

# Narrative Structure in Ancient Arabic Prose: An Applied Study in the Tales of "Kalila and Dimna" by Ibn al-Muqaffa'

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## Abstract

This research aims to study the narrative structure in ancient Arabic prose through the book "Kalila and Dimna," to uncover how the ancient Arab narrator employed various narrative techniques, realizing their value, and presenting them in new formats and artistic templates that served his purposes and objectives. The problem addressed in this research is related to the contention made by some that "Kalila and Dimna" is nothing more than a translation of some Persian or Indian stories, and that translation, no matter how accurate, does not capture the essence, soul, and spirit of the original text. Hence, the researcher found it necessary to write about this book to reveal its artistic value and the extent of Ibn al-Muqaffa's skill in those stories using a literary style that reflects the aesthetics of ancient Arabic literary prose. The researcher adopted an integrated approach that combines descriptive, analytical, and historical methods. The research concluded that the narrative storytelling produced by Ibn al-Muqaffa' was characterized by objective features and artistic characteristics that are foundational in their traditions. Furthermore, their influences are still evident in literature in general and storytelling in particular. The resurgence of mythical narrative in post-modern fiction is a confirmation of this reality. This may encourage researchers to focus on ancient storytelling, which is still distant from the concerns of modern narrative theorists.

**Keywords:** Narrative Structure, Ibn al-Muqaffa', Kalila and Dimna, Storytelling.

## Introduction

In this research, we present the narrative style in ancient Arabic prose, taking "Kalila and Dimna" as a model to illustrate the characteristics that distinguish the narrative structure in Ibn al-Muqaffa's work. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the concept of narration and its status in Arabic literature. Narration is the translation of human actions and behaviors into structures of meaning through the narrative style. A narrative is a literary tool used by

writers to reach the goal of the story, tale, or events. It forms the basis upon which dialogue and description in the narrative, story, or historical event rely.

Ancient Arabic narration has not received sufficient attention in terms of study, analysis, and interest, unlike Arabic poetry, which has garnered significant attention from critics and literary figures. There is no doubt that poetry is the Arabs' anthology, recording their history and stories. However, the Arabs did not only produce poetry but also created narratives with several distinct characteristics that manifest at different levels within the structure of ancient Arabic narration. When we examine the text under study, which is the book "Kalila and Dimna," we find many of the unique features of ancient Arabic narration.

The one who contemplates the tales of "Kalila and Dimna" will notice that the narration in the various stories is solicited, meaning that the narration is the result of a request from the other party who expresses a passion to hear the story. For example, Dabschelim asks Bidpai to commence storytelling with a specific request. In the story of the lion and the bull, Dabschelim says, "Give us an example of two friends who are separated by a deceitful liar, causing enmity and hatred between them"(Al-Muqaffa', 1937). In the chapter about inquiring into Dimna's situation, Dabschelim continues to request narration and says to Bidpai, " You have told me about the cunning deceiver and how he sows discord between two friends with his gossip. Tell me about Dimna's situation and what happened to him after he killed Shatrubaha, what excuses he presented to the lion and his companions when the lion reconsidered his opinion about the bull and the gossip about Dimna was confirmed, and what his argument was when he presented it" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

Here, we observe that the desire to listen intensifies in the recipient as listening takes on the form of investigation and inquiry as if the listener senses that the narration conceals something. And the request for storytelling continues in "Kalila and Dimna." In the chapter of the encircled dove, Dabschelim says to Bidpai, inquiring, "I have heard about two friends, how a lie drove a wedge between them, and what became of their situation afterward. Tell me, if you have seen it: about the brothers of purity, how they began their communication and listened to each other?" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

