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Cross-Media Narrative Transformations of the "Hunter Catches Birds" Tradition in Indo-Persian and Malay Worlds

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Abstract

The tale commonly known as "Hunter Catches Birds" circulates widely across South Asia, the Islamicate world, and insular Southeast Asia. Despite linguistic, religious, and cultural differences, the narrative architecture of the Hunter Catches Birds tale displays remarkable continuities across Buddhist, Persian, Malay, Indonesian, and Javanese traditions. Its persistence across radically different religious and cultural settings raises a broader question of how narrative meaning remains recognizable through continual reinterpretation. In early Malay renderings, particularly within the *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* tradition, oral materials are reorganized into framed and nested literary structures. These forms enable both textual and visual interplay while supporting ethical instruction alongside aesthetic elaboration. Frequently positioned as an introductory episode in parrot-cycle literature, the story integrates motifs such as collective escape, feigned death, interspecies conflict, and the tension between loyalty and betrayal. These narrative elements remain open to reinterpretation in different moral and cultural settings. Drawing upon Sanskrit, Persian, Uyghur, Malay, Indonesian, and Javanese materials, this study examines how the tale moved across oral, manuscript, and visual traditions. Rather than treating the narrative as a fixed folktale type, the article approaches it as a flexible modular structure whose ethical meanings were continually reshaped across changing religious and social environments. These interactions generate layered systems of meaning in which image and text jointly shape narrative tension, vulnerability, and strategic judgment. In Persian miniature traditions, scenes of entrapment, sacrifice, and escape are organized through sequential composition and spatial tension, allowing conflict, vulnerability, and narrative causality to be experienced visually as well as textually. By tracing these transformations, this study argues that the enduring vitality of the Hunter Catches Birds tradition may lie less in narrative stability than in the sustained reinterpretation of repeated narrative structures across textual and visual cultures.

Keywords: Hunter Catches Birds; *Hikayat Bayan Budiman*; visual narrative; cross-media narrative; visual culture

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1. Introduction

Narratives of birds escaping hunters circulate widely across South Asia, the Islamicate world, and insular Southeast Asia. Early versions appear in Sanskrit epics and Buddhist literature, particularly the *Mahābhārata* and several *Jātaka* tales, where collective action and obedience to wise leadership are presented as moral principles. Related episodes in the *Pañcatantra* and the *Śukasaptati* further demonstrate how framed narrative structures facilitated the movement of animal tales across courts and cultural backgrounds. Islamicate

adaptations in Persian, Urdu, and Turkic traditions further illustrate how translation reshaped narrative emphasis while preserving recognizable patterns of entrapment and escape. Chen Ganglong's comparative study of Uyghur, Persian, and Urdu materials has shown how regional literary preferences influenced which narrative elements were expanded or reduced (Chen 2014, p. 23). Pan Shan has noted the close relationship between Sanskrit bird-and-hunter stories and several *Jātaka* narratives centered on unity and collective survival (Table 1) (Pan 2016, pp. 30–31).

Table 1. Comparative plot elements of the Hunter Catches Birds tradition across translations.

Category	Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* 5.62.6–14 (Huang et al. 2005)	Pāli *Jātaka* (Quail Jātaka) (Guo and Huang 1985)	Sanskrit *Pañcatantra* (Haṃsa and the Hunter) (Ji 1981)	Sanskrit *Śukasaptati* (The Clever Haṃsa) (Pan 2016)	Tamil *Pañcatantra* (Bin Abdul Kadir Munsyi 2016)	Malay *Kalilah dan Dimnah* (Four Friends) (Bin Muhammad 1964)	Indonesian *Hikayat Bayan Budiman*, Cc Recension (Opening Episode) (Winstedt 2016)
Cultural sphere	-	Buddhist monastic ethics	Sanskrit *nīti*/didactic literature	Courtly–secular wisdom narrative of South India	Tamil adaptation of *nīti* literature	Islamicate courtly ethics in the Malay world	Islamicate Malay–Indonesian ethical adaptation
Characters	Two birds	Quails, Bodhisattva, fowler	Haṃsas, hunter	Haṃsas, hunter	Dove, crow, hunter	Pigeon, crow, hunter	Parrot, starling, old man
Opening situation	Hunter lays a ground net and pursues	The Bodhisattva-quail admonishes the flock	Haṃsas dwell in a fig tree with creepers beneath	King of the haṃsas resides at a Bodhi tree	Crow bathing at a pond	Crow keeping watch from behind a tree	Introduction to the starling's tale
Tree/locale	-	-	Fig tree (*udumbara*)	Bodhi tree	Pond	Shady tree	Banyan (*beringin*)
Mode of capture	Birds entangled together in the net	Net cast	Snare set at the nest	Net spread in the tree	Net and arrows	Grain baited upon a net	Birdlime
Avian response	Quarrel; captured	Maintain concord; lift the net together	Ninety-nine birds feign death, then rise together	Collective ascent and escape	-	-	-
Didactic emphasis	Condemnation of quarrelling among kin	Communal harmony within the Saṅgha	Authority of the elder bird	Authority of the elder bird	Elder wisdom; self-sacrifice; value of friendship	Unity and loyalty	Primacy of solidarity
Outcome	Captured	Taken by the fowler	Escape	Escape	Birds delivered	Birds delivered	-

