

Whispers of the Displaced: Reimagining Power through Kalila wa Dimna

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Abstract: *The climax of political narratives across ages often remains the same, though the characters who enact them may differ – as Mark Twain reminds us, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” In rereading Kalila wa Dima in our contemporary moment, we find that the stories have not changed; the same tales unfold in today’s political theatre, only with different actors. “Whispers of the Displaced: Reimagining Power through Kalila wa Dimna” explores the subtle geographies of exile, silence and political maneuvering woven into one of the most enduring classics of Arabic literature. Though Kalila wa Dimna is often approached as a moral and didactic fable, its deeper terrain reveals a narrative shaped by displacement – of people, voices, truths and even the text itself, which journeyed from India to Persia and finally to the Arab world. This article rereads displacement not merely as a physical uprooting but as a complex metaphor that defines how wisdom survives under power, how stories negotiate danger and how truth seeks refuge in allegory when direct speech becomes perilous.*

The fables’ animal characters, speaking from forests, royal courts and liminal spaces, embody the displaced individual who navigates tyranny through coded language. Their voices, cautious yet courageous, from what James Scott terms “hidden transcripts,” layers of resistance disguised as narrative play. Ibn al-Muqaffa’s adaptation becomes an act of political displacement itself; transforming an Indian moral treatise into a sophisticated manual for survival within the Abbasid court’s unpredictable politics. Through nested storytelling, deferred endings and moral ambiguity, Kalila wa Dimna performs a narrative displacement that shields its insights from authoritarian scrutiny while empowering the marginalized reader to decode the masks of power. This study reimagines the text as an archive of political wisdom for the displaced; those who live at the edges of authority, who must speak in whispers and who learn to survive through metaphor rather than confrontation. Displacement thus becomes a form of agency: a strategic movement of meaning, a shifting of voice, a reconfiguration of identity that allows truth to circulate even within hostile environments.

The lion, the fox, the crow and the other figures transcend their animal forms to become symbolic agents of political negotiation, reflecting the intricate dance between oppression and subversion. By situating Kalila wa Dimna within the broader discourses of exile literature, diasporic identity and political allegory, this article argues that the text remains profoundly relevant to contemporary experiences of marginalization and forced migration. Its fables continue to echo in modern narratives of dispossession, reminding us that displaced voices are not voiceless. Within their whispers resides an enduring wisdom that challenges authority, redefines power and affirms the resilience of storytelling across centuries and borders.

Keywords : *Narrative Resistance, Political Allegory, Exile Literature, Power and Authority, Hidden Transcripts.*

Introduction

Displacement is not merely a movement of bodies across borders; it is a shifting of voices, a rearrangement of meaning and a reimagining of how truth survives under power. From ancient epics to modern exile testimonies, displaced voices have always spoken in registers shaped by fear, ingenuity and longing. In this vast literary landscape, *Kalila wa Dimna*¹ occupies a unique terrain: a book that travelled farther than most empires, carried wisdom across cultures and hid political critique beneath the soft fur of animals and the delicate folds of fable narratives. Originally composed in Sanskrit as the *Panchatantra*, transformed into Pahlavi and reimagined by Ibn al- Muqaffa' in Arabic, the text is itself a wanderer-an exile moving through languages, courts and ideological climates.

To read *Kalila wa Dimna* is to enter a world where displacement becomes the very grammar of survival. In the lion's court, in the counsel of foxes and crows, in forests that echo with cautious speech, we find an allegorical universe that mirrors the precarious world of human politics. Ibn al- Muqaffa's adaptation was not a simple translation but a subversive act of cultural and political negotiation. Living under the Abbasid court, where intellectuals walked a thin line between patronage and persecution, he embedded with the text layers of coded wisdom for those who must survive power without directly confronting it (24-45). Thus, the fables become not just moral tales but manuals of political literacy-guides for navigating tyranny, betrayal and the fragile ethics of counsel.

