

Contextualizing Kalila Wa Dimna an Arabic Translation of Panchatantra as Timeless Mentor in Ahmed Masoud's Thriller Vanished Situated in Present Day Gaza

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Abstract:

Wisdom of the ancients still resonate in the modern world as human beings are essentially the same with their virtues and vices. Omar the protagonist in Ahmed Masoud's coming of age novel Vanished based in present day war affected Gaza refers to tales from Kalila Wa Dimna in crucial moments of his life as a tool book of advice. This paper aims to show how the wisdom of the Panchatantra translated as Kalila Wa Dimna validates ancient wisdom and foregrounds the essential human elements across cultures and time periods in history. It also foregrounds how the text was translated as well as adapted to suit the temper of the Arabic culture with reference to the tales Omar refers to in the novel Vanished.

Keywords: ancient wisdom, human elements, culture, translation, adaption.

The word Panchatantra means "Five Treatises" in Sanskrit and is derived from two words- Panch and Tantra meaning five and treatises respectfully. It was conceptualized as a pedagogical tool to instruct three sons of Raja Amarashakti, King of Mahilaropaya. The King was wise and fair and was equally loved by his subjects but he was disappointed by his sons who had no inclination to learn and were his opposites. Rajan calls a meeting of his ministers and laments the state of his sons. He was known for his wisdom, his court sported the best thinkers, poets and philosophers yet his sons were morons, refusing to learn. His ministers suggested learning the grammar, law, philosophy, science, arts, mathematics, economics and the arts but the King remained sad. Then Sumati, one of his ministers suggested, "The princes do not need years and years of lessons. Instead, they need a new method of learning, and a teacher who can open their minds and guide them towards worldly wisdom." (Panchatantra trans. Chowdhury 3)

Sumati refers to Vishnu Sharma a renowned teacher who lived in Raja Amarashakti's kingdom. Vishnu Sharma is called and the King offers him a reward of a hundred villages if he succeeds in teaching the three princes. To his surprise the old man refuses the reward but takes on the challenge instead, "I will tutor your sons in how to live wisely and well. Within six months from now, I will make your sons learned beyond all." (Panchatantra trans. Chowdhury 4) Vishnu Sharma then composes the Panchatantra and the three princes are enamoured by the tales that teach practical wisdom and the curiosity to learn the ways of the world.

The book is structured into five sections: - 1. The Falling Out of Friends, 2. The Gaining of Friends, 3. Of Crows and Owls, 4. Loss of Gains and 5. Unconsidered actions. Arthur W Ryder in his introduction to The

Panchatantra translated from Sanskrit calls it a “niti -shastra”. There is no direct equivalent of ‘niti’ in the English language. Ryder describes it roughly as “the wise conduct of life.” (Panchatantra Ryder 5)

Hertel foregrounds the purpose of writing Panchatantra “to train young princes to discreet behaviour... in private and political life, and, incidentally and by a faultless model, to teach them the court-language, the Sanskrit.” (Panchatantra, Hertel x)

The stories of the Panchatantra travelled across countries and continents. Around 501-579 CE, King Anushirwan the just ruler of the Sassanian Empire in Iran heard of these tales from travellers who went to India. King Anushirwan sent his physician-vizier, Barzoi to get some medicines and also the “equally powerfully medicines embedded in these tales” known to teach wisdom and cunning to rulers. (Panchatantra trans. Chowdhury xiv) This is how the Sanskrit stories made their way into Pahlavi, an Iranian language. Kalila wa Dimna is the translation from Barzoi’s Pahlavi version by Ibn al-Muqaffa’ into Arabic. Ibn al-Muqaffa’ translated from the Middle Persian into Arabic in and around about 750 CE. The wisdom of the East spread to the Middle East and became part of the Arab culture through translation, transcreation and adaptation. Tales of the Panchatantra also travelled to Europe and were translated into many languages across the world but the paper restricts its focus to its Arabic rendition.