Within Southeast Asian studies, scholarly attention has focused primarily on the Malay *Hikayat Bayan Budiman* tradition and its manuscript history (Winstedt 2016, pp. 13–15). Philological studies of manuscripts such as LoR 3208 reveal both the richness of local adaptation and the creativity of copyists in expanding narrative detail. Folkloristic approaches have also identified iterative tale types, including the feigned death motif (K522.4) (Thompson 1956, p. 308)[1], which provide useful comparative reference points. Yet motif classification alone cannot fully explain why the story remained intelligible after passing

through markedly distinct religious, linguistic, and artistic traditions. The persistence of the tale raises a broader question of how meaning could be constantly reshaped while preserving structural continuity. What endured across these transformations was not a fixed storyline, but a set of persistent narrative modules that could be detached, recombined, and ethically reformulated in new cultural environments.

Rather than treating the story as a settled folktale type, this study approaches the Hunter Catches Birds tradition as a flexible, modular narrative structure. Across Sanskrit, Persian, Malay, Indonesian, and Javanese adaptations, the tale repeatedly operates through interconnected narrative elements such as interspecies conflict, collective escape, feigned death, strategic cooperation, sacrifice, and moral reciprocity[2]. These elements persist even as their meanings shift across diverse religious and social environments. In Buddhist contexts, collective escape often emphasizes communal discipline and moral cooperation; in Persian and Islamicate traditions, similar episodes foreground strategic intelligence and ethical kingship; while in Malay adaptations, the narrative becomes closely tied to social obligation, loyalty, and reciprocity.

Across translations from Sanskrit and Persian into Malay, Indonesian, and Javanese traditions, the story moved from oral and manuscript circulation into print and visual media, including Persian miniature painting traditions associated with the *Tūṭī-nāma*. In these visual contexts, image and text jointly shape ethical interpretation and narrative tension. Scenes of entrapment, sacrifice, and escape are organized through sequential composition, compressed pictorial space, and shifting spatial hierarchies that direct the viewer's attention between hunters, trapped birds, and moments of collective escape. Through these visual arrangements, conflict, vulnerability, and narrative causality become perceptible not only through textual narration but also through visual experience. By reading textual witnesses alongside pictorial traditions, this study shifts attention from narrative transmission alone to the broader question of how ethical meaning remains identifiable across changing religious, linguistic, and artistic environments. The lasting vitality of the Hunter Catches Birds tradition may lie less in narrative stability than in the continuing reinterpretation of modular structures across textual and visual cultures.

2. Introductory Narrative as Modular Ethical Structure

The Hunter Catches Birds story functions as a modular narrative, with the K522.4 "bird that feigns death" motif serving as one of its persistent structural elements. Across Indian, Persian, and Malay traditions, the tale unfolds through interlocking narrative units centered on conflict, entrapment, strategy, and collective survival. Although the story undergoes substantial religious, ecological, and cultural adaptation, its fundamental narrative sequence remains discernible across different textual and visual traditions. Rather than functioning as a fixed folktale, the narrative continually reorganizes detachable yet interconnected episodes within new literary and artistic environments. This section examines how the introductory narrative establishes tension, strategic action, and visual representation as mutually reinforcing elements within the story's broader cross-cultural transmission.

