

Original Research Article**A Comparative Study of the Evolution of Text and Illustrations in the Story of the Ducks and the Turtle in Kalilah wa-Dimnah, Tuhfat al-Aḥrar, and Anvar-i Suhayli**

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Abstract

The parable of the turtle and the ducks is among the most venerable narrative motifs of Indian provenance. Owing to its allegorical tenor, the tale was subsequently assimilated into other canonical works, including Kalilah wa-Dimnah, Jami's Haft Awrang (specifically Tuhfat al-Aḥrar), and Mulla Ḥusayn Va'iz Kashifi's Anvar-i Suhayli. Over the centuries, numerous miniatures have been executed to embellish manuscripts of these texts. A comparative consideration of these visualizations across disparate codices that nevertheless share a common narrative kernel elucidates the rationale and scholarly significance of the present inquiry. The fundamental research question posed is this: notwithstanding the allegorical unity of the tale, what mutations have taken place in its textual articulations in contrast with the archetype Kalilah wa-Dimnah? Methodologically, the study employs a descriptive-comparative approach. Manuscript samples were selected at random and examined until the point of saturation was reached. The findings may be articulated on two interrelated planes: textual transformation and pictorial transformation. On the textual plane, the most liberal reinterpretations and literary embellishments appear in Jami's Tuhfat al-Aḥrar. More generally, however, it can be affirmed that the illustrations of each recension remain consonant with the stylistic disposition of their host text. Thus, miniatures within Kalilah wa-Dimnah manuscripts mirror the clarity and unadorned expression of the narrative, favoring austere compositional schemes devoid of excessive visual elaboration. Conversely, in Anvar-i Suhayli, whose prose style is marked by the Indo-Persian literary idiom of the Safavid milieu, saturated with metaphor and ornate rhetoric, the paintings attributed to Ṣadiqi Beyk Afshar faithfully transpose the textual intricacies described by Kashifi. In illustrated copies of Tuhfat al-Aḥrar, however, the displacement of the tale's central actors to peripheral or recessive positions within the composition suggests that narrative action is relegated to a secondary role; in harmony with Jami's poetic idiom, the emphasis shifts toward human spectatorship and mystical-ethical exegesis.

Keywords: *Iranian Painting, Parable of the Turtle and the Two Ducks, Kalilah wa-Dimnah, Tuhfat al-Aḥrar, Anvar-i Suhayli.*

Introduction

Among the cardinal sources for reconstructing the history of Persianate painting are illustrated manuscripts in diverse domains—medicine,

philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, poetry, and belles-lettres. The intimate symbiosis between Iranian painting and literature has long been acknowledged by historians of art. Within this literary-pictorial continuum, two ancient narrative

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reservoirs stand out: Kalilah wa-Dimnah and its Sanskrit precursor, the Pancatantra. The fable of “The Turtle and the Two Ducks”, transmitted through Kalilah wa-Dimnah, was later incorporated, with modifications, into Jami’s *Tuhfat al-Ahrrar* (within the *Haft Awrang septet*) and into Kashifi’s *Anvar-i Suhayli*. Beyond tracing the textual vicissitudes of this tale, the present study undertakes a rigorous comparative analysis of the miniatures that visualize these divergent yet interrelated renditions of a shared narrative theme. The central research question is twofold: first, given the textual metamorphoses of the “Turtle and the Two Ducks” fable, what expressive and stylistic reconfigurations may be discerned in the corresponding pictorial programs? The article proceeds through the following sequence: an initial description of the visual and stylistic features of each miniature, followed by a comparative analysis and critical evaluation of their convergences and divergences.

Literature Review

Two overarching categories of sources pertain to the present inquiry. The first, more circumscribed in scope, is devoted directly to the tale of the turtle and the two ducks. Noteworthy in this regard is the article *Comparative Examination of Visual Elements in the Miniature of the Turtle and Two Ducks in the Mashhad and Qazvin Schools* (Nayebpour & Esfandiari, 2016). After narrating the fable, the authors contextualize the artists and then scrutinize the works with emphasis upon school distinctions, visual structure, and compositional logic. Their findings demonstrate that the Mashhad school miniature manifests courtly refinements, whereas the work attributed to Sadiqi Beyk Afshar, though classified within the Qazvin school, is rendered with marked simplicity and restraint.

The second category encompasses broader comparative studies, largely literary in orientation, that occasionally extend to pictorial analysis.