Kalila Wa Dimna is a testament of cultural translation and adaptation. It maintains the five book structure and keeps the most popular stories, though there are additions and interpolations. It is not literary translation but a free, cultural adaptation. The purpose of Panchatantra was to teach political technique but Kalila Wa Dimna attributed to Ibn al-Muqaffa’ rewrites these stories to teach ethics more in tune with Islamic tradition. It takes its name from the two jackals Kalila and Dimanaka. (Kuroyanag)

Nilanjana S Roy in her introduction to Panchatantra translated by Rohini Chowdhury dwells on the nature of animals depicted in fables, “friendly, curious, generous, but also greedy, cunning, jealous”. She points out that their “wild side is exaggerated, so that in them, we can see more clearly that ‘human’ is just another animal in the forests of the world.” (Panchatantra, trans. Chowdhury xv) Projection of animals as characters in stories facilitates the understanding of otherwise complex human issues. As Nilanjana contends, “Fables is.....where you put the stories that float between the world of the forest and the kingdom- or in our times, city and the wilderness.” (Panchatantra, trans. Chowdhury xv) Each tale teaches the art of decision making as each decision leads to a specific outcome. The tales foreground the wisdom that thoughtless actions can bring potential harm so each action must be well thought out.

These tales seeped in ancient wisdom are still read and find place in the novel Vanished: The Mysterious Disappearance of Mustafa Ouda by Ahmed Masoud. Vanished is a coming-of-age thriller novel based in present day Gaza. The child protagonist Omar grows up in a conflict zone- the Gaza strip which is under Israeli control. Six-year-old Omar lives with his mother in a small house which was built by his father who went missing when he was a baby. Even as a child Omar knows that there is more to the story that is told to him by his mother. He misses his father and tries to make some investigations about his father’s disappearance along with his friend Ahmed. This shapes his life and he is guided by the stories his mother narrated from the book Kalila Wa Dimna in taking decisions in crucial moments of his life. At one point when he is separated from his family and living in hiding, there also he finds the book Kalila Wa Dimna under the rubble in a tattered condition. The pristine wisdom in worn out pages of the book help Omar take timely decision to reclaim his life and strike back.

The first reference to Kalila Wa Dimna in Vanished comes at a point when little Omar has been brutally assaulted physically and mentally by the Israeli general Uri who tries to crush the spirit of the boy for refusing to do his bidding. Omar had worked as a collaborator for him once as he promised to give

information about his missing father but the outcome of betraying his own people takes a toll on him. He outright refuses to do it again but Uri wouldn't take no for an answer. He rapes the boy and threatens to disclose his crime to the "terrorists" who are actually the resistant workers of Gaza who would surely kill him for his deed of betrayal. Physically violated and bleeding, emotionally shaken and vulnerable when Omar returns home, his mother puts him up in a warm bed and narrates the story of the 'Lion and Hyena' from Kalila Wa Dimna. The story stays with him as he grows up and helps him take the correct decision at a much later stage of life where he is faced with a dilemma. Before delving into the relevance of these stories and the wisdom they imparted to Omar it is imperative to make a study of the original tales in the Panchatantra and their adaptation in its Arabic translation Kalila Wa Dimna.

In Kalila Wa Dimna the names of the animals are removed and even an animal is changed. The lion was named Karalakesara, the donkey Lambakarna and the jackal Dhusara in the Panchatantra. They are merely referred as lion, donkey and hyena in place of jackal in the story of the 'Lion and Hyena' in Kalila Wa Dimna which is derived from "The Story of the Donkey and the Lion" in the Panchatantra. The translation by Rohini Chowdhury from the Sanskrit Panchatantra has been used for this paper. There is no mention of the details of the text Kalila Wa Dimna referred to in the novel Vanished as there is no authorised version. There are several versions of Kalila Wa Dimna as there are of Panchatantra so it is imperative to mention this in case of a comparative study.