Here, the question carries within it a strong desire from the recipient to continue the storytelling, which serves as an encouragement for the narrative composition process. It's worth noting that narration in "Kalila and Dimna" follows a structured format, often starting with the introductory phrase "they claim". For instance, in the chapter about the owls and the crows, Bidpai says, "They claim that in a mountain among the mountains, there was a tree of the mulberry kind. In it, there was a nest of a thousand crows, and there was also a seer among them" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937). In the chapter about the monkey and the youth, he says, "They claim that there was a monkey named Mahir who was the king of the monkeys. He grew old, and a young monkey from the same tribe challenged him and defeated him, taking his place. Mahir fled on his face until he reached the shore." (al-Muqaffa', 1937). And in the chapter on the ascetic and Ibn Arus, he says, "They claim that an ascetic monk lived in the land of Jurjan, and he had a beautiful wife. They remained childless for a long time, but then the woman became pregnant, causing her and the ascetic great joy, and he praised God and asked Him to make the child a boy" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The isnad, in this context, represents a narrative mechanism that the author meticulously adheres to in response to a cultural inclination that values truthfulness and realism. "News is only acknowledged if the informant is known for truthfulness and justice. The news that meets the required conditions is the one conveyed by multiple narrators who do not recognize each other and therefore have not agreed to disseminate a false report (Kilbatu, n.d)

Arab storytellers resorted to the isnad to establish credibility and authenticity in their narratives. These isnad formulations served as a form of narrative documentation, allowing the storyteller to exercise a level of authority that rivaled, and sometimes surpassed, that of the recipient, who could be a king, as in the case of "Kalila and Dimna," or in stories like "One Thousand and One Nights."

It is essential to consider the nature of the era in which Ibn al-Muqaffa' lived, an era marked by a focus on documentation, narration, and scrutiny of their trustworthiness. Thus, Ibn al-Muqaffa' attempted to utilize the mechanism of the isnad to impart a unique sense of credibility and legitimacy to his narrative. This artistic construct can be attributed to the fact that "people in the time of Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa' were keen on reliable narration, highly attentive to collecting and verifying the texts of Hadith, narrating incorrect language, and regulating its rules... He devised this necessity for distinguishing between texts, distinguishing between what is translated from Persian and what is composed in Arabic to differentiate the texts".

The narrative structure relies on the technique of narrative embedding, where stories intertwine within a single narrative text, meaning that the main story includes more than one subsidiary or sub-story. Interweaving, coherence, convergence, parallelism, continuity, and flow are characteristics of this work in which stories proliferate infinitely. By using the narrative embedding technique, as employed by Ibn al-Muqaffa (1937), the narrative text "opens up to a vision that highlights the narrative triggers, and the narrative action shifts from the first narrator to the second narrator. This shift in narrative voice is accompanied by a shift in the narrative time." Narrative intertwining is considered a process of arousal and seduction that distances the text from tradition and conventionality, as "events intertwine with events, time with time, space with space, characters with characters, and structures with structures, making it impossible to distinguish between these narrative elements."

### **An Applied Example**

When we look at the texts of "Kalila and Dimna," we find that almost every story is not devoid of a frame story from which another frame story branches out. This is used ingeniously to create suspense, arouse curiosity, and lead the reader's imagination beyond, through narrative developments that result in a multitude of narrative voices and a diversity of worlds. The reader is kept on the edge, allowing the narrative space to expand and diversify. In the story of "The Lion and the Bull," the narrative multiplies to include eighteen stories in the following manner:

The Story of the Old Man and His Three Sons: The chapter begins with this introductory story, where Bidpai starts narrating it after King Dabschelim asks him to provide an example of two lovers separated by a deceitful liar. Bidpai responds, "If two lovers are tested by the presence of a deceitful liar who sows discord between them, they will not take long to confront and

argue with each other. An example of this is a certain old man who lived in the land of Dastawand and had three sons. When they reached adulthood, they became extravagant with their father's wealth, as they did not have any profession to earn a living for themselves" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

**The Story of the Lion and the Bull:** This is the frame story of this chapter, where the author narrates the story of the deceiver "Dimna," who corrupted the friendship between the two lovers, "the Lion and the Bull," and how he schemed to incite conflict between them. The frame story serves as a narrative cloak from which several subsidiary stories emerge.