O’khane (2003), in his seminal monograph *Early Persian Painting Kalila wa Dimna Manuscripts of the Late Fourteenth Century* (2003), conducts a detailed examination of seven Persian codices from the latter half of the eighth century AH, many of which rank among the masterpieces of Iranian manuscript painting. Samanian & Pourafzal (2015), in *Comparative Examination of Illustration Features and Manuscriptology in Kalila wa Dimna of Al-Inju and Al-Muzaffar*, analyze the pictorial idiom of the Al-Inju recension, deeply indebted to Baghdad and Seljuk prototypes, and the Al-Muzaffar version, shaped by the socio-political environment of Shiraz and its intersections with the Jalayirid atelier of Tabriz. In a subsequent contribution, *Comparative Analysis of Minai Pottery and Zarin-fam Tiles (6th to 7th centuries AH) with Miniatures from the 707 AH Al-Inju Kalila wa Dimna Manuscript* (2017), the same scholars situate these productions within the broader cultural and political currents of their epoch, interpreting the continuity of aesthetic forms as emblematic of historical conditions.

Sadat Sharifi & Hayayi Tehrani (2017), in *Educational Plot*, undertake a comparative reading of narrative architecture across three retellings: *Kalila wa Dimna*, the *Bidpai cycle*, and *Anvar-i Suhayli*, employing the *Lion and the Ox* episode as an exemplar. They conclude that allegory serves as a unifying axis, while the principal point of divergence lies in the ethical orientation of *Anvar-i Suhayli*, discernible in its distinctive titling. Similarly, Nazemiyan et al. (2018), in *Comparative Examination of Linguistic and Literary Style in Kalila wa Dimna by Nasrallah Munshi and Vaiz Kashifi*, observe that despite Kashifi’s avowed fidelity to the original tale, his prose reflects the ornate Indianate literary mode of the Safavid milieu. Hence, while the two recensions converge in substance, they diverge strikingly in stylistic register. Despite such variegated approaches, the present article endeavors to reread both text and image concurrently across a span of

nearly five centuries, in Arabic and Persian, in prose and verse. This expansive scope, unprecedented in prior scholarship, permits an integrated analysis of textual mutation and pictorial imagination. The degree of correspondence between word and image, the evolving strategies of compositional arrangement, and the representation of narrative motifs across divergent manuscripts are among the distinctive contributions advanced here.

Research Method

This study is grounded in a descriptive-analytical framework combined with comparative methodology. Sources were assembled through a comprehensive consultation of library holdings and digital repositories. The corpus consists of thirteen extant miniatures, selected non-selectively and randomly, with the collection continuing until the saturation point of extant evidence was reached. While not exhaustive of all pictorial instances of the turtle and ducks fable, the sample is sufficiently representative to disclose patterns of textual and visual transformation.

• Description of the illustrations

This section presents a close, methodical reading of the miniatures that depict the tale of the turtle and the two ducks across the sampled manuscripts. The analysis is organized according to the manuscript groupings used in the Persian original: early Arabic witnesses of *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, early Persian witnesses of *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*, and the later Safavid-era renderings found in *Tuhfat al-Aḥrar* and *Anvar-i Suhayli*. For each group, I delineate compositional schemas, figural deployment, pictorial devices that index narrative temporality and agency, and the degree of fidelity to the accompanying text. Arabic inscriptions that appear within the images are preserved in their original script and are not translated.

The first quartet derives from Arabic witnesses of *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* dated to c. 578 AH c.

1182 CE, c. 678 AH c. 1279 CE, c. 688 AH c. 1289 CE, and an eighth-century AH exemplar approximately dated c. 725–750 AH c. 1325–1350 CE. These miniatures manifest a shared formal idiom. None is contained within an elaborate frame; rather, the scenes unfold within a broad horizontal field. In images 1 and 3 (Table 1), the pictorial plane resolves into a low horizon band that accommodates seated figures. The central motif, the turtle and the ducks, is positioned just above a modest pond containing a swimming fish. In images 2 and 4 (Table 1), the aquatic motif yields to a bush or small tree. Images 2 and 3 (Table 1) exhibit nimbate heads about certain figures, a visual device that sacralizes selected witnesses and distinguishes principal observers from the crowd. Figures are composed on a triangular ground plane with the turtle at the apex, thereby concentrating viewer attention and simplifying narrative legibility. Across all four compositions, the figures are animated; the gesture of outstretched arms signals a contemplated attempt at rescue and produces a pictorial sense of suspended crisis rather than a depiction of the fall or its immediate aftermath.