"The Story of the Donkey and the Lion" in the Panchatantra undergoes some changes in its Arabic version 'Lion and Hyena' in Kalila Wa Dimna. In the Sanskrit tale the lion was wounded in a deadly combat with an elephant and becomes weak and incapacitated owing to his injuries. Now Dhusara the jackal his "faithful attendant" unable to bear his hunger pangs as he is dependent on the lion's left overs, expresses his inability to serve his master owing to his debility. He is instructed by the lion to "search for an animal that I can kill even in my enfeebled state and bring him here to me" (Panchatantra "4.1" trans. Chowdhury 280) In the Sanskrit version the jackal goes to a donkey grazing the grass by the riverbed and treats him with care, addressing him as Uncle, "Why have you grown so thin and weak?" (Panchatantra "4.1" trans. Chowdhury 280). Taken aback by the unusual respect showed to him he divulges to his nephew, returning his greetings, "My master works me very hard. He barely gives me anything to eat...." (Panchatantra "4.1" trans. Chowdhury 280). The jackal tempts him by the promise of a place with plenty of juicy grass and rest in a forest meadow but the donkey declines as he is aware of the dangers lurking in the forest for a creature like him. Then the jackal offers him temptations of the flesh in the promise of three she-donkeys living on the meadow, saved by himself. He adds that they were on the lookout for an eligible husband and he just fit the bill. The donkey was unable to deny this temptation and agreed to go. As soon as he entered the forest, the lion came out and roared, the donkey turned and ran for his life with the weak and wounded lion behind him.

The jackal berates the lion at his inability to pounce on the donkey but he pleads that he wasn't ready when the donkey arrived. However, if another opportunity arrived, he wouldn't disappoint. He argues that since the donkey had already seen him, he would surely not come so, the jackal should look for another animal. The jackal confident of his persuasive skills goes to find the donkey again. The donkey retorts, "I was nearly killed.....what was that fierce creature that jumped at me?" (Panchatantra "4.1" trans. Chowdhury 283) The sly jackal scoffs at the donkey's intelligence, "Why Uncle! Couldn't you tell? That was one of the female donkey's I had told you about!" (Panchatantra "4.1" trans. Chowdhury 283). He reports that the she-donkey smitten by his very sight couldn't stop herself and came for him and also ran after him when he turned his tail and fled. The jackal had come as her messenger to convey that she would starve

herself to death if he didn't return to her. Unable to resist such promising words of love the donkey sets apart his frightening experience and goes back. This time the lion is quick and kills him with his paws for sure.

In the Kalila Wa Dimna tale 'Lion and Hyena' there is no mention of the combat between the lion and the elephant, it merely says, "the lion became very ill, so he could hardly move or hunt while his companion went hungry as there were no leftovers anymore." (Masoud 72) Here comes the innovation in translation when the lion instructs the hyena to bring him the "heart and ears of a donkey" (Masoud 72) as his illness could be cured only by consuming these. The replacement of the jackal by the hyena is not without purpose. The washerman is replaced by a farmer, this is a very pertinent cultural adaptation, for the Sanskrit version had the donkey graze on the grass by the riverbed. India being a land of rivers it was poignant to portray a donkey grazing by the riverbed but Arabia being a desert didn't have flowing rivers so, Ibn al-Muqaffa' portrays the donkey working hard on a farm. Now this donkey, unlike its Sanskrit counterpart doesn't need much coaxing, "The hyena told the donkey he should not obey his master, and that it should run off instead to a place where a herd of donkeys lived happily in the jungle." (Masoud 72) The donkey readily agreed and before he could reach the jungle the hyena ran to inform the lion. Before the donkey could come close, the excited lion started roaring from behind the bushes which frightened the donkey and it ran off before having a glimpse of the lion. Here again Ibn al-Muqaffa' departs slightly from the original story, the lion confesses his chagrin and says that his illness had slowed him down and that given a second chance he wouldn't miss the donkey. There is no argument with the jackal that he should bring another animal as the donkey would surely not come again. Of course, in the Arabic version the donkey doesn't see the lion as it does in the Sanskrit version, hence no need for greater persuasion.

The hyena goes to the donkey and simply asks why he fled, to which the donkey explains that he had heard the lion roar and was obviously afraid. The hyena tries to confuse him and says that the roar he had heard was not that of a lion at all, but the "noise of the collective herd of donkeys coming together to welcome him in their territory." (Masoud 72) The donkey is duped by the lies of the hyena and goes back to meet his sure death in the paws of the lion who was prepared this time.

