

‘KALÎLA WA DIMNA’ AS A GENRE OF ARABIC LITERATURE: A BRIEF STUDY

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ABSTRACT

As a literary genre *Kalîla wa Dimna* plays an important role in the realm of Arabic literature; it was translated into Arabic by the distinguished essayist ‘Abd Allâh Ibn al-Muqaffa’ (d.756 A.D.) from the book *Kalile va Dimne* written in the Middle Persian Pahlavi language. As a resident of Basra, ‘Abd Allâh Ibn al-Muqaffa’ was well versed in Persian language; but he learnt Arabic and became expert in Arabic literature. In course of times, his work *Kalîla wa Dimna* has been considered as a masterpiece work of Arabic prose literature. In fact, the prose style of *Kalîla wa Dimna* has achieved the utmost acclamation in the domain of Arabic literature. Some animals and birds are personified in the story of this book to teach moral education for governors and rulers in the country.

KEYWORDS: Kalila Wa Dimna, Genre, Arabic Literature Etc

INTRODUCTION

The book *Kalîla wa Dimna* is an important work of Arabic literature, translated by ‘Abd Allâh Ibn al-Muqaffa’ from the Middle Persian Pahlavi language. It is known that Borzuy’s 570 A.D. Pahlavi translation (*Kalile va Demne*, now lost) was soon translated into Syriac, and nearly two centuries later Ibn al-Muqaffa’ translated it into Arabic by around 750 A.D. In course of times, his work *Kalîla wa Dimna* has been considered the first masterpiece work of Arabic literary prose. In fact, the prose style of *Kalîla wa Dimna* has achieved the utmost acclamation in the realm of Arabic literature. In the consistence of this book animals and birds are personified with moral education and thereby the author has tried to draw the attention of the governors and rulers. In fact, it was written mainly for giving instructions to the civil servants. The readers enjoyed it with a great interest for getting heart touching knowledge in the consistence of its comprehensible stories. Subsequently it became highly popular among all the classes of knowledge seekers. Alongside, it became a valuable source of folklore in the scenario of world literature.

It is imperative to know that *Kalîla wa Dimna* are the two names of two independent jackals. In this connection, we find that these two names appear especially in the two chapters namely *Bâb al-Asad wa Thaur* and *Bâb al-Fahs* ‘*An Amr Dimna*. As a book *Kalîla wa Dimna* seems to be the original work of Arabic literature and this credit goes to its translator ‘Abd Allâh Ibn al-Muqaffa’ In fact, it is whole heartedly accepted by its readers and has become a valuable literary masterpiece of Arabic language and literature. It illustrates parables and stories for imparting knowledge and wisdom; for which the Arabs expressed their pleasure and made continuation of its further study. Here mention may be made that *Kalîla wa Dimna* comprises of 21 chapters and the theme of its contents is derived from the trio cultures of India, Persia and Arabia. The 12 chapters of this book are of India, 3 chapters of Persia, and other six chapters are unknown to the source of their inclusion.⁽¹⁾

DESCRIPTION

The author of the book *Kalila wa Dimna*, Ibn al-Muqaffa' was appointed by the Abbasid Caliph, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (d. 775 A.D.) to the post of the secretary. Because Ibn Muqaffa' was well versed in Persian language including Greek. On the other hand, he was a resident of the city of Basra, while it was a great seat of learning for Arabic language and literature. As an intelligent man Ibn al-Muqaffa' learnt Arabic language and became excellent in Arabic literature. In addition, he had the utmost capability to write in Arabic; and accordingly translated the book *Kalile va Dimne* into Arabic with a great excellence.