**The Story of the Man Escaping from the Wolf and the Thieves:** This is a subsidiary story that originated from the story of "The Lion and the Bull." It is narrated by one of the secondary characters, the man who was left by the owner of the bull next to the bull but became frightened and abandoned the bull to rejoin his friend. He told his friend that the bull had died, and destiny was inevitable. He illustrated this with the following story: "Once, a man took a path through a wilderness out of fear of wolves. He was familiar with the dangers of that land and its fears. When he had walked only a short distance, a wolf from among the wolves intercepted him and injured him. When the man saw that the wolf was approaching, he became frightened and looked to the right and left to find a place to protect himself from the wolf. He saw nothing but a village behind a valley, and the wolf was almost upon him. So, he threw himself into the water, even though he could not swim, and he was about to drown if not for the people in the village who saw him and cooperated to rescue him, bringing him ashore" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937). Then the author continues with the frame story, saying, "As for the bull, he managed to escape from his predicament and was set free. He remained in a lush pasture with plenty of water and vegetation. When he grew fat and content, he started to bellow loudly. There was a majestic lion nearby who ruled over that territory, accompanied by many lions, wolves, jackals, foxes, herds, and tigers. This lion was known for making decisions independently, without consulting his companions. When the bull's bellow was heard, the lion, who had never seen a bull before and was unfamiliar with its appearance or its sound, became intrigued.

**The Story of "The Monkey and the Carpenter":** This story is narrated by Kalila to illustrate the dangers of associating with kings and intruding upon them. Kalila says, "They claim that a monkey saw a carpenter splitting a piece of wood with a wedge while he was riding on it. He was impressed by that. Then, the carpenter went to attend to some of his work. The monkey, without minding his own business, got on the piece of wood and placed his back against the wedge and his face towards the wood. His tail hung in the split, and when he removed the wedge, the split stuck to him, and he fell unconscious" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

**The Story of "The Fox and the Drum":** This story is narrated by Dimna, intending to calm the Lion's fear upon hearing the Bull's bellowing. Dimna tells the story of a fox who approached a drum hanging from a tree. Whenever the wind blew against the drum's bars, it made a loud noise. The fox, intrigued by the loud sound, approached it. When he saw the drum was massive, he assumed it must be filled with plenty of fat and meat. He attempted to open it, thinking he could feast on its contents. However, when he opened it, he found it empty, and he said, "I don't know why the most useless things make the loudest noise and appear the most impressive" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The Story of "The Hermit and the Thief": This story is narrated by Kalila to Dimna and is used to draw a parallel with Dimna's situation. After the lion chose the bull's company over Dimna's, Dimna was disappointed after Dimna had hoped to have a position and status with the lion.