The story in the Panchatantra ends here, but Ibn al-Muqaffa' innovates by portraying the lion kill the donkey but not eat it right away. The lion goes to wash himself as advised by the doctor before eating the heart and ears of the donkey. As soon as he leaves, the hyena quickly eats away the heart and ears of the donkey. When the lion returns and questions the disappearance of these sought after parts, he says, "if the donkey had a heart and ears he wouldn't have come back." (Masoud 73) Now this rendition opens up possibility of several meanings: one the donkey doesn't have a mind at all but has a heart i.e. he feels and hears. But in this case, as he failed to rely on his own ear sight and the emotion of fear that he experienced upon his escape, the hyena declares that he had no "heart and ears". The ending could also suggest that as the lion depended upon these parts as a cure to his illness, the denial of these to him exposes the intentions of the hyena – he didn't want him to recover at all rather remain dependent on him for his catch. In the Arabic version, the hyena pretends to be faithful but proves the opposite towards the end of the tale so this replacement serves its purpose.

Despite these changes and adaptations, the moral of both the Sanskrit and Arabic version remains the same – i.e. trust your own experience and intellect more than you trust the seemingly desirable things told by a stranger, however tempting he might sound.

The second tale of the Panchatantra referred to in the novel Vanished is "The Story of the Meddlesome Monkey" rephrased as the tale of the curious monkey and his owner, the carpenter in Kalila Wa Dimna.

Let us make a study of the alterations and cultural adaptations in this transcreation. In the Sanskrit tale a rich merchant decides to build a temple in a forest near his home town. He invites the best carpenters and masons to build the temple. The men worked all day long and took a break in the afternoon to eat and have some rest. One sunny day a group of monkeys arrived at the building spot when the workers were at rest. Being monkeys they pranced about playing among the half-built temple structure. One of the monkeys meddled into the area where a carpenter had been working. He came across a “half-split log of wood.” (Panchatantra “1.2” trans. Chowdhury 14) The carpenter had gone to have his lunch driving a wedge into the split of wood to keep it in position in order to complete his work later. The curious monkey found it very strange and started investigating. He lunched himself on top of the log and began to loosen the wedge. He had no business doing this yet he did it and as soon “as the wedged popped out, the slit in the log snapped shut, trapping the monkey” who had a painful death. Moral of the story, “it is best not to interfere in concerns that are not our own.” (Panchatantra “1.2” trans. Chowdhury 14)

In Kalila Wa Dimna Ibn al-Muqaffa' changes the context of the story. There is no merchant or any temple building story, there is a carpenter who owns a monkey, rather than a monkey who chances upon a log of wood. This again is an incident of cultural adaptation because understandably there were no temples in Arabia. The carpenter is made the owner of the monkey providing the scope for him to learn from the warnings given by his master over and over again, “he who interfered in someone else’s business often discovered things that they did not like” (Masoud 121) However, the monkey refused to learn, he would watch his master working and when the carpenter was not in sight he would take the hammer and bang on things, “pretending to be useful.” (Masoud 121). However, one day when the carpenter was gone the monkey found two logs of wood wedged together and presumed that his master intended to make a gate out of them. Intending to help his master, he began removing the wedges, little did he know that there were springs attached that came crashing on his neck the moment the wedges were removed. His master mourned his death and the moral of the story became a famous Arabic proverb, “he who interferes in someone else’s business often finds things they don’t like” (Masoud 122)

The next tale from the Panchatantra that finds a place in the novel is “The Story of the Brahmin’s Wife and the Mongoose” as the story of the Imam and the Meerkat in Kalila Wa Dimna. In the course of the novel Masoud doesn’t give the exact title of the story from Kalila Wa Dimna, Omar just narrates the story. In the Sanskrit version there is a brahmin and his wife and the wife gives birth to a son. On the same day a mongoose is born but its mother dies in labour. The kind woman looks after the little mongoose along with her son, but doesn’t fully trust its animal instinct and is careful. However, the mongoose looks upon the brahmin family as his own. One day the woman goes to fetch water from the well and asks her husband to look after their baby till she returns. The brahmin doesn’t pay heed to her words and goes to gather alms, his usual fare, leaving the child behind. Meanwhile the mongoose keeps vigil and a big cobra slither into the room. The mongoose attacks it with all his might and bites it to pieces. When the woman returns, he runs to welcome her. The sight of blood on the mongoose’s snout and mouth misleads her and she assumes her fears had come true and that the animal had killed her son. She hits him with her pot and it dies. When she finds her baby sleeping peacefully with the dead body of the cobra lying nearby, she realises her folly but it is too late. Overcome with guilt and grief she weeps aloud and curses her husband for his greed. She had killed her second son mistakenly, “Now suffer the grief of losing a childas excessive greed causes the wheel to spin upon your head!” (Panchatantra “5.2” trans. Chowdhury 319)

