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Representations of Moral Values in the Stories of Kalilah wa Dimnah by Ibn al-Muqaffa'

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the moral values, social functions, social criticism, and legitimacy of power in Kalilah wa Dimnah by Ibn al-Muqaffa'. This research employs a library research method using a qualitative descriptive approach. The primary data source is Kalilah wa Dimnah, while secondary data are obtained from books, scholarly journals, and previous relevant studies. Data were collected through documentation techniques by reading, identifying, classifying, and recording textual data related to the research objectives. The data were analyzed through the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that Kalilah wa Dimnah contains various moral values, such as honesty, wisdom, responsibility, hard work, and friendship, which contribute to character building. Moreover, the work functions as a medium of social and political criticism through the use of animal characters as symbolic representations of human behavior. The criticism addresses issues such as abuse of power, injustice, corruption, and the importance of wise leadership. The study also finds that the legitimacy of power in Kalilah wa Dimnah is based on sociological, elitist, and ethical dimensions. Therefore, Kalilah wa Dimnah not only possesses literary significance but also contributes to the development of moral, social, and political thought within the Islamic intellectual tradition.

Keywords: Kalilah wa Dimnah, moral values, social criticism, legitimacy of power, Ibn al-Muqaffa'

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis nilai-nilai moral, fungsi sosial, kritik sosial, dan legitimasi kekuasaan dalam Kalilah wa Dimnah karya Ibn al-Muqaffa'. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kepustakaan (library research) dengan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif. Sumber data primer penelitian ini adalah Kalilah wa Dimnah, sedangkan sumber data sekunder diperoleh dari berbagai buku, jurnal ilmiah, dan penelitian terdahulu yang relevan. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui dokumentasi dengan cara membaca, mengidentifikasi, mengklasifikasikan, dan mencatat data yang berkaitan dengan fokus penelitian. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahapan kondensasi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Kalilah wa Dimnah mengandung berbagai nilai moral, seperti kejujuran, kebijaksanaan, tanggung jawab, kerja keras, dan persahabatan yang berperan dalam pembentukan karakter pembaca. Selain itu, karya ini juga berfungsi sebagai media kritik sosial dan politik melalui penggunaan tokoh-tokoh binatang sebagai simbol perilaku manusia. Kritik tersebut mencakup penyalahgunaan kekuasaan, ketidakadilan, korupsi, dan pentingnya kepemimpinan yang bijaksana. Penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa konsep legitimasi kekuasaan dalam Kalilah wa Dimnah didasarkan pada aspek sosiologis, elitis, dan etis. Oleh karena itu, Kalilah wa Dimnah tidak hanya memiliki nilai



sastra, tetapi juga memberikan kontribusi terhadap perkembangan pemikiran moral, sosial, dan politik dalam tradisi intelektual Islam.

Kata kunci: *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, nilai moral, kritik sosial, legitimasi kekuasaan, *Ibn al-Muqaffa'*

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INTRODUCTION

Classical literature serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for conveying moral values, character education, and social criticism. Through various narrative forms, authors convey their perspectives on life, ethics, leadership, and human relationships using symbolic and easily understandable language. Therefore, classical literary works possess value that is not only aesthetic but also educational and reflective, making them relevant for study even though they were written centuries ago.

Among various classical literary works that combine entertainment, moral teachings, and social criticism, one of the most influential works in the Arabic literary tradition is *Kalilah wa Dimnah*. This book is one of the most famous works in the Arabic literary tradition and has been translated into various languages around the world. To this day, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is still widely studied because of its universal moral values, wisdom, and social criticism, which keep it in demand among various groups of readers and researchers (Shakinah Abdul Rahman et al., 2024).

Historically, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* was not originally written in Arabic. The book originated in India as a collection of stories that was later translated into Persian during the Sassanid Empire. Subsequently, Ibn al-Muqaffa' translated and adapted the work into Arabic, adding various new elements tailored to the social, cultural, and political thought of his time. This adaptation process transformed *Kalilah wa Dimnah* from a mere translation into a literary work with its own distinct style and character within the Arab literary tradition (Suryaningsih et al., 2025).

The process of translation and adaptation that *Kalilah wa Dimnah* underwent has also influenced the development of its textual structure. In the Arabic tradition, this work generally consists of fourteen main chapters found in nearly all manuscripts, as well as five additional chapters that appear only in certain groups of manuscripts. These differences in the number and arrangement of chapters indicate that *Kalilah wa Dimnah* has undergone a long process of transmission, editing, and evolution across various regions and historical periods. This diversity underscores that *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is not merely a collection of fables, but a literary work that continues to evolve through the interaction of various cultural and historical traditions, thereby further enriching its value and significance within the world's literary heritage (Khalfallah, 2023).