The Story of "The Crow and the Black": This story is narrated by Dimna to his brother Kalila to emphasize that even though he is smaller in size compared to the bull, he can still prevail through cunning and cleverness. The story illustrates that wit and strategy can overcome physical strength. Dimna says, "They claim that a crow had a nest in a tree on a mountain. Nearby, there was a black snake. Whenever the crow laid eggs, the snake would sneak into the nest and eat them. The crow became sad and complained to a friend from the birds of prey. He said to him, 'I want your advice on a matter I have decided upon. What is it?' asked the bird of prey. The crow replied, 'I have decided to go to the snake while he's asleep and peck his eyes out to rid myself of him.' The bird of prey said, 'What a terrible plan you have come up with! Seek a solution that achieves your goal without risking yourself' (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The Story of "The Scorpion and the Crab": This story branches from the story of "The Crow and the Black." The narrator includes it as part of the previous story. It is narrated in the voice of Ibn Awya, a character mentioned in "The Crow and the Black." The tale shows that a person's cleverness can lead to their downfall. And beware of being like the scorpion who wanted to kill the crab but ended up killing itself." The crow asked, "How did that happen? Ibn Awya recounts, "They claim that a scorpion lived in a large fish's nest. He thrived there for a while, living off the fish he caught. But as he aged, he could not catch fish anymore, and he suffered from hunger and exhaustion. He sat there, saddened, seeking a solution to his predicament. Then, a crab passed by, noticed his condition, and asked, 'Why do I see you so sad and gloomy?' The scorpion replied, 'How can I not be sad when I used to live off the fish here, but today, I saw some fishermen passing by this place, saying, 'Look, there is plenty of fish here. Shouldn't we catch some first?'" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The Story of "The Rabbit and the Lion": This story was told in the context of the dialogue between Kalila and Dimna. Dimna recounted it to emphasize that despite his physical weakness compared to the bull, he was still capable of defeating him, just as the rabbit outwitted the lion. "They claim that there was a lion in a land abundant with water and grass. There were many wild animals in that land, enjoying the plentiful water and pastures. However, they could not benefit from it due to their fear of the lion. So, they gathered and approached the lion"... (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The Story of "The Three Fish": Dimna crafted this story to encourage the lion to hurry and eliminate the bull. He urged the lion to act swiftly, likening the situation to a story about three fish in a pond. "They claim that there was a pond with three fish: one was wise, another was wiser, and the third was helpless. The pond was secluded in the middle of the land, hardly accessible to anyone, and near it flowed a river. It so happened that two fishermen crossed the river and noticed the pond. They made a pact to return with their nets to catch the fish in it. The fish overheard their conversation, and as for the wiser of them, when she heard what they were planning and grew fearful of them, she did not budge from her place, staying hidden"(Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The Story of "The Louse and the Flea": Dimna narrated this story to the lion to convince him of the cunning nature of the bull, warning him against procrastination and hesitation in facing the enemy. "Dimna said: 'They claim that a louse lived on the bedding of a wealthy man for a long time. She would feed on his blood while he slept, and he would not feel it. A companion flea joined her, and they lived like that together. Then, one night, a flea proposed to the louse, 'Tonight, we have a comfortable bed and good blood to feed on.' So, the flea stayed with her until the man returned to his bed and the flea bit him, waking him up. He got up and ordered an inspection of his bedding, but all he found was the louse. So, he grabbed her and crushed her between his fingers while the flea escaped'" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The Story of "The Wolf, the Crow, Ibn Awya, and the Camel": The narrator presented this story through Shatrabah during his conversation with Dimna to illustrate the superiority of unity over individual strength. "They claim that there was a lion in a meadow near a road frequently traveled by people. He had three companions: a wolf, a crow, and Ibn Awya. One day, some shepherds passed by with their camels, and one of the camels lagged until it reached the lion. The lion asked, 'Where do you come from?' The camel replied..." (Al-Muqaffa, 1937).

The Story of " The Sea Lawyer and the Sandpiper": Dimna used this story as a metaphor to caution those who dare to attack their enemies without proper preparation, likening their fate to that of the sea delegate and the mole. The Story of "The Tortoise and the Two Ducks": This story multiplies within the previous story, demonstrating the narrative multiplication. It starts as a sub-story within the main story and then branches into another sub-story, narrated by one of the female Mole. The Story of "The Man and the Bird": The narrator returns to the frame story and branches into this sub-story as an example. It was narrated by Kalila within the context of his reprimand to Dimna for not heeding his advice and warnings.

The Story of "The Fraud and the Foolish": This story tells of two partners, one Fraud and the other Foolish, and it serves as an allegory for the fate that befalls the deceiver who preys on the unsuspecting. Kalila narrated it to admonish Dimna for not heeding his advice and to illustrate that his fate might mirror that of the Fraud partner in the story who plotted against the Foolish one. They say that there were two partners, one Fraud and one Foolish, engaged in trade. While they were on a journey, the Foolish partner lagged for a personal matter. He found a bag containing a thousand dinars and took it. The Fraud partner sensed something was amiss upon his return to their hometown. As they neared the city, they sat down to divide the money. The Foolish partner proposed, 'Let's split it, you take half, and I'll take half.' However, the Fraud partner had already decided to take the entire thousand dinars for himself. He responded, 'No, we won't divide it. Partnership and negotiation lead to fairness and camaraderie. But I will take an allowance, and you will do the same, and we'll bury the rest at the base of this tree, as it's a safe place... and so on" (Al-Muqaffa', 1937).