The Arabic translation of the story has a lot of cultural adaptation - an Imam instead of the Brahmin to begin with. The Panchatantra doesn’t elaborate on the character and social status of the brahmin but Ibn

al-Muqaffa' portrays the social status of the Imam as he is a religious head. The Imam is wise and "Everyone loved him and asked for his advice on all matters regarding their lives." (Masoud 128) He would always come up with solutions to their problems and viewed everything in a positive light. Though he had the patronage of the King he refused to move to the court as he loved to stay among his people in the village and be of service to them. His wife only complimented his qualities and was equally loved by all. "They worked in the local mosques together, giving lectures on morality and helping people with paperwork for all the villagers without ever asking for a penny." (Masoud 128) The couple had everything but a child, though the Imam had a meerkat whom he cared for like his child and it followed him everywhere. The meerkat too reciprocated their love by its love and service, "It would jump up and down whenever it saw its owner" wait on them till they fell asleep. (Masoud 128) In this mode of living and loving the meerkat, one fine day the Imam's wife became pregnant with child. She gave birth to a son and they loved him dearly and the meerkat was ignored though it cared for the baby as his brother. The Panchatantra depicts the Brahmin's wife go out to get some water from the well, and in Kalila Wa Dimna its Arabic adaptation, the Imam's wife goes to help women get water for the mosque. This again foregrounds Ibn al-Muqaffa's adaptation of the tale to an Islamic world view.

The Imam was with his son when the King's messenger arrived asking him to report to the King immediately. So, the greed of the brahmin in the Sanskrit story is replaced by King's order in the Arabic version relieving a religious head of such a trait. The Imam is depicted as concerned about leaving his child behind and decides to go and return fast. At this point the meerkat goes and sits by the child as if to reassure him that he would look after him. The meerkat keeps vigil and pounces upon a snake (name not specified) that slithers near the baby and kills it with all his might. The meerkat runs to greet the Imam upon his return who imagines the worst and kills the meerkat with his bare hands. Finding his son sleeping soundly with the dead snake lying nearby, he realises his folly but it is too late. Henceforth the Imam wears the colour black and leaves the village with his family soon after, never ever mentioning the meerkat again. The Panchatantra depicts the wife kill the mongoose but keeping the ethics of Islam in mind Ibn al-Muqaffa' makes the Imam the killer and in keeping with his religious nature makes him wear black ever after as a symbol of lifelong mourning.

Here the greed for money in the Sanskrit version which is actually a means of survival for the brahmin, is replaced by royal favour of the King which he dares not risk. Excessive love for one's biological child blinds the judgement of a man who was sought after by all for his wisdom. Instead of gratitude the meerkat receives death by the Imam's hands as the mongoose undergoes in the Sanskrit version. So, the story teaches caution and selflessness as a precursor to making such rash judgements and putting them into action. The Panchatantra doesn't elaborate on the fate of the brahmin and his wife after this incident but Ibn al-Muqaffa' in Kalila Wa Dimna makes the Imam sacrifice everything he loved to atone his guilt as a religious leader whose life was meant to inspire others towards an ethical disposition.