An Arabic caption positioned above the composition in image 2 (Table 1) is preserved here in the original script: تعضين على وسط عود، و تأخذ كل واحد منا بطرفه، فرضيت بذلك فطار بها، فرأها الناس. Expanded versions in other witnesses conclude with a terse formula: the turtle opened its mouth and died. Concerning image 4 (Table 1), the Metropolitan Museum catalog observes that the codex originally contained seventy-eight paintings and that its figural idiom demonstrates marked Mamluk Egyptian affinities with occasional Ottoman sartorial and Safavid turban references. The manuscript is commonly attributed to Gujarat and may have been copied from an Egyptian exemplar.

Images 5 and 6 (Table 1) render the aerial episode in Persian *Kalilah wa-Dimnah* exemplars associated with Abdullah Munshi. The exemplars are held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and the

Table 1. Illustration of the story of the turtle and the ducks in Arabic and Persian, Kalilah and Dimnah. Source: Authors.

Number of painting	Images	Captions	References
1		Arabic inscription/ Book of Kalilah and Dimnah. 578 AH	http://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-kalila-wa-dimna-nthe-story-of-the-tortoise-and-two-ducks-from-the-95806472.html
2		Book of Kalilah and Dimnah. 678 AH. Location: Cambridge Museum.	http://www.uzscite.uz/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/113-126.pdf
3		Egyptian manuscript of Kalilah and Dimnah. 688 AH. Bavarian State Library	http://www.publicdomainreview.org/essay/travelling-tales/
4		Kalilah and Dimnah. 725-750 AH. Attributed to India, Gujarat, Metropolitan Museum of Art.	http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453094
5		Persian Kalilah and Dimnah. Baghdad. 678 AH. Bibliothèque Nationale de France	https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8410892b/f153.item.r=Persan+377
6		Persian Kalilah and Dimnah. British National Library. Al-Injo period. 707 AH	https://museum.ganjoor.net/items/kalila-va-demne/p0139

British Library and date respectively to c. 678 AH, c. 1279 CE, and c. 707 AH, c. 1307 CE. These two miniatures are among the earliest Persian illustrated witnesses and reveal decisive divergences in compositional logic and figural articulation. The colophon of image 5 (Table 1) records completion at Madinat al-Salam, an honorific for Baghdad, while the 707 AH leaf is associated with Shiraz and the Al-Inju milieu; stylistically, the later painting exhibits affinities with Seljuk precedents, particularly in facial typology and formal schematization (Samanian & Pourafzal, 2017).

A salient distinction concerns the treatment of arm gestures. In image 5 (Table 1), hands are extended in an indexical upward pointing gesture that emphasizes spectatorship and communal astonishment rather than active assistance. This contrasts with other early witnesses in which an extended hand performs the function of attempted intervention. Notably, none of the examined miniatures shows the turtle's fall; the pictorial strategies prefer temporal suspension, either the moment before catastrophe or the instant of collective amazement. The finger-pointing motif first attested in the c. 678 AH exemplar relocates causal inference from imminent peril to public visibility; the pointing enacts the social reveal that precipitates the turtle's fatal mouth opening.

The *Tuhfat al-Aḥrar* leaves register a discernible reorientation of pictorial emphasis. Image 7 (Table 2), ascribed to an early Safavid Tabriz workshop c. 919 AH c. 1513 CE and often attributed to Rustam Ali, positions the principal event beyond the immediate pictorial frame in the upper right quadrant. Five figures in the field direct their gaze toward the offstage subject; two ducks occupy the lower register within a pond. Two inscriptional panels inhabit the principal field such that an imaginary axis drawn through the inscriptions aligns with the witnesses' sightlines, producing a centrifugal vector that leads the viewer beyond the picture plane toward an unseen locus. Jami's verse that accompanies the

scene accentuates the communal exclamation بانگ برآمد ز همه کای شگفت یک کشف آنک به دو بط گشته جفت.

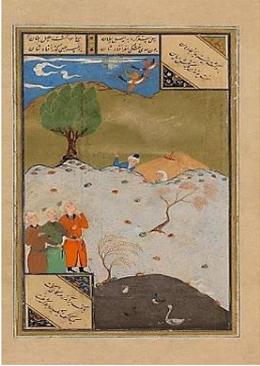
Image 8 (Table 2) from a Qazvin school exemplar attributed to c. 942 AH, c. 1536 CE, displays a more complex orchestration of inscriptional bands. A silvered river occupies the lower register, now darkened by oxidation. The principal motif inhabits the upper center and is bracketed by vertical and diagonal panels, which modulate the viewer's descent through the composition. The pictorial field stages choreography of glances; a central spectator with an uplifted head establishes an optical axis echoed by adjacent figures.