It is aware of the fact that the original work was of the philosophy of Hindu concept that could find no easy equivalent in Zoroastrian Pahlavi. In the domain of Arabic literature both the terms *Kalila and Dimna* used in the caption of the book became the generic and classical names for the whole work. A chapter has been added by Ibn al-Muqaffa' just after the first chapter that speaks of the trial of Dimna the 'jackal' which is latter on suspected of intentionally leading to the death of the bull "shanzabeh" mentioned in the first chapter. The trial lasts for 2 days to no avail, until the tiger and the leopard come forward and accuse Dimna who is subsequently put to rest. It is worth mentioning that the names of some animals are changed in the work of Ibn al-Muqaffa'. The crocodile in the fourth chapter is changed to the Al-ghailam i.e. "the male tortoise", the mongoose is changed to the weasel, and the Brahman becomes a "hermit".

Here an attempt has been made to discuss a few aspects for bringing the work into clear conception as follows:

Original Source

It is imperative to know that the origin source of *Kalila wa Dimna* goes to the book **Panchatantra** i.e. Five Principles according to Sanskrit language, which was written by Bishnu Sharma. It is a collection of originally Indian animal fables in verse and prose. The original Sanskrit work, which some scholars believe was composed in the 3rd century B.C.⁽²⁾

It appears from the account of Muhammad Hasan Nâ'il al-Marşafi⁽³⁾ that the author of "Panchatantra" is mentioned namely as Baidaba⁽⁴⁾, an Indian philosopher who wrote the work for an Indian king Dabshalim who ruled over India after the conquest of Alexander the Great (356 B.C. – 323 B.C). While the Indian king was betrayed and deceived, Baidaba wrote *Panchatantra* for his training and reformation having full of admonitions spoken by the tongue of animals and birds; because the Hindu Brahmins of the ancient period used to narrate the "speech of wisdom" through the tongues of animals according to their belief for transmigration of souls. It is supposed that most of the stories of the same belonged to Indian origin. In fact, some other individual added anecdotes to it after the philosopher author Baidaba, but they followed him in the portrayal of story. Indeed the work was composed for making the hearts of people civilized and creating passions for constructive development of human resource.⁽⁵⁾

Actually the "Panchatantra" is an inter-woven series of colorful fables, many of which involve animals exhibiting animal stereotypes. According to its own narrative, it illustrates, for the benefit of three ignorant princes, the central Hindu principles of *nîti*. While *nîti* is hard to translate, it roughly means prudent worldly conduct, or "the wise conduct of life".

Apart from a short introduction, in which the author of **Panchatantra** is introduced as narrating the rest of the work to the princes; it consists of five parts. Each part contains a main story, called the frame-story, which is also set with several small stories contained in it, as one character narrates a story to another. Often these stories contain further other

small stories.⁽⁶⁾

How Borzuy Brought the Work from India

The *Panchatantra* also migrated westwards, during the Sassanid reign of Khosru I Anushiravan around 570 CE when his famous physician Borzuy translated it from Sanskrit into the Middle Persian Pahlavi language, transliterated as *Karirak ud Damanak* or *Kalile va Demne*.

According to the story told in the *Shâh Nâma* (*The Book of the Kings*, Persia's late 10th century national epic by Firdousi), Borzuy sought his king's permission to make a trip to Hindustan in search of a mountain herb he had read about that is "mingled into a compound and, when sprinkled over a corpse, it is immediately restored to life." When he reached there, he did not find the herb, and was instead told by a wise sage of "a different interpretation. The herb is the scientist; science is the mountain, everlastingly out of reach of the multitude. The corpse is the man without knowledge, for the uninstructed man is everywhere lifeless. Through knowledge man becomes revived." The sage pointed to the book *Kalîla*, and he obtained the king's permission to read the book and translate it, with the help of some Pandits.⁽⁷⁾

Chapters of Panchatantra

It appears that the work **Panchatantra** is full of animal fables which are personified with knowledge and better information to the fact of human needs. In fact, it is the pride of India that spread throughout the world with translation works and its stories are widely accepted everywhere. The name of the book "**Panchatantra**" signifies that it has five principles or five books which are as follows:

