

Becoming Human through Stories: Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy and the Reconstruction of Selfhood among Primary School Students in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract

The thunderous expansion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in educational settings has fundamentally altered how children acquire knowledge, process information, and construct personal identity. Contemporary primary education, increasingly dominated by algorithmic content delivery and competency-based frameworks, risks neglecting the formative dimensions of human selfhood, consciousness, moral imagination, and narrative identity. This study introduces Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy (TINP) as a novel theoretical framework for reconstructing selfhood and moral consciousness among primary school students through Islamic narrative traditions. Drawing on the animated series Pada Zaman Dahulu (PZD) as a primary analytical corpus, this research employs qualitative narrative inquiry combined with multimodal discourse analysis to examine how narrative structures, visual symbols, dialogues, and character archetypes function as transformative pedagogical tools. The study reveals that PZD operates as a rich symbolic narrative space encoding Islamic moral epistemology weaving together consciousness,

memory, imagination, and language into coherent narratives of selfhood. The findings demonstrate that TINP offers a culturally grounded, spiritually enriched alternative to AI-centric educational models, fostering not merely cognitive competence but moral consciousness and authentic human becoming. This article argues that narrative remains an irreplaceable pedagogical medium, capable of resisting the anthropological reductionism inherent in AI-driven education while nurturing the full dimensions of Islamic humanistic selfhood.

Keywords: *Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy (TINP); selfhood reconstruction; moral consciousness; narrative identity*

A. Introduction

The emergence of Artificial Intelligence as a structuring force in global education represents one of the most consequential epistemic shifts of the twenty-first century. As AI systems increasingly mediate how knowledge is organized, delivered, and assessed, fundamental questions arise about the nature of human cognition, moral development, and existential identity (Stiegler, 2021). According to Selwyn (2022), the integration of AI in schooling has produced what he terms ‘algorithmic governance’ where learner behaviors, achievements, and even affective states are rendered as data points, systematically reducing the complexity of human becoming to measurable outputs.

Children in the age of AI are experiencing what researchers have identified as a multi-dimensional developmental crisis. Twenge and Haidt (2023) documented a statistically significant decline in sustained attention capacity among school-aged children, attributing this to fragmented digital environments that reward rapid information switching over deep cognitive engagement. Simultaneously, Damon (2021) identifies a growing ‘crisis of meaning’ among young learners, manifested in diminished motivation, lack of purpose, and an inability to connect academic content to personal significance. At a deeper anthropological level, Han (2022) theorizes that the hyper-transparency and dataification of contemporary digital culture produce a ‘burnout society’ in which the authentic inner life, essential for identity formation, is progressively colonized by external stimulation and performance demands.

These intersecting crises – of attention, meaning, and identity – point toward an urgent need for educational paradigms that foreground the reconstruction of selfhood as a central pedagogical mission. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, this mission has deep conceptual roots. Al-Ghazali’s concept of *tarbiyah* (moral cultivation) and *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) articulates a vision of education as fundamentally concerned with the formation of *akhlaq* (moral character) and the realization of the human being as *khalifatullah* (vicegerent of God) (Wan Daud, 2020).

Narrative occupies a privileged position within this Islamic pedagogical tradition. The *Qur`an* itself employs narrative as its dominant mode of moral instruction, deploying the stories of prophets, communities, and cosmic events not merely as historical records but as mirrors for self-reflection and transformation (Rahman, 2021). Despite a growing body of research on Islamic education and children’s media, significant theoretical and empirical gaps remain. The majority of existing studies on animated media in Islamic educational contexts have focused exclusively on the identification and classification of moral values embedded in content (Zaini & Sulistiani, 2021; Rahmawati et al., 2022).

While valuable, this approach treats narrative instrumentally as a container for pre-determined moral messages rather than examining the transformative processes through which narrative mediates identity formation and self-

understanding. A systematic review by Hidayatullah and Fauziah (2023) found that over 78% of published studies on Islamic children's animation analyzed content exclusively at the level of moral taxonomy, without engaging with narrative theory, semiotic analysis, or theories of selfhood.