This article rereads *Kalila wa Dimna* not as a children's book or a moral compendium but as a sophisticated political allegory shaped by displacement. Through its animal interlocutors, its whispered wisdoms, and its coded narrative strategies, the text becomes an archive of survival for the marginalized.

Displacement in this context becomes multi-dimensional:

- **Textual displacement**, as stories migrate and transform;
- **Narrative displacement**, as truths hide behind animal voices;

¹ A classical collection of animal fables redefined into an Arab cultural form in the 8th century by Ibn al- Muqaffa' from the Middle Persian *Panchatantra* tradition. Though presented as moral tales, the work is widely regarded as sophisticated political allegory addressing kingship, governance and the perils of courtly life. Its layered narrative structure and use of animal characters allow for indirect critique of authority, making it one of the most influential and politically nuanced texts in Arabic prose literature.

- **Moral displacement**, as characters embody and fear and ethical instability;
- **Political displacement**, as the powerless strategize survival under authoritarian rule.

Through displacement, this study argues, the enduring strength of *Kalila wa Dimna* lies not in its lessons alone but in the way those lessons are hidden, displaced and carried across time; like quiet embers preserved in the palms of the endangered.

Such forms of displacement echo what Edward Said describes as the “unhealable rift” of exile, where individuals live in the tension between what is spoken and what must remain concealed (*Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* 173-186). The fables’ layered speech aligns with James Scott’s concepts of “hidden transcripts”-the subtle, disguised forms of resistance that flourish beneath the surface of authoritarian power (*Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* 2-4).

Textual Displacement: A Travelling Manuscript

Long before *Kalila wa Dimna* became an Arabic classic, it was a wandering manuscript; crossing geographies, languages and empires with the quiet resilience of a pilgrim carrying wisdom in a bundle of fragile pages. Its journey from the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*² to Middle Persian and then to Arabic is not merely story of translation; it is a story of displacement, of meaning uprooted and replanted in new soils (1- 24). This process can also be read as a record of cultural exchange, as discussed by Takahashi Nobuyoshi, in which each translator, editor and storyteller left distinct fingerprints upon the text, shaping it to reflect the anxieties, ambitions and political climates of their time.

When Ibn al-Muqaffa’ encountered the Pahlavi version and transformed it into Arabic in the eighth century, the text entered another life; one marked by the volatile politics of the Abbasid court, where intellectuals navigated shifting allegiances and the ever, present shadow of suspicion (Crone 9-14). His translation was an act of both literary preservation and political intervention. He did not merely carry the text across linguistic borders; he repositioned it within a culture where allegory was often safer

² The *Panchatantra* is an ancient Sanskrit compendium of animal fables traditionally attributed to the scholar Vishnu Sharma and generally dated to around the 3rd century BCE. Renowned for its layered moral and political wisdom, it has profoundly shaped storytelling traditions across Asia and beyond.

than truth, where stories could travel where direct speech could not. This act of textual displacement enabled the fables to function as disguised critiques, as whispers embedded within narrative forests, as warning carried in the paws of animals.

The manuscripts itself became a metaphor for displacement; uprooted from one intellectual landscape, reshaped in another and continuously adapted across centuries. Through this movement, the text accumulated layers: Indian moralism, Persian royal didacticism and Arab political philosophy, creating a palimpsest of cultural identities rather than a single, stable origin (Atil 9- 14). Each version displaced the previous one, not erasing it but folding it into a richer composite.

This history of movement invites us to read the work as a displaced archive of political thought. The text's multicultural genealogy allowed it to escape ideological confinement and survive across civilizations. Its wisdom, carried from court to court like a wandering sage, became universal precisely because it refused to remain rooted in one cultural soil. The fables lived by migrating – by transforming, by adjusting, by surviving through displacement.

