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# MORAL AMBIVALENCE IN PARABLE-LIKE NARRATIVES: STEFANIT AND IHNILAT

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## ABSTRACT

This article is focused on the ambiguities and contradictions of moral concepts in parable-like narratives. Parable as an archetypal form of knowledge is not directly related to any morality at all. Only entering a certain culture and functioning there, parable acquires a certain moral «above-text». Therefore, it can be used to enhance any moral thesis. During the transition to a different culture, this «above-text» can vary. This allows to aware that different moral concepts can exist within one parable.

**Keywords:** Stephanit and Ichnilat, Panchatantra, Kalilah and Dimnah, morality, parable, archetype, mediator

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Stefanit and Ichnilat” is a Greek Slavic version of “Panchatantra” (1962) - the world famous Indian collection of animal fables and fairy tales. The book was compiled, in its current form, between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the middle 8<sup>th</sup> century Arabic writer Abd Allah Ibn al-Muqaffa translated it into Arabic under the title “Kalilah and Dimnah” (Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1986). These are the names of two jackals - the protagonists of the first chapter. The text has undergone some radical changes. On the basis of Arabic culture book gained new life and after a while came to Europe. Slavic literatures borrowed it from Byzantium through “Stefanit and Ichnilat” - the Greek translation of Simeon Seth (Grecheskij tekst «Stefanita i Ichnilata», 1969). This version has been translated into Church Slavonic in one of the monasteries on Mount Athos, most probably in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Danylova & Borokh, 2013).

Similar texts can move from one culture to another, while maintaining primary meanings of narratives. These meanings can be actualized again in a culture-recipient as a result of changes in the specific local and temporal conditions. The features of transplantation are determined by tight bond of any similar text with folk sources. Within folkloric and mythological semantics “Panchatantra”, “Kalilah and Dimnah”, “Stefanit and Ichnilat” can be defined as narratives that have parable-like structure.

## 2. HYPOTHESIS

Parable-like structure of “Stefanit and Ichnilat” largely determines its ethical orientation. Parable as the archetypal form of knowledge (Danylova, 2013) is not directly related to any morality at all. Only entering a certain culture, parable gets a certain moral meaning. Therefore, it can be used to enhance any moral thesis. Due to cultural change, moral meaning of parable also changes. In this case we can talk about different moral concepts within a certain parable.

It is impossible to extract the only one moral concept from the narrative. Parable-like texts are the products of different, not similar to each other, cultures. They have different interpretations even within the same version. Therefore, the study of this text in terms of peculiar moral philosophy inherent to it seems to be the most fruitful.

## 3. METHODS

The author has used analytical methodology of C. Levi-Strauss, C. Jung's theory of archetypes, and hermeneutical methodology

#### 4. DISCUSSION

“Stefanit and Ihnilat” is a dialogical writing. The core of writing is the dialogue between the king and the philosopher that serves as a background of moral statements. The framework of the book is the story about two jackals, lion, and bull. It is the basis of the first chapter of “Panchatantra”, full texts of “Kalilah and Dimnah” and “Stefanit and Ihnilat”. In the forest ruled by Lion, two jackals Stefanit/Karataka/Kalilah and Ihnilat/Damanaka/Dimnah lived. They were suspended from governance, therefore, they had no possibility to show their talents of courtiers. One day a Bull appeared in the forest; his voice scared all inhabitants, including king Lion. Then tricky Ihnilat/Damanaka/Dimnah proposed to reconcile Lion and Bull and engender friendship between them. He implemented his plan, but something unexpected has happened: Lion became very close to Bull and jackals left out in the cold again. Seeing that this friendship brought him no benefit, Ihnilat/Damanaka/Dimnah provoked Lion to kill Bull. Other stories are attached to this frame.

The world depicted in such narratives was “not as simple and unambiguous as the traditional world of medieval literature; people in it were not always “white” or “black”, they were controversial” (Likhachev, 1987, p.82). This is personified in one of protagonists – dodgy Ihnilat. He initially promoted Bull’s friendship with Lion, who was “arrogant, proud-spirited, and void of understanding” (Stefanit i Ihnilat. Sinodal’nyj spisok, 1969, p. 494turn). In “Panchatantra” Damanaka’s/Ihnilat’s actions are rationally motivated. Damanaka/Ihnilat told Bull: “I inclined lord to show mercy and urged him to give you security. So go with peace. But being in favor, be in harmony with me; becoming powerful, do not act haughtily. And becoming a counselor, I shall take the brunt of the king’s affairs in agreement with you. Then we shall both enjoy the happiness of royal authority” (Panchatantra, 1962, p.50). Bull agreed. In “Kalilah and Dimnah” and its later versions this motivation is lost.