The uniqueness of *Kalilah wa Dimnah* lies in its use of animal characters as the main protagonists in each story. These characters serve as symbols of various human traits, such as wisdom, honesty, greed, cunning, loyalty, and courage. Through this symbolism, Ibn al-Muqaffa' conveys moral messages while indirectly satirizing various social and political issues. Thus, the stories in this book not only teach ethical values but also serve as a means of criticizing the abuse of power, injustice, and the behavior of leaders who deviate from the principles of good governance (Selviana et al., 2024).

Based on the above discussion, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is a classic literary work of significant value for study because it combines literary elements, moral education, and social criticism into a single narrative. A study of this work is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how classical literature was used as a medium for character development as well as a means of expressing criticism of the social and political realities of its time (Shakinah Abdul Rahman et al., 2024),(Selviana et al., 2024).



THEORETICAL

This study is based on three main theoretical frameworks: moral values in literature, literature as a medium for social criticism, and the concept of *Kalilah wa Dimnah* as a classical literary work. These theories are used to analyze how Ibn al-Muqaffa' conveys ethical teachings and social criticism through allegorical narratives. Therefore, the theoretical framework serves as the basis for interpreting the moral and social dimensions found in the stories of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*.

A. Moral Values in Literature

Moral values are an important element in literary works, relating to teachings about right and wrong in human behavior. Through the stories, characters, dialogue, and conflicts presented, authors convey various messages that can serve as guidelines for daily life. These values not only complement the story but also serve as a means of character development and instilling ethical principles in readers. In literary works, moral values are generally embodied in the form of honesty, compassion, responsibility, hard work, loyalty, wisdom, and friendship, which form the foundation for a harmonious social life (Faza et al., 2026).

Moral values in literature are often conveyed indirectly through the characters' experiences and the sequence of events they encounter. In this way, readers not only enjoy the plot but are also invited to understand the meaning behind each character's actions. Therefore, literary works play a vital role as a medium for character education, capable of fostering moral awareness and shaping attitudes and behaviors aligned with humanistic values (Faza et al., 2026).

B. Literature as a Medium for Social Criticism

In addition to possessing aesthetic value, literature also serves a social function as a medium for critiquing various issues in society. Social criticism in literary works is a form of the author's expression of opinion or assessment regarding social, political, economic, cultural, or moral conditions that are considered to deviate from ideal values. Such criticism is not always conveyed directly but is often expressed through symbols, metaphors, allegories, satire, or irony, making the message more subtle yet still meaningful.

(Damono, 2020) states that literature is a reflection of society because it arises from the social realities experienced by the author. Therefore, literary works cannot be separated from the social conditions prevailing at the time of their creation. Authors often use literary works as a means to convey aspirations, criticism, and hopes for desired social change.

In *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, social criticism is conveyed through fables that use animal characters as symbols of humans. Through this allegorical technique, Ibn al-Muqaffa' critiques the abuse of power, corruption, greed, betrayal, political manipulation, and the moral weakness of the leaders of his time. Conveying criticism symbolically allowed the author to express political ideas without having to confront the rulers directly. Therefore, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is viewed not only as an entertaining literary work but also as a medium for reflection on social and political life.

C. Overview of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*

Kalilah wa Dimnah is a classic literary work that has had a significant influence on the development of Arabic literature and Islamic political thought. This book contains a collection of fables that use animal



characters as symbols of human traits to convey moral lessons, ethics, and life wisdom. Through this allegorical approach, the work not only entertains readers but also offers lessons on leadership, social relationships, justice, and the importance of making wise decisions.

Ibn al-Muqaffa', as both the translator and adapter of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, is known as one of the authors of "mirror for princes" works that offer moral and political advice to rulers. The "mirror for princes" tradition aims to provide guidance on how a leader should govern based on the principles of religion, ethics, justice, and wisdom. In *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, this advice is conveyed through the dialogues and stories of animal characters, allowing the moral and political messages to be conveyed more subtly while still retaining profound meaning (Pabiyah Toklubok et al., 2021).

As a work that blends elements of literature, education, and political thought, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* demonstrates that fables can serve as an effective medium for conveying social criticism while also shaping the character of its readers. Therefore, this book remains one of the classic literary works that is still relevant for study from literary, moral, and leadership perspectives to this day (Selviana et al., 2024).

METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study employs a library research method using a qualitative descriptive approach. Library research is a research method that relies on written documents, books, journals, and other relevant sources as the main data (Zed, 2014). Meanwhile, qualitative descriptive research aims to describe and interpret phenomena systematically based on textual data (Chu, PH. and Chang, 2017).

The primary source of this study is Ibn al-Muqaffa's *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, while journal articles, books, and previous studies are used as secondary sources. Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques by reading, identifying, classifying, and recording textual data relevant to moral values and social criticism.