2.1. Conflict and Narrative Trigger

The Tuuk Cc version begins with tension between parrots and starlings[3], establishing the ethical conflict that drives the narrative forward. The parrots are warned not to associate with "birds with red eyes and black bodies", since such creatures are considered unreliable and potentially dangerous. This hostility corresponds to the "J416.1" motif type (Thompson 1956, p. 38)[4], in which birds reject companionship with species of different habits. In retaliation, the starlings' droppings eventually nourish the growth of a banyan tree, whose expanding branches later allow hunters to reach the birds' nest.

Similar narrative patterns appear in the *Jātaka* tales and the Sanskrit *Pañcatantra* (Rahman and bin Abdullah 1958), where trees and creeping vines gradually become instruments of danger. In these traditions, natural imagery functions not merely as background description but as narrative foreshadowing. The replacement of the Indian fig tree with the Southeast Asian banyan localizes the narrative within the ecological imagination of the Malay world while preserving the underlying structure of gradual and concealed entrapment. Large banyan trees are also common features of village and port landscapes in the Malay world.

The Tuuk Cc version also presents the parrot as a "king of birds" who invokes Allah before the crisis unfolds, situating the narrative within an Islamicate moral framework. Through this opening conflict, the story introduces themes that remain central throughout later adaptations: betrayal, vulnerability, and the instability of social trust. The conflict between parrots and starlings serves as a repeated narrative trigger that initiates later cycles of entrapment, separation, and ethical testing. Although the animal species and environmental details vary across traditions, the structural function of conflict between different species appears repeatedly across various traditions in identifiable patterns.

2.2. Capture, Strategy, and Collective Survival

The second stage of the narrative focuses on capture and collective response. Once the banyan tree matures, an old hunter begins targeting the parrots. Across different textual traditions, the methods of capture vary, including nets, arrows, grain bait, and birdlime[5], yet the underlying structure remains consistent: birds are trapped because human strategy successfully exploits their environment.

At the same time, the story emphasizes collective intelligence as a means of survival. In the Tuuk Cc version, the birds agree to feign death after becoming trapped. Their coordinated action eventually enables escape, although the mother parrot stays behind. Comparable episodes appear in the *Pañcatantra* and *Jātaka* traditions, where birds either lift the net together or escape through disciplined cooperation. These scenes transform physical entrapment into ethical instruction, suggesting that survival depends upon foresight, obedience, and communal solidarity.

Different cultural traditions re-conceive this ethical structure in distinct ways. Buddhist versions associate collective action with monastic discipline and communal harmony, while Hindu adaptations emphasize wise leadership and strategic authority. Malay and Islamicate retellings shift the emphasis toward loyalty, obligation, and social responsibility. Material details also change during transmission: the Indian fig tree becomes the Southeast Asian banyan, while hunting imagery evolves from ritualized scenes into more practical forms related to port-city society and everyday survival.

Through these frequent episodes of capture and escape, the narrative develops a flexible ethical framework capable of adapting to different cultural and religious settings while preserving its central concern with cooperation and vulnerability. Across these variations, the sequence of entrapment, coordinated response, sacrifice, and release continues to retain recognizable patterns of narrative recombination across textual traditions.

2.3. Visualizing Ethical Tension

Illustrated narrative manuscripts played a critical didactic role across the visual cultures of South Asia, Persia, and the Malay world. Similar visual strategies are already visible in illustrated versions of Kalīla wa Dimna, where scenes of entrapment, rescue, and collective action are organized through spatial hierarchy and sequential composition (Figure 1). These compositional devices were further developed in courtly manuscript traditions such as the *Tūṭī-nāma*, where miniature paintings did more than decorate liter-

ary texts: they arranged narrative sequence, directed attention to moments of danger or moral uncertainty, and helped viewers visualize relationships between deception, authority, sacrifice, and survival. These paintings emerged within broader traditions of illustrated didactic and courtly literature that combined entertainment, instruction, and political reflection. By the sixteenth century, Indo-Persian miniature cycles had become important vehicles for transmitting narrative knowledge across multilingual and multicultural courtly environments. Within this context, scenes of entrapment, pursuit, injury, and escape were repeatedly visualized not simply as narrative illustration, but as part of a broader visual practice concerned with instruction, kingship, and moral reflection.

Visual representations further strengthen the story's ethical and emotional dimensions. Persian miniature paintings linked to the *Tūṭī-nāma* tradition transform scenes of capture and escape into highly dramatized visual sequences. Trapped birds are often compressed into crowded spaces, while hunters and predators occupy elevated or visually dominant positions within the composition. This contrast heightens the atmosphere of danger and vulnerability surrounding the flock.