Thus, before we encounter the animal characters who navigate the dangers of kings and predators, we must first understand the manuscript itself as a displaced subject: a traveller whose journey shaped its voice, sharpened its caution and deepened its political intelligence. In its wanderings lie the first whispers of resistance; a reminder that wisdom often travels in exile, seeking lands where it may speak more freely.

Psychological Displacement and Narrative Techniques

When we read a new story, we often receive only an updated version of an ancient history; but when we turn to an ancient story, we encounter the deeper truth of humanity; one that can even heal the internal wounds of the past. As Rollo May³ says, *Human freedom involves our capacity to pause, to choose the one story that will define our existence.* Psychological motives lie at the root of every act of storytelling and *Kalila wa Dimna* is no exception. Here, displacement is not confined

³Rollo May (1909 - 1994) was an American existential psychologist and one of the leading figures in humanistic psychology. His work explored anxiety, creativity, freedom and the human search for meaning. May's writings, particularly in *The Courage to Create* and *Man Search for Himself*, emphasize the role of persona choice and narrative in shaping individual identity and psychological liberation.

to wandering bodies or travelling manuscripts; it unfolds within the fragile, shifting landscape of the mind.

The fables reveal characters who are internally unsettled-creatures whose loyalties tremble, whose fears often speak louder than their courage and whose wisdom is shaped as much by anxiety as by experience. This **psychological displacement** becomes a subtle engine driving the narrative forward, shaping not only the characters' decisions but also the techniques through which the stories themselves are told.

In the lion's court, the fox rarely speaks directly. His counsel emerges slowly, wrapped in metaphors, framed within other tales – a narrative hesitation that mirrors the unseen mental state of one who must advise a volatile ruler (*Islamic Advance Literature, edited by Louise Marlow* 27-48). Such indirection is not stylistic ornamentation; it is instinct for survival. In *Kalila wa Dimna*, the mind under threat does not think in straight lines. It circles. It conceals. It hesitates. It narrates obliquely. Thus, the text's nested storytelling – stories within stories, voices hidden behind other voices; captures a consciousness marked by caution, fear and internal displacement.

The use of **animal masks** deepens this psychological layering. Speaking through animals allows characters to relocate their anxieties into safer vessels: the lion becomes a projection of authoritarian power; the ox, of fragility; the fox, of cunning born from insecurity. Through this technique, personal fears are displaced into allegorical space, where they may be examined without exposing the vulnerable human behind them (Zipes, Jack. *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, 2012, pp. 87-92). In this sense, the fables function as mirrors for readers, enabling them to confront forms of inner displacement that might otherwise remain unspoken.

The text further employs **shifting perspectives** – a narrative technique mirroring the instability of minds caught within political ambiguity. A single event is refracted through multiple angles: the fox's suspicion, the lion's pride, the crow's caution, the murmurs of the court. This multiplicity creates what narratologists call *unstable focalization*, a structure representing fractured states of consciousness (Bal 145-150). Through such fragmentation, the text dramatizes the psychological reality of living

under power: no truth stands alone, no voice is firm, no perspective is complete.

Even the moral statements, often placed at the end of stories, carry traces of this inner displacement. They are not declarations carved in certainty but gentle reflections on fear, loyalty, betrayal and the trembling balance of the mind under pressure. They read less like commandments and more like whispered self-consolations; footprints of characters learning to navigate their emotional exile.

In *Kalila wa Dimna*, psychological displacement becomes inseparable from narrative technique. The structure of the storytelling mirrors the tremors of the displaced mind: hesitant, layered, indirect and profoundly aware of danger. Through this fusion of psychology and narrative craft, Ibn al-Muqaffa' creates not only a political allegory but also a psychological landscape of survival, where every narrative choice echoes the quiet storms within.

Political Disgrace and the Survival of Existence

Kalila wa Dimna is not merely a treasury of fables; it is a manual of political survival disguised beneath the speck of animals. Its strategies of veiled criticism reflect the anxieties of communities and individuals who must speak while remaining unseen – a paradox central to the experience of displacement. Ibn al-Muqaffa', himself navigating the volatile politics of the Abbasid⁴ court, crafts a narrative universe in which criticism becomes possible only through indirection, allegory and the protective mask of fiction (Goodman 93-99).