Images 9 and 10 (Table 2) continue the Safavid tendency to marginalize the turtle and the ducks within a dense foreground of human spectatorship. Image 9 (Table 2), a Bukhara exemplar, increases the number of figures, thereby emphasizing collective observation; only a single ascetic figure diverts attention from the spectacle to perform ablutions, introducing a countervailing motif of disengagement. Image 10 (Table 2) sustains the accumulation of observers, the lower register again presents a tarnished silver river, while the upper field is crowded with an array of inscriptional kites that frame the aerial subject.

Image 11 (Table 2), attributed to Ṣadiqi Beyk Afshar within the Qazvin school c. 955 AH c. 1548 CE, exemplifies the closest pictorial fidelity to Kashifi's prose. As in several *Tuhfat al-Aḥrar* witnesses, the central event is situated beyond the main frame in the upper right corner. The left half of the composition is dense with inscriptions, architecture, and human figures whose orchestrated gazes move the viewer toward the offstage scene. The poetic caption from Kashifi is preserved within the pictorial field, and the original Arabic and Persian segments are retained in this edition (Va'ez Kashfi, 2009).

Image 12 (Table 2), Qazvin school leaf c. 958 AH c. 1551 CE, evidences a distinctive pictorial economy. The frame is open on one side, and a lofty cypress

Table 2. Drawings of the story of the turtle and the duck in Tohfat al-Ahrar and Anwar al-Sahili. Source: Authors.

Number of painting	Images	Captions	References
7		<p>The Book of the Gift of the Freedmen, Jami. Tabriz, Safavid, 919 AH. Attributed to Rostam Ali.</p>	<p>www.islamicartsmagazin.com/magazine/view/explore_the_arts_of_the_islamic_world_india/</p>
8		<p>Book of the Gift of Al-Ahrar Jami. Qazvin School. 942 AH. Uzbekistan. Purchased by: John Paloski.</p>	<p>http://www.timelesmoon.getarchive.net/media/the-flight-of-the-tortoise-cbl-per-215-f18a-271626?action</p>
9		<p>Book of the Gift of Al-Ahrar Jami. Bukhara 972 AH. Place of storage in Russia.</p>	<p>http://artsandculture.google.com/asset/flight-of-the-tortoise-page-from-a-manuscript-of-the-haft-awrang-seven-thrones-tuhfat-al-ahrar-or-gift-of-the-free/UAHKmaA8rlhidA?ms</p>
10		<p>Book of the Gift of Al-Ahrar Jami. 967 to 977 AH. Place of storage: Los Angeles Museum of Art.</p>	<p>https://expositions.nlr.ru/eng/ex_manus/jami/gallery.php</p>

Rest of Table 2.

Number of painting	Images	Captions	References
11		The Book of Anwar Soheili. Attributed to Sadeghi Bek Afshar. Qazvin School. 955 AH.	https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fe/Sadiqi_Beg%2C_The_Ducks_Carry_the_Tortoise_over_a_Village%2C_from_Anvar-i_Suhayli%2C_Qazvin%2C_1593_Aga_Khan_Museum.jpg
12		The Book of Tuhfat al-Ahrrar Jami. Qazvin School. 958 AH.	https://expositions.nlr.ru/eng/ex_manus/jami/gallery.php
13		The Book of Haft Awrang Jami 963-973. Mashhad School. Attributed to Abdul Aziz. Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art	https://asia.si.edu/explore-art-culture/collections/search/edanmdm:fsg_F1946.12.215/

shapes the vertical axis of the page. The subject is rendered in a subtle three-quarter orientation, the turtle drawn with an incipient volumetric modeling, a rare experiment in perspectival representation among the sample. Notably, the miniaturist omits any depicted water body, thereby stressing dryness and the terrestrial peril as the dominant moral trope rather than the motif of the pond.

Image 13 (Table 2), belongs to the Safavid period

and derives from a manuscript of Haft Awrang by Jami. As in the two preceding miniatures, the composition opens on the right and closes on the left. The vegetation and a large tree on the left side visually enclose the frame, creating a sense of spatial containment. The principal motif, depicting a turtle accompanied by ducks, is positioned in the upper-central section of the composition, thereby drawing the viewer's gaze towards the narrative focus. Twelve

figures are arranged in a spiralling configuration, their gazes converging upon the main subject. The painting contains three inscriptions; if imaginary lines are drawn connecting these inscriptions to the central motif, they intersect the lines of sight of the surrounding figures. Through this carefully calculated compositional structure, the viewer's eye is subtly led towards the narrative and thematic core of the scene. The inscriptions include the following verses from *Haft Awrang* by Jami: «بانگ برآمد ز همه کای شگفت، یک / کشف آنک به دو بط گشته جفت / چون سوی خشکی سفر افتادشان، بر جمععی گذر افتادشان» (Jami Khorasani, 1958, 415).