The Story of " The Scorpion, the Snake, and Ibn Ibn Arus ": This story branches from the previous one and is narrated by a secondary character, the father of the Fraud. The Story of "The Merchant and the Land Whose Rats Eat Iron ": This is the final sub-story in the chapter about the lion and the bull. Kalila narrates this story to lament Dimna's behavior and draw a moral lesson. It serves as an allegory for those who mistreat their benefactors or take advantage of their favors. "They say there was a merchant in a certain land who intended to go to various places in search of livelihood. He had a hundred pieces of iron, which he

entrusted to a man among his brethren before setting out on his journey. After some time had passed, he returned and inquired about the iron. The man told him, 'It has been eaten by rats.' The merchant replied, 'I have heard that nothing can cut through iron except their teeth.' The man was pleased that the merchant believed his story and feigned ignorance.

Later, the merchant encountered a boy who happened to be the son of that man. He took the boy with him and brought him to his own home. The next day, the merchant returned to the man and asked, 'Do you know where my son is?' The man replied, 'When I left your place yesterday, I saw a falcon carrying off a boy, and it might have been your son... and so on (Al-Muqaffa', 1937). As seen in the central story 'The Lion and the Bull,' which branches out in the narrative, this pattern is repeated in the rest of the book's chapters. Therefore, we have a text with an overall structure composed of a collection of stories and sub-images consisting of each story. This diversity indicates the multiple levels of narration that can be elucidated in the following table

Narrative Level	Narrator	Story
Level 1	Ibn al-Muqaffa'	The central story (Baydaba and King Dubshaleem)
Level 2	Baydaba	The frame stories
Level 3	Animal Characters (Main)	Subsidiary Stories
Level 4	Animal Characters (Secondary)	Partial Stories

The previous table illustrates that the narrative structure in "Kalila and Dimna" is organized into four levels of storytelling, forming a descending narrative curve and then returning to take an ascending narrative curve, ultimately concluding at the first level of storytelling. If we examine the narrative structure in "Kalila and Dimna," we realize that it unfolds in an imaginary space, transcending time and place. The setting is absolute, and so is the timeframe. This signifies a conceptual abstraction of the story, an attempt to make its lessons applicable across various contexts. This doesn't mean that the stories are devoid of references to time and place. Narratives in Kalila and Dimna break free from the constraints of specific time and place. The timeframe is an absolute past, and the locations are associated with nature, such as the forest, the wilderness, the seashore, the palm tree, or the riverbank. However, these places are not geographically or politically specified. They are abstract, which gives the events that occur in them a universal quality that makes them relevant at any time and place. This universality serves to protect the narrator or translator from potential scrutiny or criticism by those in power, as some of the stories contain subtle critiques of authority.

**Conclusion**

- Al-Muqaffa (1937) adopted unique narrative techniques in "Kalila and Dimna" that departed from traditional patterns. These techniques are exemplified by what is known as "infinite storytelling," where stories convey wisdom and timeless morals that can guide individuals and societies toward improvement and reform.
- The observer of the tales in "Kalila and Dimna" notices that the narration in these various stories is a requested narrative. This means that the narration results from a request made

by another individual who expresses a desire to hear the storytelling. In this context, the act of requesting stories serves as a motivational factor for the narrative composition.

- The storytelling in "Kalila and Dimna" follows a relayed narrative style, often using the phrase "they claimed " as an introductory formula. This was a narrative strategy adopted to enhance credibility and realism in storytelling. It allowed the narrator to exercise a level of authority equal to or even surpassing that of the audience, as seen in other Arabic narratives like "One Thousand and One Nights". The researcher suggests that the era in which Ibn al-Muqaffa' lived played a significant role in shaping his narrative style. It was a period of declining orality and increasing emphasis on writing, documentation, and storytelling verification.
- The narrative structure in "Kalila and Dimna" relies on the mechanism of narrative embedding. In this approach, various stories are interwoven within a single narrative text. This means that the main story includes multiple subsidiary or sub-stories. The interconnection, cohesion, convergence, parallelism, continuity, and fluidity of these stories are characteristic features of this work. Ibn al-Muqaffa employed the technique of narrative embedding to distance the text from conventionality and stereotyping, bringing together different stories into a unified fabric.



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