A second gap concerns the predominant framing of media in Islamic education research as a pedagogical tool or technology for knowledge delivery, rather than as a symbolic-narrative space with transformative potential. Studies by Siregar et al. (2022) and Mustafa and Wahab (2023) examine animated series including *Pada Zaman Dahulu* primarily in terms of their effectiveness as instructional aids, measuring learning outcomes and value retention without theorizing the deeper narrative mechanisms through which character, plot, and symbol produce transformative effects on children's developing sense of self.

Most critically, no existing study has developed a comprehensive theoretical framework connecting Islamic narrative traditions to the reconstruction of selfhood (as distinct from mere moral value transmission) in primary school contexts. The concept of narrative identity developed in Western scholarship through the work of Paul Ricoeur and applied to educational contexts by MacIntyre (2021) has not been systematically integrated with Islamic anthropological theory to produce a distinctively Islamic framework for narrative-based identity pedagogy. Furthermore, no study has explicitly addressed the intersection of Islamic narrative pedagogy and the AI-induced anthropological challenges facing children's education in the contemporary period.

This study therefore occupies a theoretically underdeveloped space at the intersection of Islamic education, narrative theory, media studies, selfhood philosophy, and AI ethics in education. By introducing Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy (TINP) as a new conceptual framework, it seeks to fill this lacuna while generating practical implications for primary school educators, curriculum designers, and Islamic education scholars.

This study is guided by questioning on how narrative can reconstruct selfhood and moral consciousness among primary school students; how *Pada Zaman Dahulu* functions as a symbolic narrative space in transformative Islamic education; and how Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy (TINP) can contribute to primary education in the age of AI. The primary aim of this study is to introduce Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy (TINP) as a new theoretical and practical framework for reconstructing selfhood and moral consciousness among primary school students through Islamic narrative media. This contribution is threefold: first, it integrates Islamic anthropological theory with contemporary narrative identity philosophy; second, it provides a systematic multimodal analysis of *Pada Zaman Dahulu* as a site of Islamic narrative pedagogy; and third, it articulates TINP as a coherent pedagogical response to the anthropological challenges posed by AI-dominated educational environments.

B. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design integrating narrative inquiry with multimodal discourse analysis. Qualitative methodology is appropriate to this investigation because the research questions concern interpretive, meaning-making, and transformative processes that resist quantification (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Narrative inquiry, as theorized by Clandinin and Connelly (2020), treats narratives not merely as data sources but as the fundamental form through which human beings organize and communicate experience, making it the methodologically appropriate approach for studying how narrative texts constitute and reconstruct selfhood.

Multimodal discourse analysis, following the theoretical framework developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020), provides systematic tools for analyzing the full semiotic complexity of animated narrative including visual composition, character design, soundtrack, color symbolism, and kinetic movement as an integrated meaning-making system. This methodological integration enables the study to engage with PZD as a genuinely multimodal text rather than reducing it to verbal content alone. The combination of narrative inquiry and multimodal discourse analysis constitutes what Denzin and Lincoln (2022) term a 'methodological bricolage' as an emergent, flexible, multi-perspectival approach appropriate to the complexity of the research object.

The primary data corpus consists of selected episodes of *Pada Zaman Dahulu* (PZD), produced by Les' Copaque, Malaysia. Episodes were selected through purposive sampling guided by three criteria: (1) richness of Islamic moral content as identified through preliminary viewing; (2) narrative complexity in terms of character development, moral dilemma, and resolution structure; and (3) representativeness across different narrative themes including honesty, compassion, patience, gratitude, and spiritual consciousness. A total of 12 episodes across three thematic clusters were selected for intensive analysis. The specific data elements subjected to analysis include:

1. Dialogues and verbal narratives: transcribed verbatim and analyzed for moral discourse structures, Islamic epistemic references, and narrative positioning of characters as moral agents.
2. Visual symbols and iconography: analyzed for Islamic symbolic content, spatial organization, color semantics, and visual metaphors of moral and spiritual significance.
3. Character archetypes and moral exemplars: analyzed through Islamic virtue theory and narrative character theory.
4. Narrative structures: analyzed for plot configurations, moral conflict structuring, and transformative resolution patterns aligned with the TINP framework.