The collected data were analyzed using the stages proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, 2023), namely data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The analysis focused on interpreting characters, dialogues, plots, and symbols contained in the stories of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Moral Values in *Kalilah wa Dimnah*

One of the key aspects that makes *Kalilah wa Dimnah* a classic literary work that remains relevant to this day is the moral values embedded in each of its stories. Through animal characters that symbolize human traits, Ibn al-Muqaffa' conveys various ethical teachings that can serve as guidelines for social life. These moral values include honesty, compassion, hard work, and friendship. Honesty is portrayed as the cornerstone of building trust, while compassion and friendship form the foundation for harmonious social relationships. Meanwhile, hard work teaches the importance of effort and perseverance in achieving one's life goals (Faza et al., 2026).

In addition to these moral values, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* also contains a broader range of character-building values. The stories in this book teach religious attitudes by emphasizing behavior consistent with



moral teachings, fostering tolerance toward others, encouraging readers to think creatively in solving problems, and cultivating independence and a sense of responsibility. Democratic values are also evident through the importance of deliberation, careful consideration, and respect for others' opinions before making decisions. Thus, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* not only provides entertainment but also serves as a medium for character development that is relevant to education today (Pabiyah Toklubok et al., 2021).

These moral teachings are clearly reflected in the story of "*The Monkey and the Carpenter*." In this story, the monkey imitates the carpenter's work without understanding the proper technique. As narrated in the text, "The monkey then imitated what the carpenter was doing by forcing himself to do work he couldn't do" (*Hikayat Kalilah Dan Dimnah*, 2018 p.150). As a consequence, the monkey's tail became trapped in the split wood, causing him severe pain. This story teaches readers not to interfere in matters beyond their knowledge and abilities. It emphasizes the importance of wisdom, prudence, and careful consideration before taking action, as reckless behavior may lead to harmful consequences.

B. The Story Structure in *Kalilah wa Dimnah*

The story structure in *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is organized systematically so that each section has an interrelated theme and moral message. This book consists of five main parts: *Matrapanam*, which teaches compassion among friends; *Sakralaum*, which emphasizes the importance of loyalty in friendship; *Sandi Bikraum*, which depicts the destruction caused by evil and deceit; *Artanasam*, which discusses trust; and *Sambi Rica Karium*, which explains the consequences of acting without careful consideration. This division indicates that each story is designed to convey a specific moral lesson, yet together they form a cohesive whole in providing ethical guidance to readers (Azizah & Yusuf, 2025).

One example that illustrates the narrative structure in *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is the story of "*The Monkey and the Carpenter*." The conflict begins when the monkey attempts to imitate the carpenter's work without understanding the proper technique. As stated in the story, "The monkey then imitated what the carpenter was doing by forcing himself to do work he couldn't do" (*Hikayat Kalilah Dan Dimnah*, 2018 p.152). The climax occurs when the monkey's tail becomes trapped in the split wood, causing him severe pain. The resolution takes place when the carpenter returns and drives the monkey away. This sequence demonstrates that the stories in *Kalilah wa Dimnah* follow a clear narrative structure consisting of exposition, conflict, climax, and resolution, making the moral messages easier for readers to understand. This story teaches the importance of thinking wisely, being wary of deception, and carefully considering every action before making a decision. The values it conveys demonstrate that intelligence and wisdom are more valuable than mere physical strength (Azizah & Yusuf, 2025).

Another significant characteristic of *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is its extensive use of symbolism. Ibn al-Muqaffa' deliberately employs animal characters as symbolic representations of human behavior, allowing complex moral and political ideas to be communicated indirectly. This symbolic narrative technique encourages readers to interpret deeper ethical meanings behind the stories while simultaneously appreciating their literary beauty. Consequently, the work succeeds in combining entertainment, education, and political reflection within a single narrative framework (Wanhao & Ali Tahawi, 2024).

Overall, the narrative structure in *Kalilah wa Dimnah* demonstrates that each story serves not only as entertainment but also as a means of conveying moral values. The moral messages contained in these



stories align with Islamic ethical teachings, which emphasize honesty, trustworthiness, wisdom, patience, and responsibility as the foundation for living one's life.

C. Social Function and Criticism in *Kalilah wa Dimnah*

Beyond its moral teachings, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* serves a vital social function as a guide for families, rulers, and future generations, imparting essential values of leadership, ethics, and communal life. Through its accessible yet profound fables, Ibn al-Muqaffa' emphasizes the importance of justice, wisdom, prudent decision-making, and the responsibility of leaders toward their people.

Recent studies also emphasize that *Kalilah wa Dimnah* should be viewed as an intellectual and political text rather than merely a collection of animal fables. Ibn al-Muqaffa' integrates philosophical thought, ethical instruction, and political criticism into the narrative, enabling readers to reflect on justice, governance, and the responsible exercise of power. This multidimensional approach explains why the work has maintained its relevance across different societies and historical periods (Language, 2023).