Discussion

As previously established, the *Pañcatantra* constitutes a seminal corpus of animal fables traditionally attributed to a Brahmin of the highest caste in India. Marina Warner, in her study “The Itineraries of *Kalila and Dimna* and Animal Fables,” which examines the English translation of *Kalila wa Dimna*, observes: “Some scholars contend that Viṣṇuśarman, in the second century BCE, compiled a didactic manual at the behest of a raja for the instruction of prospective princes. Yet scholarly consensus regarding the original authorship remains elusive.” Warner further notes that these fables were widely transmitted, both orally and in written form, across Asia, even reaching the court of Khusraw I of the Sasanian Empire. This dissemination prompted him to commission Burzōy to translate the *Pañcatantra* from Sanskrit into Middle Persian (Warner, 2023).

It is well documented that Ibn al-Muqaffa (1981) subsequently rendered the *Pañcatantra* from Middle Persian into Arabic, modifying titles and augmenting the text with additional chapters, thereby producing *Kalila wa Dimna*. Consequently, the narrative of the turtle and the ducks derives from an ancient textual tradition subsequently recounted in three canonical works: Arabic and Persian *Kalila wa Dimna*, Jami's *Tuḥfat al-Aḥḥar* within the *Haft Awrang*, and Kashifi's *Anvar-i Suhayli*. The narrative trajectory

across these four texts can be systematically analyzed along three axes: 1. Titling and Narrative Framing, 2. Narrative Structure and Development, 3. Narrative Closure and Ethical Didacticism.

Titling and Narrative Framing: Before examining the titling strategies, it is essential to consider each text's literary and historical context, as sociopolitical and cultural conditions significantly influenced narrative strategies vis-à-vis authority. The evolution of narrative voice is evident, ranging from the forthright critique of monarchs in Bidpay's *Tales* to the circumlocutory and oblique prose of Nasrallah Munshi's *Kalila wa Dimna*, culminating in the rhetorically elaborate and cautious style of Anvar-i Suhayli, wherein layered metaphor mitigates the sharpness of political critique (Seyedbagheri & Hasani Bagheri Sharifabad, 2022, 113). Kashifi's preference for extended prose, poetic digressions, allegorical devices, and simile transforms the narrative into a sophisticated ethical and rhetorical edifice rather than a linear moral tale (Hadi et al., 2015, 5). This stylistic positioning of Kashifi as a “moral pedagogue” differentiates the titling conventions in Anvar-i Suhayli from both *Kalila wa Dimna* and Bidpay's *Tales* (Sadat Sharifi & Hayayi Tehrani, 2017).

In contrast, Jami's *Tuḥfat al-Aḥḥar* employs fables and allegorical narratives to convey elevated mystical and ethical principles in accessible language. Fidelity to the original titles or narrative sequence is secondary to didactic purpose, as Jami uses each tale as an ethical exemplum. Additionally, Jami draws upon supplementary sources, including Sana'i's *Ḥadiqat al-ḥaqīqa* and his own *Nafāḥat al-uns* (Khadivar & Sharifi, 2010, 113–114). Stylistic analysis by Bahman Karamollahi indicates that *Tuḥfat al-Aḥḥar* combines linguistic simplicity with a cautionary tone and mystical exposition informed by Ibn Arabi's metaphysics, emphasizing the unity of being, monotheism, divine transcendence, and analogy. The essays primarily address religious, ethical, and mystical concerns, with some providing

socio-political critique using admonitory rhetoric (Karamolahi, 2022, 133). Therefore, the elaborate rhetorical ornamentation characteristic of Kashifi in *Anvar-i Suhayli* is not reproduced in Jami, who exercises greater narrative autonomy.

Arabic and Persian *Kalila wa Dimna* converge with *Anvar-i Suhayli* in the titling and narrative framing of the turtle and ducks story. Jami, however, introduces a distinct narrative entry point: unlike other texts, where the title functions as a frame narrative to illustrate the importance of heeding counsel, Jami situates the story to elucidate the preceding essay, “Essay Nine: On Silence as the Capital of Salvation and Ornament of Exaltation.” The title reads: “The tale of the kashaf who began to fly on the wings of the ducks and by a single untimely word fell from the zenith of the sky to the nadir of the earth” (Jami Khorasani, n.d). A further terminological distinction is the lexical choice for “turtle”: Arabic *sulḥafah*, Persian *bakha* in Munshi, *sang-posht* in *Anvar-i Suhayli*, and *kashaf* in *Tuḥfat al-Aḥrar*.