In the tale *The Lion and the Ox*, the author constructs a miniature kingdom where power circulates through suspicion and whispering. The courtly atmosphere is filled with dangerous proximities; a king who listens too easily, a minister who deceives too expertly and subjects who survive only by mastering the art of careful speech. Dina the fox's ambition illustrates not only the corruption of power, but also the precariousness of advising a ruler whose moods decide life and death. Beneath the surface, this is a critique of governance in which truth becomes a casualty of fear and political agency belongs only to those capable of manipulating narratives (Allen 1-29).

⁴ The Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258) was one of the most intellectually vibrant eras in Islamic history, marked by advancements in literature, philosophy, science and translation. Centered in Baghdad, it

fostered a cosmopolitan cultural milieu that shaped Arabic prose, poetry and political thought for centuries.

Survival in such a world depends on knowing when to speak, how to speak and most importantly; when silence is the only safe language. The text disciplines the reader into this ethics of survival. Characters often pause mid-narrative to tell sub-stories that warn: *not all truths deserve an audience; not all rulers deserve candor*. These digressions, which appear at first as decorative moral lessons, operate as coded political instructions for those navigating dangerous hierarchies (Pellat 883-888).

A particularly rich moment emerges when the ox, Shatrabah, senses the changing currents of political favour. He remarks, “*The King’s heart changes as shadows shift*.” Although this line belongs to an animal, it records the psychological burden of humans living under volatile rule; individuals who must adjust their loyalties for mere survival. Through anthropomorphism, Ibn al- Muqaffa’ frees himself to articulate truths that could not be voiced directly; displacement becomes a method of critique and critique becomes a strategy of existence (El-Shamy 387-396). Thus, *Kalila wa Dimna* transforms political criticism into an art of survival. Those who are displaced-physically, socially or politically-find in these fables a coded literacy, a grammar of self- preservation. The text speaks softly, but its whispers carry yearning for moral clarity in a world ruled by instability.

Methodology of Study and Textual Analysis

This study approaches *Kalila wa Dimna* as both a literary archive and a political instrument, employing a dual methodology that combines interpretive textual analysis with contextual- historical reading. Because the text itself operates on multiple layers; surface narrative, embedded moral instruction and veiled political commentary; its study too must move in overlapping circles, spiraling inward toward meaning rather than advancing linearly.

Analytical Framework:

The work adopts a hermeneutic approach, reading the fables as symbolic mediations between author, ruler and reader. This method acknowledges that meaning in *Kalila wa Dimna* is rarely explicit; it is scattered in pauses, embedded stories, silences and rhetorical detours. By tracing these narrative movements, the study

uncovers the fables' covert political messages and the psychological negotiations of characters who speak under threat (Meisami 63- 69).

A comparative narratological framework supports this reading, focusing on elements such as: the architecture of embedded narratives; the functions of animal proxies; the distribution of speech and silence and the strategies of moral ambiguity. These narrative tools are examined not as aesthetic flourishes, but as survival mechanisms designed for authors writing within politically dangerous climates.

Historical and Cultural Contextualization: Textual analysis is enriched by situating the work in its Abbasid milieu, a period marked by intellectual ferment, political tension and the fragile boundaries of public speech. Ibn al-Muqaffa's biography, characterized by cultural translation, bureaucratic service and perilous proximity to power, provides essential context for interpreting the fables as disguised political critique (Ghazoul, Ferial J. *Arab Narrative of Travel and Cross- Cultural Encounters*, 2015, 17-23.). This study therefore reads the text not in isolation but as a dialogue between Persian wisdom, Arabic literary culture and the anxieties of courtly life.