It is necessary to mention one more motivation in “Panchatantra” text, which is missing in its receptions. Lion’s behavior is unnatural, because he is Bull’s friend; he “behaves like herbivore” (Panchatantra, 1962, p.71). Lion is no longer the king of animals, he is useless to jackals, “whose necks have become emaciated from hunger” (Panchatantra, 1962, p.57), because jackals are beasts, “making a profit at someone else’s expense” (Panchatantra, 1962, p.135). Thus, it is appropriate to mention C. Levi-Strauss and his mediative structure (Levi-Strauss, 2008), where the function of mediator (in our texts it is jackal) is the reconciliation of antinomies of human existence. The antinomy of life and death is the basic. Jackal “is a mitigation of this and the related antinomies. He eats carrion, and this is a compromise between herbivores and predators (metaphor for life and death)” (Kostyukhin, 1987, p.34). This motivation will be called initial, “natural”. This deep level is directly reflected in the structures of narrative, that is, in Damanaka’s words: “... he (*Bull – T.D.*) eats grass and the Divine (*Lion - T.D.*) eats meat. He is food and the Divine is a devourer” (Panchatantra, 1962, p.111), and then neutralized by means of moralization. In “Panchatantra” it is, above all, a breach of agreement between a jackal and a bull on the division of “spheres of influence”. If we eliminate this “above-text”, we obtain a breach of “natural law” (Danylova, 2010).

By its origin “Panchatantra” is closer to “natural law”. Later, due to changing languages of cultures, it is refocusing on moralization with changing ethical “above-text”. “Natural” motivation is lost in “Kalilah and Dimnah”, in Greek and Slavic receptions of “Stefanit and Ihnilat”. Dimnah’s/Ihnilat’s envy and his desire to regain his previous status on the social ladder became a new motivation.

Stefanit and Ihnilat are protagonists in Greek and East Slavic receptions. Narrative has dialogical form, it can be seen as a dialogue within one personality, i.e. at a certain stage one single mediator is splitting, and we get two characters – Stefanit and Ihnilat. They are representatives of opposing views and they wisely defend their positions. Per se this dialogue-dispute has neither beginning nor end. Stefanit and Ihnilat are the bifurcation of one single synthetic character. This character is a representative of bipolar worldview that combines the opposing principles of life. Stefanit, who embodies the protective principle, which sometimes coincides with morality, and Ihnilat, who embodies the principle of activity, are two types of personality. Moralization that corresponds to rules and principles of any given culture can be introduced into open structure of parables, that is, a certain ethical “above-text” can be attached to a parable.

Archetypal image of one unified mediator - synthesis of Stefanit and Ihnilat - can not be correlated with any morality at all, because archetypal images are ambivalent, they are “beyond” moral conventions, good and evil (Rutkevich, 1989). The meaning of the narrative is not a simple moralization, but it is “generated in a linkage, in dialectic and opposition of actors, any of them represents only a part of the truth, but not the whole truth” (Karalashvili, 1984, p.253). This is a never ending process; in our case, this is a dialogue-dispute of a person with him/herself. This is an attempt to look inside, to understand the underlying processes of human spiritual life. The opposite poles are not mutually exclusive. They are complementary. The end of “Panchatantra” reflects the starting

point: two jackals suspended from governance represent two types of worldview (Panchatantra 1962,p.31-8), the same we find at the end of this narrative (Panchatantra, 1962, p.202-4). This composition is available in "Panchatantra", where the story about two jackals serves as a frame to other stories.