Narrative Structure and Development: Jami’s interpretive rendition diverges in narrative detail from prior texts, yet preserves the central plot. In the concluding pages of the first chapter of *Kalila wa Dimna*, titled *Bab al-Asad wa’l-Thawr*, the story recounts the female duck *Ṭiṭawi*, who, to persuade her mate not to nest in a hazardous location, narrates the story of the turtle and the ducks to ensure a safer nesting site. The core narrative conflict in Arabic and Persian *Kalila wa Dimna* and *Anvar-i Suhayli* arises when the turtle requests that the ducks carry him to escape the drying pond. In *Tuḥfat al-Aḥrar*, Jami foregrounds friendship and affective bonds, framing the turtle’s flight as motivated by ethical virtues and relational loyalty: “The kashaf lamented: O companions, from whom separation pains me; I am nourished by your kindness and grieve with your grief” (*ibid.*).

A further distinguishing feature is the dialogic structure. In Jami’s poem, unlike in other texts,

the ducks remain silent, accentuating the turtle’s loquacity. Conversely, in the other three texts, the ducks articulate the solution of using a stick to facilitate the turtle’s flight and stipulate adherence to their counsel. A notable divergence in *Anvar-i Suhayli* occurs at the flight’s apex: unlike other texts, which vaguely reference land or people below, Kashifi explicitly situates a village: “When they reached the height of the sky, their path passed over a village. The villagers emerged astonished by their condition and from left and right raised their voices exclaiming behold” (Va’ez Kashfi, 2009). This visual depiction is reflected in manuscript illustrations attributed to Ṣadiqi Beg (Image 9 in Table 2).

Narrative Closure and Ethical Didacticism: The ethical resolution in Arabic and Persian *Kalila wa Dimna* and *Anvar-i Suhayli* is consistent, emphasizing attentiveness to friends’ counsel. Jami, however, provides a distinct interpretive closure, advocating prudence and self-restraint: “Jami, from this idle talk, how long? Exercise prudence and keep your lips sealed, so that in this dreadful wilderness you do not fall from the heights of the heavens to the earth” (Jami Khorasani, n.d). By contrast, *Anvar-i Suhayli* adheres strictly to the *Kalila wa Dimna* pattern: “It is for friends to give counsel, and for the fortunate to heed admonition. Benefactors provide advice, yet the blessed are those who receive it” (Va’ez Kashfi, 2009).

An additional creative innovation by Nasrallah Munshi is the turtle’s philosophical reflection mid-flight, attributing death to divine decree rather than human error or disobedience: “The turtle said: This is all vain endeavors (Fig. 1). When the nature of death sharpens its arrow and hurls it recklessly toward anyone, no benefit arises from breaking the chain, and no wise heart can avert it. *al-manaya la tuṭishu sihamaha*. To avoid death is not permitted at two moments: when fate decrees it, and when it does not” (*ibid.*).

Following the comparative assessment of textual

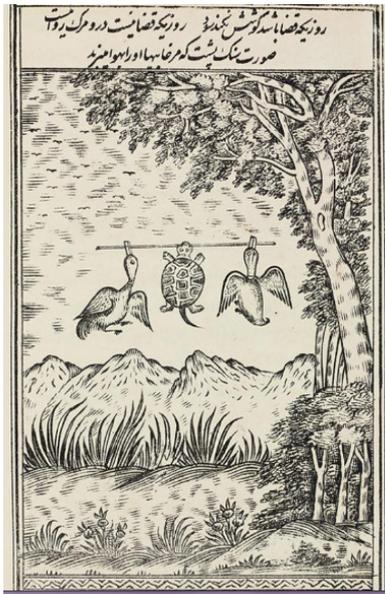


Fig. 1. Kalila and Dimna, lithographic print, Qajar period, Malek National Museum. Source: Mahmoudi et al., 2024, 558.

similarities and differences (Table 3), the quality and correspondence of illustrations warrant careful examination. The visual elements of the paintings can be systematically analyzed across three dimensions: 1. Alignment and fidelity of image components with the text, 2. Placement of the narrative climax within the composition, 3. Visual rendering of the turtle and the ducks.

Alignment and Fidelity of Image Components with the Text: The earliest illustrations (Images 1–4 in Table 1), derived from Arabic or Persian Kalila wa Dimna, maintain a simplicity consistent with the text. Their composition is straightforward, reflecting both stylistic conventions and historical constraints of the manuscripts. Comparative analysis indicates a shift beginning with Image 7 in Table 2, where the textual source transitions from prose (Kalila wa Dimna) to Jami's Tuḥfat al-Aḥḥar and Kashifi's Anvar-i Suhayli, incorporating rhymed and metrically structured verse. This textual transformation is mirrored in the illustrations of Anvar-i Suhayli, demonstrating that while the narrative content remains constant, changes

in the text prompted corresponding visual adaptations by the painters.