The use of elevated or overhead perspectives is vital. In scenes showing trapped birds and approaching predators, the visual angle reflects the birds' sense of exposure and fear (Figure 1). Sequential compositions depicting capture, feigned death, rescue, and escape allow viewers to follow the story's cause-and-effect logic through visual progression rather than text alone (Figure 2).



Figure 1. The mouse gnaws the net imprisoning the doves, folio from *Kalila wa Dimna*, second quarter of the sixteenth century. Ink and opaque watercolor on paper. Attributed to Gujarat, India, probably based on an Egyptian original. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1981.373.56[6].



Figure 2. The parrot mother cautions her young on the danger of playing with foxes, from Dasavanta, *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper. The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1962.279.32.a[7].

Color and spatial arrangement also contribute to moral interpretation. Red accents suggestive of wounds, weapons, and hunting implements guide the viewer's attention toward moments of danger and rupture, intensifying the visual rhythm of pursuit, capture, and escape. The repeated visual focus on the parrot reinforces its role as a figure of wisdom and guidance. These images therefore do more than illustrate the narrative. They actively reorganize lessons concerning vigilance, strategic thinking, and collective survival.

Viewed from the perspective of cross-media adaptation, the relationship between narrative structure and miniature painting indicates how ethical meaning can be transmitted simultaneously through textual and visual forms. Miniature compositions frequently place several narrative moments within a single pictorial space. Hunters, trapped birds, and moments of escape often appear simultaneously, inviting viewers to move gradually across the image.

Through this visual sequencing, narrative causality becomes perceptible not only through text but also through the act of viewing itself. The story's modular structure therefore extends beyond literature into visual culture, where persistent patterns of entrapment, vulnerability, and collective escape are perpetually reconfigured across shifting artistic milieus.

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3. Interwoven Narratives: Characteristics of the Hunter Catches Birds Narrative Structure

Across Persian, Uyghur, Urdu, Malay, and Javanese traditions, the Hunter Catches Birds narrative repeatedly restructures modules of interspecies conflict, strategic deception, sacrifice, and reciprocity. Although episodes vary substantially across regional traditions, these modules function as portable narrative units that can be reorganized within new cultural frameworks. Comparative analysis shows how different traditions redistribute narrative emphasis while preserving repeated patterns of entrapment, intervention, negotiation, and survival. Three modules that appear repeatedly are especially significant: sacrificial healing, strategic manipulation of human actors, and the unstable negotiation between betrayal and loyalty[8]. Together, these modules demonstrate how narrative flexibility enabled the tale's continued transmission across Eurasian textual and visual traditions (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative plot elements of stories analogous to the Hunter Catches Birds motif in classical Malay literature.

Item	Persian: The Birdcatcher, the Parrot, and Its Young (Pan 2016)	Uyghur: A Parrot Cures King Kamiran (Reshiti 2013)	Urdu 1: The Tale of Emperor Alim Shah's Unfaithful Parrot (*Yindu Yingwu Gushi* 1958)	Urdu 2: The Hunter and the Parrot with Its Young (Kong et al. 2016)	Malay: The Story of the Disobedient Parrot (Winstedt 2016)	Javanese: The Parrot and the Fox Cub (Wiraga 1929)
Characters	Parrot, hunter, king	Young parrot, young fox, dog, king	Parrot, hunter, king	Young parrot, weasel, child, gray wolf, king	Fox, parrot, child, mountain dog, king	Young parrot, young fox, dog, king
Opening	-	Young parrot befriends a fox; recounts story of the guard's son and a monkey	-	Young parrot befriends a weasel; recounts monkey and merchant story	Parrot befriends a fox; recounts monkey and merchant story	-
Monkey motif	-	Monkey's blood used to cure the king	-	Monkey's heart used for healing	-	-
Tree/locale	A tree	Sacred tree	A tree	Tall, straight tree	Large fruit-bearing tree	-
Strategy/ Intervention	-	Dog advises: feign lameness to lure hunter	-	Gray wolf advises: slowly lead child to a hollow	Mountain dog advises: lure humans to fruit tree	-
Hunter Captures Birds	Hunter casts a net; birds feign death	Net set; birds taken from net and escape	Hunter sets net near parrot's nest	Hunter sets net near parrot nest, places cage; birds feign death and escape	Nest entrance blocked in advance; birds captured at noon	Dusk: hunter captures birds
Bird's response	Thrown into net; feign death; later fly away to branches	Taken from net; fly free	Thrown into net; escape	Cage opened; birds thrown out; feign death; later escape	All parrots captured; mother throws young from tree	-
Price/Reward	10,000 dinars	10,000 dinars	10,000 gold coins	10,000 dinars	4000 gold coins	1000 dinars

