

Investigating the relationship between the social class and the women's morals in the stories of Kelileh va demneh and Marzbannameh

*Saeed Emami¹- Qasem Sahrai²

1. Ph.D. Department of Persian Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Lorestan University, Lorestan, Iran. (Corresponding author) Email: Saiid.emami@yahoo.com

2. Associate Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Lorestan University, Lorestan, Iran

Article Info (۱۳۹-۱۵۳)

ABSTRACT

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:

Received:
۲۲ April 2022

Accepted:
۱۵ August ۲۰۲۲

Keywords:
Kelileh va
Demneh
Marzbannameh
Social Class
Women
Morals

Kelileh va demneh and Marzbannameh are classical texts of Persian language. These two, which are written in Technical Prose, contain many stories written in the style of a story within the other. Considering that the sociological approach is one of the methods of text analysis, in this article, it has been tried to look at these works from this point of view and examine the relationship between social class and women's morals. This article shows that there is a direct relationship between social class and women's prostitution or chastity. Because in the stories of these books, most of the women from the lower social class have bad morals and betray their husbands. On the other hand, the women of the upper class of the society, whose husbands have power, wealth and high social influence, in addition to the cleanliness of the face, also have the goodness of character and chastity. For this reason, in these works, most of the wives of shoemakers, butchers, weavers, carpenters, etc. are prostitutes. The manifestation of this orientation in old texts can be derived from the power, wealth and social influence of the upper class. In fact, the views of those in power have influenced literature in various ways and expressed and displayed what was according to their wishes.

Citation: Emami Saeed, Sahrai Qasem (2022) Investigating the relationship between the social class and the women's morals in the stories of Kelileh va demneh and Marzbannameh. Modern Literary Researches, 1(2) 139-1۵۳



Publisher: Association for the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature
© The Author (s).

DOI: [20.1001.1.28211413.1401.1.2.5.4](https://doi.org/10.28211413.1401.1.2.5.4)

Introduction

Classical Persian literary prose serves not only as a repository of didactic wisdom, political counsel, and aesthetic eloquence, but also as a sociological mirror reflecting the ideological structures and class dynamics of historical Iranian society. Among these monumental works, *Kalīla wa Dimna* (translated and rendered into ornate prose by Nasrullah Munshi in the 6th century AH) and *Marzbān-nāmeḥ* (translated into refined prose by Sa'd al-Din Varavini in the 7th century AH) occupy a central position. Both texts utilize the frame-story narrative technique (*hikāyat dar hikāyat*) and feature characters drawn from diverse social strata.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the sociological relationship between **social class** and the representation of **women's morality** (chastity versus corruption/infidelity) in the anecdotes of *Kalīla wa Dimna* and *Marzbān-nāmeḥ*. Specifically, the research addresses whether moral virtue or depravity in these narratives is systematically linked to the socioeconomic standing, power, and prestige of female characters or their husbands, and explores the underlying ideological factors and power discourses that govern these textual representations.

Method

This research adopts a **descriptive-analytical** approach within a **sociological literary criticism** framework. The theoretical foundation is grounded in classical and modern theories of social stratification, class power, and ideological hegemony (including perspectives articulated by Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Gerhard Lenski, alongside historical analyses of ancient Iranian and Indo-Iranian class hierarchies by scholars such as Mehrdad Bahar and Morteza Ravandi).

The corpus consists of all narrative episodes in *Kalīla wa Dimna* and *Marzbān-nāmeḥ* that explicitly feature female agency, marital dynamics, and ethical behavior across different socioeconomic strata. The textual data were systematically categorized and analyzed across two primary sociological tiers:

١. **Lower-Class Strata (Artisans and Commoners):** Subordinate groups such as weavers (*jūlāhah*), cobblers (*kaffāsh*), carpenters (*dorūdgar*), butchers (*qassāb*), and barbers (*hajjām*).
٢. **Upper-Class Strata (The Ruling Elite, Nobility, and Aristocracy):** Monarchs (*shah*), princes, military commanders (*marzbān/arteshtārān*), and wealthy merchants.

Results

The textual and sociological analysis reveals a direct and systematic correlation between the social class of female characters and the ethical attributes ascribed to them by the authors/translators:

- **Systemic Moral Condemnation of Lower-Class Women:**

Across both texts, women belonging to the working-class and artisan families are predominantly portrayed as unchaste, deceitful, morally corrupt, and treacherous toward their spouses. Prominent textual examples include:

- In *Kalīla wa Dimna*, the anecdote of the cobbler's wife and the barber's wife portrays both women as cunning conspirators engaged in illicit affairs and deceptive ruses. Similarly, the wife of the carpenter betrays her husband while employing deceit to escape accountability.
- In *Marzbān-nāmeḥ*, the wives of the butcher, the silk-merchant, the weaver, and the woodworker/carpenter are consistently depicted as promiscuous and disloyal (*pākīzeh-sūrat o ālūdeh-sefat*), frequently orchestrating clandestine rendezvous with lovers.

- **Idealization and Preserved Chastity of Upper-Class Women:**

In stark contrast, women affiliated with ruling lineages, aristocrats, and high-ranking military figures are systematically enveloped in

an aura of inviolable sanctity, absolute purity, and moral perfection:

- In *Marzbān-nāmeḥ*, the daughter of King Ardashir is portrayed as a pristine, angelic entity guarded celestial-like by Saturn (*Zohal*), whose face has never been seen by any gaze except the mirror. Similarly, the royal wife of Khosrow is explicitly introduced as nurtured within the veil of absolute chastity (*dar khedr-e 'esmat parvardeh*).
- In *Kalīla wa Dimna*, when a bird-keeper slave attempts to seduce the wife of the prominent military commander (*marzbān*), her absolute integrity and refusal of the illicit advance are emphasized, and her innocence is vindicated.
- Even in ambiguous scenarios involving wealthy mercantile households (e.g., the anecdote of the merchant's wife in *Marzbān-nāmeḥ*), the narrative ultimately exonerates the high-status woman from the suspicion of treason, confirming her legal and moral purity.

- **The Ideological Function of the Dominant Discourse:**

The study reveals that this asymmetric ethical division is a direct consequence of the **hegemonic discourse of the ruling elite**. Court scribes and secretaries (*monshīyān*) were dependent on royal patronage and political power for their livelihood and the physical preservation of their manuscripts in courtly libraries. Consequently, the literary discourse normalized the virtues of the aristocracy while projecting vice, moral laxity, and treachery onto the disenfranchised lower classes, who lacked social power, literacy, and textual representation.

Conclusion

The study concludes that moral characterization in *Kalīla wa Dimna* and *Marzbān-nāmeḥ* is fundamentally structured by **class bias and political power**. The virtues of chastity, dignity, and moral integrity are reserved as ideological privileges for the ruling and noble classes, while moral decay,

infidelity, and cunning are disproportionately assigned to lower-class women.

These classical masterpieces do not represent objective ethical realities; rather, they reproduce the aristocratic worldview and patriarchal-political hierarchies of their historical context. By demonstrating how literature conceals the transgressions of the powerful while amplifying the perceived vices of the weak, the article highlights the critical necessity of examining classical literary prose through the lens of power relations, class stratification, and courtly discourse.