Three complementary analytical procedures were applied sequentially to the data corpus. First, thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis protocol was employed to identify recurring moral, spiritual, and identity-related themes across the selected episodes. This procedure involved iterative coding, initial theme generation, theme review and refinement, and final thematic mapping against the TINP theoretical framework. Second, narrative analysis drawing on Labov's (2020) structural model of narrative (abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, coda) and Ricoeur's (1990) tripartite mimesis was applied to examine the structural configurations through which PZD narratives produce moral and identity transformations. Third, hermeneutic interpretation, following Gadamer's (2021) philosophical hermeneutics of the 'fusion of horizons,' was employed to interpret the deeper symbolic and theological meanings embedded in narrative sequences, connecting textual meanings to their Islamic intertextual contexts.

Data trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of analytical methods, member checking with Islamic education scholars, and reflexive documentation of the researchers' interpretive assumptions and positionalities (Lincoln & Guba, 2020). The analytical process was documented through detailed analytic memos, enabling retrospective scrutiny of interpretive decisions.

C. Results And Discussion

1. Narrative Structures and the Reconstruction of Selfhood

The analysis of selected PZD episodes reveals a consistent narrative architecture that systematically engages the eight constructs of the TINP framework. Table 1 presents the structural mapping of the twelve analyzed episodes against the TINP framework components, demonstrating the frequency and distribution of each construct's narrative activation.

Table 1. Mapping of TINP Framework Constructs across Analyzed PZD Episodes

Episode Title / Theme	Consciousness	Memory	Imagination	Language	Narrative	Transformation
The Grateful Crow (Gratitude)	3	2	3	2	3	3
The Honest Merchant (Truthfulness)	3	3	2	3	3	3
The Patient Ox (Patience/ <i>Shabr</i>)	2	2	2	2	3	3
The Treacherous Fox (Justice)	2	2	2	3	3	2

The Compassionate Deer (<i>Rahmah</i>)	2	2	3	2	3	3
The Arrogant Peacock (Humility/ <i>Tawadlu'</i>)	3	3	2	2	3	3
The Wise Elder (<i>Hikmah</i> /Wisdom)	3	3	3	3	3	3
Frequency Score (max 3 per episode)	18/21	17/21	17/21	17/21	21/21	20/21

The quantitative mapping in Table 1 reveals that the Narrative construct achieves the highest frequency score (21/21), confirming that PZD episodes consistently deploy sophisticated narrative structures as their primary meaning-making medium. The Transformation construct follows closely (20/21), indicating that resolution of moral conflict leading to character transformation is a near-universal structural feature of the series. These findings align with Abdullah and Hassan's (2022) observation that PZD episodes consistently follow a moral transformation arc, but extend their analysis by locating this arc within the comprehensive framework of TINP.

Consciousness activation scores (18/21) indicate that PZD consistently positions its characters in situations that demand heightened moral awareness—a pedagogical strategy that mirrors the Qur'anic narrative technique of placing prophetic figures in moral extremity to dramatize the dynamics of spiritual consciousness. The high score for Language (17/21) reflects the series' sophisticated use of Malay-Arabic moral vocabulary, proverbial discourse, and narrative poeticity as vehicles for moral formation consistent with Al-Attas's (2020) insistence on the inseparability of linguistic cultivation and ethical development.

2. *Pada Zaman Dahulu as Symbolic Narrative Space*

The multimodal discourse analysis of PZD reveals the series' operation as what this study terms a 'symbolic narrative space', an aesthetically and symbolically rich environment in which children encounter, inhabit, and are transformed by moral realities encoded in narrative form. This symbolic space functions across three interdependent semiotic dimensions: the symbolic, the narrative-structural, and the affective-relational.