The apex of text-image fidelity is arguably the illustration attributed to Ṣadiqi Beg in Anvar-i Suhayli. Unlike previous texts, Kashifi specifies a village and the surrounding landscape, and Ṣadiqi Beg modifies the conventional duality of sky and earth by integrating multi-layered architectural elements. Prior to Ṣadiqi Beg, only Image 7 in Table 2, attributed to Rustam-ʿAli, shows Images positioned before an iwan-like structure. Overall, across all manuscripts, illustrations exhibit maximal alignment with the textual narrative while simultaneously reflecting stylistic evolution and the painter's interpretive choices.

Placement of the Narrative Climax within the Composition: The spatial arrangement of the ducks and the turtle varies across illustrations, both in composition and color usage. In the first six images, the ducks and turtle occupy roughly half of the visual field. In later illustrations, corresponding to Tuḥfat al-Aḥḥar and Anvar-i Suhayli, this proportion decreases to less than one-tenth, consistently positioned at the top of the image to denote the sky and flight. Image 7 (Table 2) introduces architectural elements; Image 5 (Table 1) depicts a village gateway, and Image 11 (Table 2) presents a detailed multi-layered architectural panorama with dome-topped desert houses, through which figures peer at the unfolding event.

As the textual source shifts from didactic prose to ethically and mystically infused verse, the representation of human figures within the composition increases. Humans function both as structural devices enhancing the logical trajectory of the turtle's fall and as spectators of Jami's moral allegory. Over the evolution of the illustrations, human figures transition from active participants to passive observers, reflecting the growing distance of the flight event from human intervention (Fig. 2).

Visual Rendering of the Turtle and Ducks: Despite

Table 3. Comparative table of the evolution of texts. Source: Authors.

Section	Arabic Kalila wa Dimna	Persian Kalila wa Dimna (Nasrollah Monshi)	Anwar-e-Suhaili (Vaez Kashfi)	Tuhfat al-Ahrar (Jami)	Comparative analysis
Title and introduction	Explicit and allegorical title with the word "Sulahfa" for the turtle; introduction within a story-within-a-story framework to highlight the heedfulness of advisors; focus on historical-political circumstances with critical clarity.	Similar title as Arabic with the word "Bakhe" for the turtle; verbose and indirect style; avoiding overt criticism due to political constraints, with added metaphorical embellishments.	Similar title as Arabic and Persian with the word "Sang-Pasht" for the turtle; extended writing, abundant literary devices, artificial and elaborate prose; poetic digressions and long descriptive sentences to soften political critique; Kashfi's role as a moral teacher.	Different title: "The story of Kashfi who began flying on the wings of the wings and fell from the height of the sky to the depths of the earth with a single inappropriate word"; use of the story as an illustrative example for the previous essay on silence; adaptations from other texts (e.g., Hadiqa of Sanai, Nafahat al-Uns); simple language with didactic mystical tone based on Ibn Arabi's doctrine of unity of existence.	Historical evolution in title: from critical clarity (Arabic/Persian) to cautious and allegorical (Anwar-e-Suhaili) and finally to an independent mystical-educational approach (Jami); lexical variation (Sulahfa, Bakhe, Sang-Pasht, Kashfi) shows linguistic and cultural diversity; Jami exhibits more creative freedom with multi-source adaptation.
Narrative structure and plot	Linear plot with the main conflict focused on the turtle's request to be carried by the ducks to escape the drying pond; bilateral dialogue between the turtle and the ducks; the idea of holding a stick in the mouth presented by the ducks; emphasis on heeding advice.	Similar plot to Arabic with emphasis on verbosity and multi-layered metaphors; bilateral dialogue; creative approach with the turtle speaking philosophically mid-air, attributing death to divine decree.	Similar plot with variation at the flight climax: explicit mention of a village; bilateral dialogue; extended writing and literary devices to deepen ethical allegory; visual representation in the illustrations (Sadqi-Bik Afshar version).	Free adaptation emphasizing friendship and affection between the turtle and ducks as the motive for flight; unilateral dialogue (only the turtle speaks, ducks remain silent) to highlight the turtle's talkative personality; turtle's lament: "Kashf lamented: O companions, I have suffered from the pain of separation from you."	Core plot maintained in all versions, but evolution in details: from escape-focused (Arabic/Persian/Anwar) to friendship-focused (Jami); shift from bilateral to unilateral dialogue in Jami to emphasize the inappropriateness of speech; village reference in Anwar indicates cultural-visual influence, while Jami favors mystical simplicity.
Conclusion and moral	Identical moral: focus on heeding friends' advice; linear and allegorical ending.	Similar moral with creative addition: turtle attributes death to divine decree; emphasis on heedfulness of the fortunate.	Identical to the moral as Arabic/Persian: "One should heed friends' advice and the fortunate accept guidance"; complete conformity with the original storyline, with concluding verses.	Free adaptation: Jami's invitation to self-restraint and silence ("Jami: cease this idle talk, exercise discretion and keep your lips closed"); emphasis on silence as the key to salvation, linking to the previous essay.	Convergence in the first three versions on direct heedfulness, contrasted with Jami's transcendent mystical approach, connecting moral outcome to self-reflection and silence, demonstrates a transition from political-ethical critique to mystical-educational instruction aligned with the historical context.