- **Mitra-Bheda:** The Separation of Friends (The Lion and the Bull)
- **Mitra-Lâbha or Mitra-Samprâpti:** The Gaining of Friends (The Dove, Crow, Mouse, Tortoise and Deer)
- **Kâkolûkîyam:** Of Crows and Owls (War and Peace)
- **Labdhaprañâsam:** Loss Of Gains (The Monkey and the Crocodile)
- **Aparîkṣitakâraṇam:** Ill-Considered Action / Rash deeds (The Brahman and the Mongoose)⁽⁸⁾

Moral Teaching

It is imperative to know that the book "Panchatantra" is a treasury of wisdom that gives moral teaching to the human beings for their all round development. In each chapter we find the following messages of moral teaching:

- One must not accuse others falsely, and strive to preserve friendships.
- (Added chapter) Truth is bound to be revealed, sooner or later.
- Friends are an integral part of life.
- Mental strength and deceit are stronger than brute force.
- One must never betray friends, and should stay vigilant at all times.
- One must never rush in making judgments.⁽⁹⁾

Chapters of *Kalila and Dimna*

In this context, Muhammad Hasan Nâ'il al-Marsafî has added that as a whole the original Sanskrit work consisted of the twelve chapters and they are mentioned below:

- *Bâb al-Asad wa al-Thaur* (“Lion and Bull”)
- *Bâb al-Hamâma al-Mutawwaqa* (“Ringdove”)
- *Bâb al-Bûm wa al-Ghîrbân* (“Owl and Crow”)
- *Bâb al-Qird wa al-Ghaylam* (“Monkey and Tortoise”)
- *Bâb al-Nâsikh wa Ibn 'Aras* (“Hermit and Weasel”)
- *Bâb al-Juradh wa al-Sinnûr* (“Rat and Cat”)
- *Bâb al-Malik wa al-Tâ'ir Qanra* (“King and Bird”)
- *Bâb al-Asad wa Ibn 'Awa wa al-Nâsikh* (“Lion, Jackal and Hermit”)
- *Bâb al-Lub'a wa al-Aswâr wa al-Sha'har*
- *Bâb Ilâdh wa yilâdh wa Ibrakht*
- *Bâb al-Sâ'ih wa al-Sâ'igh* (“Traveler and Jeweler”)
- *Bâb Ibn al-Malik wa Ashâbuhu* (“Son of King and his Companions”)

In fact, the above mentioned chapters were in the book **Panchatantra** while it was composed in Sanskrit language. As history goes, firstly it was translated into Tibetan and then Middle Persian Pahlavi language. It is known that as and when it was translated into the Middle Persian Pahlavi language entitled as *Kalile va Dimne*. Then it was translated into Arabic and it became a master copy for latter translations into different languages in the world. ⁽¹⁰⁾

Introduction to the Author

Abû Muhammad 'Abd Allâh Rûzbeh ibn Dâdûya mostly known as Ibn al-Muqaffa' (106 A.H. – 142 A.D. / 724 A.D. – 759 A.D.) was an 8th century Persian thinker and Zoroastrian by religion. After his conversion to Islam, he took the name 'Abd Allâh. In fact, 'Abd Allâh Ibn al-Muqaffa' was a resident of Basra, and originally hailed from the town of Goor (Firuzabad) in the Iranian province of Fars. His father was a state official in charge of taxes under the Umayyad, and after being accused and convicted of embezzling some of the money entrusted to him, was punished by the ruler by having his hand crushed, hence his name *al-Muqaffa'* (shrivelled hand) became familiar. On the other hand, 'Abd Allâh Ibn al-Muqaffa' was also murdered around 756 by the order of the second Abbasid caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur reportedly for heresy, in particular for attempting to import Zoroastrian ideas into Islam. There is evidence, though, that his murder may have been prompted by the caliph's resentment at the terms and language that Ibn al-Muqaffa' had used in drawing up a guarantee of safe passage for the caliph's rebellious uncle, Abdullah b. Ali; the caliph found that document profoundly disrespectful to himself, and it is believed Ibn al-Muqaffa' paid with his life for the affront to al-Mansur. ⁽¹¹⁾