The social and political dimensions in *Kalilah wa Dimnah* are evident in the dialogue between *King Debsyalem* and *Philosoper Bedapa*. The text states, "King Debsyalem said, 'Give me a parable about people who rush into their work before considering the consequences'" (*Hikayat Kalilah Dan Dimnah*, 2018 p.124). This quote underscores the importance of caution and careful deliberation in leadership. Through this dialogue, Ibn al-Muqaffa' criticizes leaders who act hastily without considering the consequences of their decisions. This criticism highlights that a leader must first verify the truth of a matter before making a decision to ensure that justice and social order are maintained.

Behind its form as a fable, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* also serves as a vehicle for criticism of the sociopolitical conditions during the Abbasid Dynasty. Ibn al-Muqaffa' uses animal characters as symbols of various human traits, thereby allowing him to indirectly critique the abuse of power, political intrigue, corruption, and the moral weakness of officials. In several stories, he compares the conditions of the Abbasid government with the Persian political system, which was considered more orderly, just, and focused on wisdom in governing. This comparison indicates that the author hoped for the creation of a system of government based on justice, integrity, and responsibility (Hamzah, 2012).

Based on this, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* serves several important functions: as a medium for criticizing deviant governance practices; as moral counsel for rulers to exercise leadership fairly and wisely; and as a means of social education for society through the conveyance of ethical values and virtues. Therefore, this work not only holds literary value but also contributes to the development of social and political thought within the Islamic intellectual tradition (Hamzah, 2012).

D. The Legitimacy of Power in *Kalilah wa Dimnah*

One of the key themes discussed in *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is the concept of the legitimacy of power. Through various stories involving kings and their advisors, Ibn al-Muqaffa' explains that power depends not only on strength or position, but also on the recognition and trust of the people. In this context, legitimacy serves as the foundation that determines whether a ruler deserves to be respected and obeyed by his people (Puriyadi, 2010).

This book describes three forms of the legitimacy of power: sociological legitimacy, elitist legitimacy, and ethical legitimacy. Sociological legitimacy is based on society's acceptance of a ruler due



to traditions, customs, or practices that have been passed down from generation to generation. In this form, society recognizes a leader's authority not solely because of his personal abilities, but because his position has been accepted as part of the prevailing social order (Puriyadi, 2010).

Furthermore, elitist legitimacy is obtained through the support of key figures, advisors, or elite groups who wield influence within the government. Such support is a crucial factor in maintaining the stability of power and the continuity of government. Ethical legitimacy, on the other hand, places morality at the core of leadership. A leader is considered legitimate if he exercises his power fairly, wisely, and faithfully, and prioritizes the interests of the people over his personal interests. Through these three concepts, Ibn al-Muqaffa' asserts that ideal power is not only formally recognized but also gains moral legitimacy through behavior and policies that reflect justice and wisdom (Puriyadi, 2010).

The concept of ethical legitimacy is also reflected in the dialogue between *King Debsyalem and Philosopher Bedapa*. In the text, *Philosopher Bedapa* states, "O king who is open to advice, truly, the criticism I offer is solely for your own good." (*Hikayat Kalilah Dan Dimnah*, 2018 p.52). This quotation demonstrates that a ruler should be open to advice and constructive criticism from wise advisors. Through *Bedapa's* counsel, Ibn al-Muqaffa' emphasizes that legitimate power is not solely based on authority or social status, but also on moral conduct, wisdom, and the willingness to accept criticism for the common good. Therefore, a leader who listens to advice and governs justly is more likely to gain the trust and respect of the people.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that *Kalilah wa Dimnah* is a classical literary work that contains significant moral, social, and political values. Through allegorical narratives employing animal characters, Ibn al-Muqaffa' successfully conveys various moral teachings, including honesty, wisdom, responsibility, hard work, and friendship, which remain relevant to contemporary society. These values demonstrate the important role of literature in character building and moral education.

Furthermore, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* functions not only as an entertaining literary work but also as a medium for social and political criticism. Through symbolic and allegorical techniques, Ibn al-Muqaffa' criticizes the abuse of power, injustice, corruption, and the moral shortcomings of rulers while promoting justice, wisdom, and responsible leadership. The work also highlights that the legitimacy of power should not rely solely on authority or position but must also be supported by social acceptance, elite support, and ethical conduct.

Therefore, *Kalilah wa Dimnah* remains highly relevant as an object of literary study because it integrates literary aesthetics, moral education, and social criticism within a single narrative framework. This study confirms that classical literature can serve as an effective medium for transmitting ethical values and reflecting upon social and political realities across different historical periods.

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