Table 2. *Cont.*

Item	Persian: The Birdcatcher, the Parrot, and Its Young (Pan 2016)	Uyghur: A Parrot Cures King Kamiran (Reshiti 2013)	Urdu 1: The Tale of Emperor Alim Shah's Unfaithful Parrot (*Yindu Yingwu Gushi* 1958)	Urdu 2: The Hunter and the Parrot with Its Young (Kong et al. 2016)	Malay: The Story of the Disobedient Parrot (Winstedt 2016)	Javanese: The Parrot and the Fox Cub (Wiraga 1929)
Illness/ Condition	Sickness/disease	Weakness	Severe illness	Long-term illness	Vitiligo	Vitiligo
Outcome	Sold to king	Cures king; returns to forest	King's illness partially cured; parrot claims searching for herbs, returns to forest	Cures king; requests to return to forest	-	-
Parrot's strategy	Seeks cure for king; returns to forest	Heals king; searches for rejuvenating herbs	Deceives king about herb search; returns home	Cures king; petitions to return to forest	-	-

3.1. Sacrifice, Healing, and Ethical Violence

In the Tuuk Cc version, the young parrot befriends a mouse weasel, prompting the mother parrot to recount the story of the monkey and the merchant's son as a cautionary lesson. The monkey's continuing attachment to humans eventually leads to injury, after which the physician prescribes the monkey's heart as medicine for the prince. The episode corresponds to motifs centering on healing through animal sacrifice and the belief that certain animals possess medicinal properties. Malay and Javanese adaptations conserve the underlying logic of sacrificial extraction, whereas the Uyghur version replaces the removal of the monkey's heart with the external use of monkey blood, reflecting different medicinal and ritual assumptions.

Across these adaptations, the monkey episode functions less as an isolated folktale than as a transferable narrative module through which violence, healing, and sacrifice are continuously reimagined within different moral frameworks. Persian and Turkic traditions tend to highlight ritualized healing, whereas Malay adaptations place greater stress on caution, reciprocity, and the dangers of misplaced trust.

In one Persian miniature, the wounded monkey collapses beside the prince while attendants gather around the royal court. A gold vessel placed near the monkey's body quietly anticipates the extraction of blood for medicine.

Rather than merely illustrating the story, the composition organizes tension through visual sequence and spatial contrast. Red accents indicative of the monkey's wound and the surrounding implements guide the viewer's attention across successive moments of injury, sacrifice, and response (Figures 3 and 4).

Spatial hierarchy further structures reading: scenes of injury and extraction occupy one side of the composition, while royal spectators and attendants form a parallel visual field of vulnerability, authority, and expectation. Instead of functioning as static illustrations, these images shape tension through visual progression, spatial compression, and directional movement across the composition. Violence, healing, and sacrifice are therefore experienced not only through textual narration but also through the viewer's reconstruction of sequential visual events.



Figure 3. The monkey slain, his blood to be used as medicine for the ailing prince he has bitten, from Basavana, *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.33.b[9].

3.2. Strategic Intervention and Collective Survival

The second persistent module centers upon strategic intervention and the manipulation of human vulnerability. In several versions, the capture of a young weasel or fox initiates a series of calculated responses designed to protect the birds. Animal advisers—including dogs, wolves, or mountain dogs—propose strategies involving deception, reconnaissance, environmental manipulation, and feigned weakness in order to outmaneuver hunters and secure escape.

Malay adaptations substantially expand this sequence, emphasizing tactical planning, environmental awareness, and coordinated response. Javanese retellings, by contrast, often simplify or omit the feigned death motif, redistributing attention toward dialogue and social interaction. Despite these differences, the transferable structure of entrapment, strategic intervention, and negotiated escape remains coherent across traditions.



Figure 4. The wounded monkey bites the hand of the prince, his chessmate, in the presence of guests, from Dasavanta, *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.32.b[10].