- **His Literary Career**

In the realm of Arabic literature, Ibn al-Muqaffa' is recognized to be the first category of writers. He established a distinct style of writing from Perso-Arabic style, for which his name and fame spread far and wide in the world. In fact, his translation of *Kalila wa Dimna* from Pahlavi language into Arabic is considered as one of the first masterpiece works of Arabic literary prose. In the composition of poetry, he had a little contribution. Al-Qifti (d. 1248 A.D.) says that he was the first to pay attention to the field of translation work as commanded by the Caliph Abu Za'far al-Mansur.⁽¹²⁾ Ibn al-Muqaffa' was a pioneer in the introduction of literary prose narrative to Arabic literature. He paved the way for later innovators such as al-Hamadhani (d. 1007 A.D.) and al-Sarqasi (d. 538/1143), who brought literary fiction to Arabic literature with traditional adaptation accepting modes of oral narrative transmission into literary prose. Ibn al-Muqaffa was also an accomplished scholar of Middle Persian, and was the author of several moral fables.⁽¹³⁾

DISCUSSIONS

Scholars' Views about *Kalila wa Dimna*

After the Muslim invasion of Persia (Iran) Ibn al-Muqaffa's version (by now two languages removed from its pre-Islamic Sanskrit original) emerges as the pivotal surviving text that enriches world literature. Ibn al-Muqaffa's work is considered a model of the finest Arabic prose style, and is considered the first masterpiece of Arabic literary prose.

Some scholars believe that Ibn al-Muqaffa's translation of the second section, illustrating the Sanskrit principle of *Mitra Laabha* (Gaining Friends), became the unifying basis for the Brethren of Purity (*ikhwân al-ṣafâ*) — the anonymous 9th century A.D. Arab encyclopedists whose prodigious literary effort, *Encyclopedia of the Brethren of Sincerity*, codified Indian, Persian and Greek knowledge. A suggestion made by Goldziher, and later written on by Philip K. Hitti in *History of Arabs*, proposes that "The appellation is presumably taken from the story of the ringdove in *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* in which it is related that a group of animals by acting as faithful friends (*ikhwân al-ṣafâ*) to one another escaped the snares of the hunter." This story is mentioned as an exemplum when the Brethren speak of mutual aid in one *risâla* (treatise), a crucial part of their system of ethics.⁽¹⁴⁾

Literary Style of *Kalila wa Dimna*

In fact, "*Kalila wa Dimna*" is the sample of the Persian didactics. The collection of fables, parables, and instructive stories comes from the pen of Ibn al-Muqaffa'. The origin source of this book is "Panchatantra" which actually begins with the story about king of animals the lion and two jackals Karataka and Damanaka.

The central subject of "*Kalila wa Dimna*" is conversations of king Dabshalim with Brahman Baydaba. During the conversation, king asks questions on this or that moral idea with the request to illustrate it on a material of a parable. The first parable is about two jackals Kalila and Dimna, the lion-king and its attendant the bull Shatraba by name. This fable narrates about the slanderers sowing hostility between friends, the second parable is about true friends (the pigeon, the raven, the rat, the turtle and the gazelle); third parable is about guile of the enemy posing as a friend (ravens and owls).