Once the story about jackals became the main narrative and their names appeared in the title "Kalilah and Dimnah", evaluation of their actions in terms of morality became necessary. Ibn al-Muqaffa tried to develop philosophical and ethical standards of rational human behavior. In his time there was a need for mature ethical philosophy contributing to the unification of Arab states and mitigating mores during the period of continuous wars. Eastern philosophers believed that with improvement of imperfect human nature evil would vanish under the sun. Freethinker Ibn al-Muqaffa tried to present a kind of syncretized ethical and philosophical doctrine designed to cause people to be perfect. He added an introduction and a chapter devoted to the trial of Dimnah. Development of certain ethical concept required the explicit evaluation of main characters. However, the closer "entry" into the text shows that the idea of the interpreter/author was more complicated. Researchers emphasize that the true meaning of the chapter describing trial mismatches its external form: story demonstrates not the victory of virtue in the world of animals, but "complex relationships in human society" (Lur'e, 1969, p.163). In the center of Ibn al-Muqaffa's narrative there is Dimnah's dodgy self-defense instead of condemnation of jackal. The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose, as well as Dimnah/Ihnilat in Arabic version uses quotes from the Quran, refers to sages. In Greek and Slavic versions he mentions Psalter: "I have nowhere else to turn, only ask for God's grace, my defence is of God, which saveth the upright in heart" (Psalter 7:10), Gospel: "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matthew 7:3; Luke 6:41).

In "Kalilah and Dimnah" verdict was determined by two witnesses who accused Dimnah of inciting Lion to murder Bull (Ibn al-Muqaffa, 1986, p.152); in Greek Slavic version there is no evidence against Ihnilat. If in terms of morality Ihnilat deserved to be punished for his treachery, his trial (as it shown in Greek Slavic version) was unlawful. Jackal's prosecutors were not more virtuous than he was, and verdict itself was due to court intrigues and demands of Lion's mother (Stefanit i Ihnilat. Sinodal'nyj spisok, 1969, p.526 turn). Thus, readers could not perceive this trial as a triumph of justice and couldn't interpret it unambiguously.

## 5. CONCLUTIONS

In general, the study of this text shows that it is difficult (if ever possible) to deduce a clear moral criterion. Morality of parable-like narratives is ambiguous. The very meaning of parables as well as fables, allegories, animal tales is richer than sermons that are given in a frame narrative. In this case we can not talk about definite moral judgments. Mainly this is due to parable that determines the secondary nature of moral conclusions. We talk about "natural" parable: its deep level is non-verbal and it can not be verbalized. Deep structure of a parable is reflected in a structure of a narrative. An intentional state is neutralized by means of moralization. A deep level of "natural" parable as an archetypal form is beyond any moral conventions; therefore it often seems that moralization is attached to a parable. Considering that parable's "journey" from one culture to another occurs with the change of ethical "above-text" and given narrative operates in different regions as the heritage of each culture-recipient, moral inconsistencies in parables to its deep meaning become clear.

Moral "framings" of parables that can be seen as "false verbalizations" have endless opportunities of interpretations depending on the worldview and peculiar system of morality. Parable's semantic richness remains untapped, latent. It can be actualized due to changing external "climate", set of interpretants (that is, as a result of narrative receptions by different cultures or transformations that occur in any given culture). Therefore, the reduction of parables' meaning to didactics and moralization is mistaken. Moral conclusions of some stories contradict each other; tales sometimes express questionable morality (Grintser, 1984). Moral thesis of frame narrative does not unite "emboxed" stories. Exploring the ethical concept of the text, we encounter some difficulties. As any writing consisting of many kinds of genres, functioning at different times and being greatly evolved with changing of ethical "above-text", "Stefanit and Ihnilat" does not demonstrate one and only moral concept. Examining the first story of this book, which refers to king's request to show how evil man may cause friends' quarrel (Stefanit i Ihnilat. Sinodal'nyj spisok, 1969, p. 493), we see that proposed morality is very superficial. The final morality of this story reflects the other side/point that actualizes in author's mind after "passing through" a parable: "Understand that anyone who slanders his friend, anyone who digs a pit will fall into it" (Stefanit i Ihnilat. Sinodal'nyj spisok, 1969, p. 526 turn). This example shows that any explication of parable's semantic reserve (in our case, author's moralization) leads to simplification of a parable, to its one-sidedness. Therefore, we have to explore the ethical concept of such narratives mindfully. Just as the question of sense of human life is inherent in any culture and its addressing varies depending on each type of culture, so the perception of "Stefanit and Ihnilat" stories may differ depending on the culture-recipient.



An advantage of instrumental and pragmatic ethical precepts over abstract theoretical moralization declared by authors and copyists or on behalf of protagonists can be considered as the general trend of writing. This conclusion is confirmed by variation of conceptual moralistic interpretations of parables and by stability of their plots. "Stefanit and Ihnilat", "Panchatantra", "Kalilah and Dimnah" as literary narratives appear to be an essentially unfinished project open to criticism, as well as condensed set of rules that are common within a given culture.

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