constraints, the depiction of the primary narrative elements demonstrates notable variation. Except for Image 4 (Table 1), where the ducks grasp a stick in their beaks, ducks are generally oriented upwards, obliquely aligned in the same direction, or obliquely

facing each other. Early depictions of the turtle are dorsally oriented and flat; later illustrations (Images 8, 12, 13 in Table 2) experiment with three-quarter angles, conveying perspective.

Duck morphology and coloration lack consistency



Fig. 2. Analysis of the composition of visual components in relation to the main theme of the story. Source: Authors.

across manuscripts. Some are rendered white with elongated necks, others with shorter necks and a more duck-like appearance. In Images 2 (Table 1) and 8, 12, 13 (Table 2), the uniform right-to-left orientation conveys lightness and motion, suggesting minimal effort in carrying the turtle. In contrast, other illustrations employ irregular flight directions, asymmetrical wings, and distorted necks to evoke a sense of instability and risk for the turtle, even when it maintains the mandated silence.

Conclusion

To address the main research question, the evolution of the depiction of the turtle and ducks narrative across adaptive texts was examined, while a consistent allegorical core was analyzed at two interrelated levels: textual and pictorial. This evolution reveals a clear historical trajectory from the original versions (Arabic and Persian *Kalila wa Dimna* by Munshi) to later adaptations (*Anvar-i Suhayli* by Kashifi and *Tuḥfat al-Aḥrar*

by Jami), shifting from direct, critical, and didactic approaches toward more cautious, metaphorical, and mystical-ethical frameworks. At the textual level, Jami's *Tuḥfat al-Aḥrar* demonstrates the most liberal reinterpretation and literary modification. In Arabic and Persian *Kalila wa Dimna*, the narrative exhibits explicit allegorical titles (using “sulḥafah” and “bakha”), a linear, escape-focused plot with dialogic exchanges, and a direct moral conclusion emphasizing receptivity to counsel, while Munshi introduces the creative notion of fate and divine decree. *Anvar-i Suhayli* presents a more cautious approach: it retains a similar title (using “sang-posht”), employs extended prose and rhetorical embellishments to temper political critique, situates the narrative climax over a village, and concludes with the same moral lesson about heeding wise counsel. In contrast, *Tuḥfat al-Aḥrar* features a freer reinterpretation with a distinctive title (“The tale of the kashaf who began to fly on the wings of the ducks...”), a friendship-centered plot with unilateral dialogue, and a transcendent ending invoking silence (“Jami, how long this idle talk...”) inspired by Ibn ‘Arabi’s mystical philosophy, emphasizing ethical and mystical education. This textual evolution, influenced by historical-political contexts—from the Abbasid/Ilkhanid to the Timurid/Safavid periods—reflects the increasing autonomy of adaptors in shaping the narrative.

At the pictorial level, illustrations consistently adhere to the textual source. In the original *Kalila wa Dimna* manuscripts (Qajar lithographs), illustrations closely follow the text, employing simple compositions with minimal visual complexity, while details such as gestures of figures subtly reinforce moral lessons. In *Anvar-i Suhayli* (Indian Safavid style), Ṣadiqi Beg’s paintings meticulously reflect textual details, depicting the flight over a village and human spectators, situating the main subjects against the background to justify the turtle’s open mouth. In *Tuḥfat al-Aḥrar*, the illustrated poetry diminishes

the visual prominence of the turtle and ducks, prioritizing mystical and human-centered elements. This evolution in illustration—from simplicity to layered visual complexity—preserves and enriches the ethical allegory inherent in the narrative.

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