Visual representations reorder these processes through spatial imbalance and sequential staging. Persian miniatures depict birds compressed within crowded pictorial spaces while hunters and predators appear enlarged or visually dominant. This imbalance directs the viewer's interest toward vulnerability, danger, and impending capture. Sequential compositions displaying entrapment, feigned death, rescue, and escape encourage viewers to reconstruct narrative progression through movement across the image itself (Figure 5). The hunter occupies the upper register while the parrots are clustered below, visually encoding asymmetrical power relations.



Figure 5. The hunter throws away the baby parrots, who pretend to be dead, and captures the mother, from Basavana, *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.35.a[11].

These visual and narrative strategies collectively foreground strategic intelligence as a response to physical weakness and social vulnerability. Across regional adaptations, the ethical focus shifts according to local priorities: Persian materials foreground ceremonial and moral authority, Uyghur versions incorporate ecological and medicinal reasoning, while Malay traditions underline practical cunning, reciprocity, and communal responsibility. Yet across these reinterpretations, recurring structures of strategic intervention, collective vulnerability, and negotiated survival remain intact.

3.3. Negotiated Loyalty and Ethical Reciprocity

The final module focuses on captivity, reciprocity, and the unstable negotiation between loyalty and self-interest. After capture, the mother parrot is sold to a king suffering from illness or physical affliction. Different traditions reinterpret the king's condition in various ways, ranging from chronic illness and weakness to vitiligo or supernatural disorder. In several Malay versions, the parrot already understands the king's condition and strategically uses this knowledge to secure protection and eventual release. Uyghur

adaptations emphasize environmental and medicinal knowledge, while Persian traditions frequently frame healing through miraculous or courtly symbolism.

This module transforms captivity into a negotiated relationship in which loyalty, reciprocity, and strategic intelligence become inseparable. The parrot simultaneously occupies multiple positions: captive, adviser, healer, and strategist. Ethical agency therefore emerges not through passive obedience but through the careful negotiation of dependence, obligation, and survival within human social systems.

Miniature paintings intensify this ethical ambiguity through spatial hierarchy and visual prominence. The parrot is regularly positioned near the compositional center, visually balancing the vulnerability of captivity against symbolic authority. Gold highlights, vivid plumage, and red accents direct the viewer's gaze toward moments of negotiation, danger, and choice (Figure 6). The king and the parrot are positioned on opposite sides of the composition, visually dramatizing the tension between royal authority and animal wisdom.



Figure 6. The hunter offers the mother parrot to the king of Kamarupa, from Basavana, *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.36.b[12].

In several scenes, the king's physical weakness is juxtaposed against the parrot's alert posture and visual salience, producing a reciprocal relationship in which human authority becomes dependent upon animal knowledge.

Across textual and visual traditions alike, this final module repeatedly links foresight, reciprocity, and negotiated trust. Although regional adaptations redistribute empha-

sis among ritual healing, practical survival, and social obligation, the recurrent relationship between captivity, intelligence, and moral reciprocity remains structurally coherent across traditions.

Taken together, these textual and visual variations demonstrate how perennial narrative modules could be constantly rearranged across Eurasian literary traditions while maintaining recognizable structures of sacrifice, strategic intervention, and collective survival. Persian miniatures do not merely illustrate narrative events; they reorganize ethical experience through sequential composition, spatial hierarchy, and visual movement. The enduring vitality of the Hunter Catches Birds tradition therefore lies not in narrative stability but in the ongoing reinterpretation of modular structures across dynamic literary, artistic, and cultural environments.

4. Mystical Reinterpretation and Narrative Survival

Beyond manuscript and pictorial traditions, the narrative modules of the Hunter Catches Birds tale also survived through later religious reinterpretations. The oral narrative traditions of the Malay Archipelago are characterized by continual adaptation across manuscript, oral, and performative cultures. Rather than preserving stories in a fixed form, these traditions sustain narrative vitality through repeated reinterpretation within changing religious and social environments. In the Javanese manuscript ORI 0088/PP/73, for example, the parrot functions doubly as a storyteller and as a vehicle of spiritual reflection. Its refusal to shelter migratory birds foreshadows later catastrophe, establishing a repeated narrative sequence of foresight, exclusion, entrapment, and moral consequence that can still be recognized across regional traditions.

