance but also in encouraging readers to question whose experiences and transformations receive narrative attention.

A particularly important finding concerns internal othering, understood in this study as a representational process through which narratives intended to celebrate marginalized communities inadvertently reproduce assumptions of cultural inferiority or deficiency. Three mechanisms were identified: emphasizing the absence of modern infrastructure, presenting cultural practices primarily as spectacles, and depicting marginalized individuals predominantly as victims. For example, the initial association between limited electricity access and an undesirable village experience in *Bermain di Kampung Naga* illustrates how urban expectations can become implicit standards for evaluating rural communities. Likewise, the portrayal of farmers experiencing displacement in *Dodo dan Cerita Bandung Utara* raises questions about whether marginalized characters are represented with sufficient agency. These interpretations are consistent with research showing that apparently inclusive children's literature may reproduce exclusionary assumptions (Formen, 2025; Morgan, 2009). Rather than establishing a universal characteristic of Indonesian children's books, internal othering provides an analytical category for identifying contradictions within the selected narratives.

The visual dimensions of representation further complicate these findings. Illustrations communicate cultural meanings through composition, perspective, social distance, and the positioning of characters and objects. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) explain, visual arrangements influence how viewers understand relationships between represented participants and audiences. Within the selected books, illustrations emphasizing cultural artifacts, traditional environments, or idealized landscapes may reinforce the textual presentation of communities as objects of cultural knowledge. Conversely, images emphasizing interaction and shared activities may support more relational understandings of difference. These interpretations suggest that evaluating inclusive children's literature requires attention to the interaction between verbal and visual meanings rather than treating illustrations as merely decorative elements.

The findings also invite consideration of the relationship between children's literature and educational governance. As government-supported reading materials, the selected books communicate values associated with cultural appreciation, cooperation, environmental responsibility, and social harmony. Tesar (2014) demonstrates how childhood discourses participate in constructing desirable identities and behaviors, while Formen and Nuttall (2014) highlight tensions among competing priorities in Indonesian early childhood education policy. Viewed through these perspectives, the selected narratives can be understood as contributing to broader educational discourses concerning national belonging and responsible citizenship. However, their availability through a government platform does not independently establish authorial intentions or children's responses. The governance interpretation should therefore be understood as a critical reading of the texts within their institutional context.

For inclusive education, these findings highlight the importance of critical engagement with culturally diverse reading materials. Teachers can encourage children to consider who narrates a story, how characters experience difference, and whether particular communities are portrayed through stereotypes or deficit-based assumptions. Such practices are consistent with Durriyah and Dewayani's (2024) emphasis on teacher mediation in children's engagement with multicultural literature. The findings also suggest that educational content developers should incorporate diverse narrative perspectives, portray culturally situated characters with agency, and examine potential biases across both textual and visual representations. Although the selected corpus offers limited explicit engagement with disability and religious diversity, this observation cannot be generalized to the entire BUDI collection. Broader representation remains important to inclusive educational practice, as illustrated by research on accessible literacy resources in Indonesian kindergartens (Sheehy et al., 2024).

Overall, this study contributes to discussions of inclusive education by showing that cultural visibility and inclusive representation are not equivalent. The interaction between narrative perspective, multimodal choices, and implicit cultural hierarchies determines whether children's literature challenges or reproduces othering. The concept of internal othering offers a useful interpretive lens for identifying these tensions, while the *kami-kita* framework highlights the relational possibilities of inclusive narratives. Because the study examines eight purposively selected books without investigating reader responses, its conclusions concern textual and visual representations rather than demonstrated educational effects. Future research involving teachers and children could examine how these representational patterns are interpreted and negotiated in actual literacy practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the representation of the "Other" (*liyan*) in eight digital children's books from the BUDI platform reflects a complex relationship between cultural diversity, inclusive values, and implicit social hierarchies. Three representational approaches were identified: ethnographic documentation, cross-cultural encounters, and animal allegories, each contributing differently to the construction of cultural identity and social inclusion. The central finding is the emergence of *internal othering*, through which narratives intended to celebrate diversity inadvertently reproduce marginalizing perspectives by emphasizing the absence of modern infrastructure, presenting cultural traditions as spectacles, or portraying marginalized communities as passive victims. Furthermore, the distinction between exclusive *kami* and inclusive *kita* demonstrates how narrative perspectives can either reinforce cultural boundaries or encourage mutual recognition and understanding. These findings highlight that cultural visibility alone does not guarantee inclusive representation, emphasizing the importance of critically examining linguistic and visual choices in children's educational literature. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its purposive selection of eight books from a single government-supported platform and its exclusive focus on textual and visual representations without investigating children's interpretations or classroom practices. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader collection of Indonesian children's literature or used to establish the educational effects of these representations. Future research should examine larger and more diverse collections of children's books, incorporate comparative analyses across government and commercial publications, and investigate how teachers and children interpret and negotiate cultural differences during literacy activities. Such investigations could provide empirical evidence for developing culturally responsive reading materials and pedagogical practices that promote meaningful inclusion while minimizing the reproduction of stereotypes and cultural hierarchies.

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