It appears from this valuable work that so many activities have been carried out by the animals as personified with human intellect in allegorical forms. So the parables depicted by Ibn al-Muqaffa' may be considered as the utmost artistic ones in the domain of Arabic literature. It is indicated earlier that the presentation of animal character in throughout the work is brought forth by the author basing on the belief traditionalized by the Hindu Brahmin who used to give examples with animals for sustaining morality in the society. In fact, popularity of animal stories lies in the Arabian and Persian

didactic works. As a result, the certain canon is developed in the literature with the framework of which concrete qualities are attributed to the certain animal. For example, cunning and resourcefulness inhere in the jackal and the fox, guile to the cat, nonsense, short-sightedness and arrogance to the monkey, cowardice to the leopard. Often concrete image personifies certain estate in a human society. The striking example is the lion personifying the king. Similarly to king, his commands can be wise, if he follows a advice of kind advisers (the peacock and the partridge) or, on the contrary, severe and short-sighted if he follows a advice of the jackal and the raven thinking only about own benefit.

In fact, the distinguished work *Kalila wa Dimna* of Ibn al-Muqaffa' has been a treasury of ancient wisdom of the East in the realm of aesthetic literature. Wisdom of the story-teller consists in observance of precise proportions between didactic wisdom, urged to generate deep meditation, both entertaining easy stories and the magic stories having the purpose to entertain and cheer up the listener. This party of the Persian fairy tales explains their demand and constant popularity among various people during various epochs.⁽¹³⁾

In the Arabic translation the form of their names are still *Kalila* and *Dimna*. According to the objective of this book *Kalila wa Dimna* we find in it four purposes: they are as follows:

- To engage the youth through the vehicle of animal fables;
- To delight the hearts of princes through richly illustrated depictions of the tales.
- To entice kings and common folk everywhere to acquire their own copies and to benefit the painters and scribes.
- To engage the philosophers in the wisdom of its tales.⁽¹⁴⁾

It is imperative to know that Ibn al-Muqaffa' begins stories with the usage of the morphemes or phrase *qâla: za'amû' anna* means "He said: They believed that" and this style has been exploited for all the stories only at the point of beginning. In fact, it is made familiar by the distinguished essayist, Ibn al-Muqaffa' in the realm of story literature. Despite his translated stories, the author also followed the same methodology of narration which is of his own addition to the book, and its clear testimony can be had in the following passage of translation:

He said: they believed that a trader had two jars in his abode, one of them was full of wheat; and other was full of gold. But it was looked out by some one of the thieves for a time. At last, the trader was engaged for some days in business being aloof from his house. Then the thief pondered him negligent, and entered the house. He concealed himself in some of the corners of the house. When he planned for taking the jar in which there was gold-coins (*Dinars*), took the jar which was full of wheat and thought of having dinars. He was in hard work and trouble. At last, he reached home bringing it (the jar). As soon as he opened it, came to know (the reality) and got ashamed. The treacherous fellow said to him: "I did not remove the parable, nor crossed the standard. In fact, I came to know my sin and the wrong that I committed to you. Thus it was difficult for me to do so. In spite of that, the evil soul commands for crime. Then the man accepted his incapability. He turned away from his reproach and confidence on himself. He was repented, when he saw his evil deed and his turning towards ignorance⁽¹⁵⁾

It appears from the above mentioned text of Ibn al-Muqaffa' that being a Persian he did not follow the fallacy as we see in the original work of *Panchatantra* for representing animals as characters of the story. Undoubtedly he maintained the mode of expression as appeared to other story writers hailed from Persia. Because the previous extraction has been selected from his book *Kalila wa Dimna* specifically from *Bâb 'Ard al-Kitâb* which was author's addition to the

translation of Indian origin.

CONCLUSIONS

In fact, the book *Kalila wa Dimna* of Ibn al-Muqaffa' is a translated work and it has been a masterpiece of Arabic literature; different translators made endeavor to translate it into various languages of the world and thereby it has been famous in every corner of the world. It is imperative to know that the mode of language expression is of easy narration and finds the credit and due praise from the readers. The language of the story seems to be the origin version of Arabic language. In fact, description of the story is perfectly successful to draw the attention of readers as per ideas given to the theme in the context. Each of the stories offers morality and makes thought-provoking for the situations of life.

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