Later reinterpretations increasingly reorganize these narrative modules within Islamicate and Sufi ethical frameworks. In these retellings, birds travel across unfamiliar landscapes, encounter exclusion and confinement, and survive through concealment, endurance, and negotiation. The 2012 publication *Contemplations of the Sage Siti Jenar: Siti Zainal and the Ninety-Nine Birds* manifests how older bird narratives could be reconfigured through intertextual engagement with Javanese Sufi thought (Mulkhan 2002). Unlike following a strictly linear structure, the text layers commercial travel, spiritual instruction, and moral testing into a multi-level narrative system. Merchant journeys, wandering birds, and repeated encounters with danger transform abstract religious concepts into narrative experience rather than doctrinal exposition (Winstedt 2016, pp. 41–43)[13].

Several recurring narrative modules are reinterpreted within this Sufi framework. Birds move through uncertain environments, become trapped within enclosed spaces, and survive through acts of concealment and sacrifice. These repeated sequences keep discernible structural patterns even as their meanings increasingly shift toward spiritual testing, restraint, and transformation.

The feigned death motif, for example, no longer functions solely as a strategy of escape. Motionless birds lying beneath nets or within confined spaces gradually become associated with withdrawal, concealment, and spiritual transformation. Physical vulnerability is therefore reinterpreted not simply as weakness, but as a condition preceding renewal and release. Similarly, moments of divine petition and unexpected animal intervention translate abstract theological ideas into concrete narrative action.

A later Javanese adaptation recounts the migration of ninety-nine birds whose refusal to shelter another bird eventually leads to entrapment, sacrifice, and negotiated escape. A fig seed carried across the landscape gradually grows into creeping vines that enable the hunter Ki Monsaka to reach the birds. Scenes of enclosure, suspended movement, and feigned death reconfigure older narrative structures within a Sufi framework, emphasizing spiritual testing and moral transformation. Far from functioning as isolated miracles, these

episodes integrate mystical reflection into perennial sequences of danger, vulnerability, and survival.

Narratives associated with Siti Jenar similarly reinterpret older Hindu-Buddhist concepts through Sufi narrative frameworks. Birds, wandering travelers, and isolated figures repeatedly move through unstable environments marked by uncertainty, separation, and dependence. Instead of presenting doctrine directly, these stories dramatize spiritual transformation through relationships between humans, animals, captivity, and ecological uncertainty. Characters gradually move from certainty toward realization, mirroring the progression connected to mystical discipline and self-knowledge.

Visual representations continue to restructure these reinterpretations through spatial compression and sequential arrangement. Illustrations of trapped birds, suspended nets, and moments of feigned death visually intensify themes of vulnerability, judgment, and spiritual testing. Through spatial compression, sequential arrangement, and heightened contrast between confinement and release, these images transform mystical reflection into perceptible narrative experience. Across these reinterpretations, trapped birds, suspended nets, and negotiated escape continue to reshape relationships between vulnerability, survival, and spiritual reflection. Rather than replacing earlier traditions, these Sufi reinterpretations demonstrate the persistent flexibility of the Hunter Catches Birds narrative system. Core structures of entrapment, sacrifice, strategic intervention, and negotiated survival continue to reappear as these narratives move through varying religious environments.

5. Conclusions

The Hunter Catches Birds tale presents the enduring vitality of modular storytelling across Eurasian literary and visual traditions. Originating in Indian Buddhist and Sanskrit sources, the motif traversed Persian, Uyghur, Malay, and Javanese contexts, preserving distinguishable structures of collective escape, sacrifice, negotiation, and survival while adapting to diverse religious, social, and ecological frameworks. Across versions, these narrative modules—collective action, feigned death, sacrifice, and interspecies conflict—continue to reappear even as hunting methods, ecological settings, and systems of belief are repeatedly localized.

Visual representations frequently linger on moments of capture, hesitation, injury, and escape. Trapped birds, wounded animals, and crowded pictorial spaces draw viewers into the emotional uncertainty of the narrative. Rather than simply accompanying the text, these images organize dramatic tension through spatial arrangement, sequential movement, and shifting visual emphasis. Scenes of trapped birds, injured monkeys, and strategic deception transform ethical conflict into a visual experience, allowing viewers to reconstruct relationships between vulnerability, foresight, and collective survival across the pictorial field.