Close Reading and Textual Excavation: The methodology relies on close reading, selecting key narratives such as *The Lion and the Ox*, *The Monkey and the Tortoise* and *The King's Daughter and Her Companion*. Each is examined for its rhetorical patterns, character psychology and narrative rhythm. Through detailed attention to repeated metaphors – the shifting shadow, the deceptive whisper, the fragile pact; this selection excavates meanings that reveal the text's engagement with displacement, power and self-preservation. For example. in *The Lion and the Ox*, the gradual manipulation of the king by Dimna is traced through shifts in diction: from flattery to fearmongering, from reasoned counsel to deliberate distortion. Such linguistic shifts illuminate how political narratives are manufactured, circulated and weaponized. The study identifies these patters as textual evidence of the author's critique of authoritarian volatility (Irwin, Robert. *The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature*, 2006, pp. 14-22).

Reflective interpretation: Because the text itself is an exercise in cautious speech, the methodology embraces a reflexive stance; one that recognizes the impossibility of fully disentangling authorial intent from survivalist strategy. This reflexive mode acknowledges the ethical burden of interpretation: to read the fables not only for what they reveal, but for what they conceal. Silence, displacement and narrative curvature

thus become interpretive sites as important as the stories themselves.

Through this layered methodology, the study aims to illuminate *Kalila wa Dimna* not as a static classical text, but as a living archive of political wisdom, narrative ingenuity and the psychology of survival.

Findings and Recommendations

The exploration of *Kalila wa Dimna* through the lens of displacement, royal and political disgrace and narrative strategy yields several interconnected findings. First, the text functions as a coded political manuscript, in which dangerous truths are refracted through fables and animal voices. This indirect mode of communication emerges not as a stylistic preference but as a survival strategy in a world where power is unstable and speech is perilous. The stories operate as mirrors held up to authority – polished not with frankness, but with carefully layered allegory (Heinrichs 113- 132).

Second, the narrative structure itself embodies displacement. Characters often speak through borrowed voices, embedded tales, or digressions that mask intention. This constant deferral of meaning reflects the psychological condition of living under scrutiny, where identity, motive and truth must remain fluid. Displacement becomes a narrative technique and narrative technique becomes a psychological refuge.

Third, textual analysis reveals that Ibn al-Muqaffa' systematically uses rhetorical ambiguity to guide readers toward political awareness without incriminating them. Dialogue is layered, moral lessons are unstable and characters inhabit both wisdom and danger. In such a narrative ecology, survival depends on reading what is implied rather than what is declared. The fables thus train the reader in a literacy of caution, a skill essential for navigating oppressive or unpredictable political landscapes (Scott 136-140).

Finally, the tales emphasize that moral clarity does not guarantee survival. The Ox, the Tortoise, the King's Daughter – each learns that virtue must be accompanied by strategic silence, calculated speech and awareness of shifting power structures. The text therefore reveals a profound insight: political existence is less about righteousness and more about recognizing the fragility of the world one inhabits.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge for future scholarship and pedagogical practice:

- **Re-reading Classical Text as Political Archives:** Scholars should approach classical fable literature not merely as moral instruction but as repositories of political psychology, especially in contexts where direct criticism was dangerous.
- **Integrating Narrative Studies with Political Theory:** Interdisciplinary work should be encouraged, bringing narratologists, historians and political theorists together to uncover how storytelling shapes systems of power and social survival.
- **Contextual Teaching of *Kalila wa Dimna*:** Educators should teach the text with attention to its historical conditions of authorship, highlighting the role of allegory as a tool for both critique and self-preservation.
- **Expanding Analysis to Contemporary Contexts:** Modern political climates; marked by censorship, displacement and surveillance – offer fertile ground for applying insights drawn from *Kalila wa Dimna*. The text's survival strategies remain urgently relevant.
- **Encouraging Comparative Studies:** Future research should compare *Kalila wa Dimna* with other global fable traditions; Aesop, Panchatantra and African folktales – to trace how different cultures encoded political truths within seemingly simple stories.
- **Studying Silence as Text:** Scholars should focus on what the text refuses to say explicitly. Its silences, omissions and hesitations may hold deeper political meaning than its overt morals.
- **Digital Archival Efforts:** Efforts should be made to digitize manuscripts, variant versions and commentaries, enabling broader access and comparative textual studies.
- **Exploring Reader Reception Across Eras:** Understanding how audiences historically interpreted these fables can illuminate how political allegory shifts meaning across time, context and culture.