The final story of Kalila Wa Dimna that Omar refers to is actually derived from a few stories of the Panchatantra to fashion a new story with unique attributes. So, this is an example of interpolation as well as derivation in translation- the story about a city that loved cats. This story has been derived from "The story of the Tittibh Bird and the Sea" and "The Story of Crows and Owls" and Ibn al-Muqaffa' adds his own to create a new story that Omar relates to in the context of the Oslo agreements that destroyed Gaza. Ibn al-Muqaffa's story is a tale of manipulation and strategic war with one's enemy. There was a city surrounded by two rivers and hence a trading centre full of people and goods. The town had lots of mice as well as cats who were loved by their owners for keeping the mice away. One day the King of mice calls

his wazirs, ministers for an urgent meeting, “I would like to seek your advice on how to get rid of them (cats) and live in more peace than past generations.” (Masoud 166) The first wazir suggests hanging little bells on the cats’ neck to be aware of their whereabouts and escape being caught. The second wazir suggests getting rid of the cats strategically by deserting the city for a year, so that the people would find no use for keeping cats and drive them out. The cats would fight with each other over food and kill themselves.

The third wazir suggests a shrewder plan that would make the people hate their own pet cats- it lays out a detailed plan, to be followed step by step. First the mice should dig a tunnel into the house of the wealthiest man and tear his clothes but not touch his food. When the man would suspect the mice of this damage, he would bring another cat, then the mice would tear his bed sheets. When he would bring in another cat to combat these attacks, the mice would tear apart his furniture. Then the man would suspect the increase in the number of cats for this escalation in damages and he would dispose of one cat. The mice would accordingly diminish the damage. With every cat the man removed, the damage would reduce accordingly and stop with the removal of the last. Now, the man convinced that all this damage was caused by the cats, would inform his neighbours, “As a result everyone will start getting rid of their cats, to prevent the same from happening.” (Masoud 167) In the context of the novel Omar says, “Whoever thought of the Oslo agreement must have had the same mind as the third wazir.” (Masoud 168) as it turned the Palestinians against themselves and totally destroyed their dream of freedom.

At a point in the novel Omar can’t take it anymore and decides to stop collaborating with Uri in getting his people killed. He couldn’t wait for the Israeli soldiers to leave, he recalls his mother’s story from *Kalila Wa Dimna* of the ‘Lion and Hyena’ and says, “I remembered Mother’s story about the donkey and how he went back for his death the second time. I refused to end up like that donkey.” (Masoud 109) The wisdom of this tale makes him take a crucial decision that changes the course of his life, he confesses to Um Marwan, who takes him to the resistant people who do not kill him as Uri had threatened but treat him as their own. Omar is saved from being a collaborator with the enemy and gets united with his people in the Palestinian cause.

Omar’s mother reads the tale of the ‘Lion and Hyena’ to him when he came home battered and bruised by the physical assault of Uri. The tale becomes pertinent as it reflects his own condition- Uri impersonates the character of the hyena for he makes him betray his won people and doesn’t provide any information about his father as he had promised. Moreover, he keeps him dependent as the lion, for the hyena eats away the heart and ears of the donkey which were meant to cure his illness.

This analysis shows that the ancient wisdom preserved in the tales of the Panchatantra composed around 300 BCE–300 CE, translated and adapted into the Arabic *Kalila Wa Dimna* in an around 750 CE is still relevant in the 21st century. Prodip Kumar Sarkar argues that the Panchatantra offers “timeless wisdom ... valuable insights into human behaviour, leadership, and societal harmony, bridging ancient Indian thought with contemporary global challenges.” (Sarkar) The reference to a few tales in *Kalila Wa Dimna* in a novel published in 2015 foregrounds the dynamism of these tales. Scott contends that “*Kalila wa Dimna* demonstrates the interconnectedness of the world’s cultures” (Scott)

These tales had anthropomorphised animal characters depicting potentially human situations and conditions which remain pertinent as the essential human characteristics remain the same over the ages. The use of these tales by Ahmed Masoud in his novel *Vanished* shows that these tales remain relevant for the timeless wisdom they impart and teach values that help Omar take meaningful decisions. The world has changed apparently but human beings remain the same in their core virtues and vices. In bringing tales

of Kalila Wa Dimna directly within the folds of a novel based in a conflict zone, the author suggests that in a world torn by strife and uncertainty, these tales assure us of certain wisdom filtered through these ancient stories that guide when there is no human being around or can be trusted. Omar is depicted as going to the book in moments of crises again and again. The conscious reference to the tales of Kalila Wa Dimna may also be read as a call to go back to ancient books and their wisdom for a better understanding of complex human situations, in an age of global connectedness and information.

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