By approaching the tale as a set of persistent yet adaptable narrative modules, this study demonstrates how stories could move across Buddhist, Persian, Malay, and Javanese traditions while continually redefining their ethical and visual meanings. The persistence of the Hunter Catches Birds tradition demonstrates that narrative continuity across Asia depended less on textual fidelity than on the continual recombination of portable narrative modules across changing textual, visual, and religious environments. This study therefore suggests that narrative modularity provides a useful framework for understanding how stories survive cross-cultural transmission through the continual reconfiguration of portable narrative units across different media and cultural traditions.

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Notes

1 K522.4. Captive parrots in a net play dead and are thrown out/escape (Thompson 1956).

2 A recurring narrative sequence found in several Malay adaptations involves conflict between the parrot and the starling, followed by entrapment, collective escape, sacrifice, and negotiated reciprocity. These interconnected episodes demonstrate how narrative modules could be reorganized across changing textual and ethical environments.

3 The Cemperling (*Aplonis panayensis*), also known as the Asian Glossy Starling or Philippine Starling, is a highly adaptable species. These birds exhibit strong intraspecific cohesion—being tightly knit within their own flock—while displaying pronounced interspecific aggression, often attacking other bird species.

4 J416.1. Bird refuses to maintain friendship with a bird of different habits (Thompson 1956, p. 38).

5 These variations reflect both material adaptation (fig tree → banyan; net → birdlime) and shifting cultural emphases, demonstrating how local environment, religious context, and narrative interpretation continually reshaped the story across regional traditions.

6 *The Mouse Gnaws the Net Imprisoning the Doves*, folio from *Kalila wa Dimna*, second quarter of the sixteenth century. Ink and opaque watercolor on paper. Attributed to Gujarat, India, probably based on an Egyptian original. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1981.373.56.

7 The parrot mother cautions her young on the danger of playing with foxes, from a *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c.1560. Dasavanta (Indian, d. 1584). Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper; overall: 20.3 × 14 cm (8 × 5 1/2 in.); painting only: 10 × 10.5 cm (3 15/16 × 4 1/8 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.32.a.

8 These recurring modules include episodes centered on sacrificial healing ("killing the monkey to obtain its heart"), strategic manipulation of hunters through deception and feigned weakness, and the unstable negotiation between betrayal, loyalty, and reciprocity within human–animal relationships. Although individual motifs vary across Persian, Uyghur, Malay, Urdu, and Javanese traditions, the underlying structures of entrapment, intervention, sacrifice, and negotiated survival remain comparatively stable across versions.

9 The monkey slain, his blood to be used as medicine for the ailing prince he has bitten, from a *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Basavana (Indian, active c. 1560–1600). Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper; overall: 20.3 × 14 cm (8 × 5 1/2 in.); painting only: 10.3 × 10.6 cm (4 1/16 × 4 3/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.33.b.

10 The wounded monkey bites the hand of the prince, his chessmate, in the presence of guests, from a *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Dasavanta (Indian, d. 1584). Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper; overall: 20 × 14.2 cm (7 7/8 × 5 9/16 in.); painting only: 10.2 × 10.6 cm (4 × 4 3/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.32.b.

11 The hunter throws away the baby parrots, who pretend to be dead, and captures the mother, from a *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Attributed to Basavana (Indian, active c. 1560–1600). Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper; overall: 20 × 14.4 cm (7 7/8 × 5 11/16 in.); painting only: 10.6 × 10.2 cm (4 3/16 × 4 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.35.a.

12 The hunter offers the mother parrot to the king of Kamarupa, from a *Tūṭī-nāma* (*Tales of a Parrot*): Fifth Night, c. 1560. Basavana (Indian, active c. 1560–1600). Gum tempera, ink, and gold on paper; overall: 20 × 14.3 cm (7 7/8 × 5 5/8 in.); painting only: 10.2 × 10.7 cm (4 × 4 3/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry 1962.279.36.b.

13 *The narrative recounts the migration of one hundred birds from the Golden Mountain to the Kingdom of Kustan, where their refusal to shelter a green-winged dove eventually leads to divine complaint, ecological transformation, entrapment, and negotiated escape. A fig seed carried by a bat grows into vines that enable the hunter Ki Monsaka to trap the birds. Following the mother bird's instructions to feign death, ninety-nine birds ultimately escape, leaving the mother bird captured and later purchased by the merchant Kim Najib.* Translation adapted

from (Mulkhan 2002) translated by the author. *Related Malay adaptations further reorganize this episode through strategic deception, animal intervention, and reciprocal obligation.* See (Winstedt 2016, pp. 41–43).

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