Through these recommendations, the text continues to live – not as a relic of medieval storytelling but as a breathing archive of political wisdom, narrative resilience

and the timeless human struggle to speak, survive and remain whole.

Conclusion

To journey through *Kalila wa Dimna* is to walk along the fragile boundary between fear and wisdom, between silence and the longing to speak. What appears, at first glance, to be a simple collection of animal tales reveals itself; upon patient reading, to be a finely woven map of human vulnerability. It is a text of exiles without distance, of citizens with their own homelands who suffer the subtler form of exile: that of speech constrained, truth disguised, and identity bent to survive. Here, displacement is not merely a geographical event but a psychological state, a trembling awareness that one's words must learn to wear masks.

Ibn al-Muqaffa', writing in an age where the wrong sentence could end a life, fashioned a narrative universe where danger softened into allegory. In this world, the lion's court is our political cosmos; the fox's cunning our reminder of how narratives are weaponized, the Ox's suffering an echo of innocent voices crushed between suspicion and power. Each fable whispers a lesson carved not from abstract morality but from the author's own brush with insecurity, surveillance and rulers whose moods determined destinies (Goodman *Islamic Humanism* 93-101).

Across the tales, the most striking discovery is that survival itself becomes an art, an art practiced in pause, in substitutions, in the delicate alchemy of speaking truth through others' tongues. Animal figures become guardians of concealed meanings, allowing the author to articulate political critique without uttering a single explicit word. The displaced narrator thus crafts a literature of shadows: stories illuminated by what they avoid saying as much as by what they proclaim (136-140).

The narrative structure, with its layered stories and recursive voices, mirrors the experience of those who live under uncertain rule. Displacement reshapes language; fear teaches eloquence of another sort. The tales train their readers to read obliquely, to sense political tremors behind humor, to detect the subtle vibrations of

⁵ Lord Acton (1834-1902) was a British historian, political thinker and moral philosopher known for his strong advocacy of liberty and ethical responsibility in governance. His most famous dictum – "Power corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupts absolute" – comes from an 1887 letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, in which he warned against the moral dangers of unchecked authority. Acton's writings continue to influence modern political thought, especially discussions on tyranny, moral accountability and the ethics of leadership.

authority behind metaphor. This pedagogy of caution is not a retreat from courage but a testament to the ingenuity of those who refuse to surrender their agency – choosing instead to encode it.

In this reading, *Kalila wa Dimna* is not a relic of medieval literature. It is a living text, one that continues to speak to societies where the truth must still hide behind gentle stories, where citizens maneuver through shifting shadows of power and where survival often depends on recognizing the silent architecture of danger. The fables remind us that resistance does not always roar; sometimes, it whispers.

This study reveals that the text offers more than political allegory – it offers moral companionship. It teaches that wisdom is not passive and that survival is not merely endurance but a deeply ethical negotiation with the world’s uncertainties. In the lion’s court and in our own, the tension between voice and silence persists. Yet, through this text, we rediscover the quiet courage of those who choose to speak in language disguise enough to survive, yet honest enough to endure through centuries. *Kalila wa Dimna* endures because it never stops whispering – to rulers, to readers, to the displaced who seek refuge in metaphor. And as long as power remains unpredictable, its whispers will remain necessary; for, as Lord Acton⁵ reminds us, power tends to corrupt; and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

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