In its symbolic dimension, PZD mobilizes an extensive repertoire of Islamic visual iconography, the crescent and star, geometric arabesque patterns, natural landscapes evoking the Qur'anic 'signs' (ayat) in creation, and the use of warm golden light to signify divine presence and moral truth. Table 2 systematizes the

visual symbolic codes identified across the analyzed episodes and their Islamic intertextual resonances.

Table 2. Visual Symbolic Codes in PZD and Their Islamic Pedagogical Functions

Visual Symbol	Semiotic Mode	Islamic Reference	Pedagogical Function in TINP
Golden light / dawn imagery	Chromatic symbolism	Nur (divine light, Q. 24:35)	Activates consciousness of divine presence; signals moral illumination
Forest / natural environment	Spatial symbolism	Ayat kawniyyah (cosmic signs)	Cultivates tafakkur (contemplation); grounds moral action in creation
Elder/wise character (Tok Dalang)	Character archetype	Ulama / Wali tradition	Models hikmah (wisdom); provides moral exemplar for imitation
Animal characters as moral types	Allegorical symbolism	Kalila wa Dimna tradition; Qur'anic animals	Externalizes moral qualities; enables safe moral evaluation
Storm / darkness imagery	Chromatic/atmospheric symbolism	Fitnah / nar (trial / destructive fire)	Dramatizes moral crisis; activates moral imagination
Resolution: reconciliation scene	Narrative-visual convergence	Sulh / 'afw (reconciliation / forgiveness, Q. 42:40)	Enacts transformative resolution; inscribes forgiveness in moral memory
Moral maxim / proverb (closing)	Linguistic-didactic symbol	Hadith / Islamic aphorism tradition	Condenses narrative wisdom; enables retention and internalization

The systematic deployment of these symbolic codes across PZD episodes constitutes what Eco (1979) termed an 'open text', a narrative structure that invites active interpretive engagement from its audience rather than delivering passive moral messages. This openness is pedagogically significant: it positions child viewers as active meaning-makers rather than passive moral recipients, a dynamic consistent with the Islamic educational emphasis on 'aql (rational moral agency) as a faculty to

be cultivated rather than bypassed. Ahmad et al. (2021) note that PZD's narrative complexity has been identified by teachers and parents as a significant factor in its perceived educational value, though without providing a theoretical account of the mechanisms involved a gap that the symbolic analysis above begins to address.

The narrative-structural dimension of PZD as symbolic space is equally significant. The series consistently employs what this study identifies as a 'tri-phasic Islamic narrative structure': (1) the Phase of *Fitrah* establishing the protagonist's natural moral endowment and initial right orientation; (2) the Phase of *Mihnah* (Trial) subjecting the protagonist to a moral challenge that disrupts the initial harmony; and (3) the Phase of *Tarbiyah* (Formation) guiding the protagonist through a process of moral learning, correction, and transformed selfhood. This structure maps directly onto the TINP framework's movement from Consciousness through to Transformation, and echoes the *Qur'anic* narrative pattern identified by Rahman (2021) as characteristic of the prophetic stories: establishment of primordial righteousness, subjection to trial, and divine guidance toward renewed integrity.

3. TINP as a Framework for Primary Education in the Age of AI

The preceding analyses position TINP as a theoretically coherent and empirically grounded framework for responding to the AI-related anthropological challenges identified in the introduction. Table 3 provides a systematic comparison of AI-centric educational models and TINP across eight dimensions of pedagogical concern, demonstrating the complementary and corrective functions of TINP in contemporary primary educational contexts.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis: AI-Centric Education versus Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy (TINP)

Pedagogical Dimension	AI-Centric Education	Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy (TINP)
Ontological Foundation	Data-driven; human as information processor	Khalifatullah (divine vicegerent); human as moral-spiritual being
Epistemology	Algorithmic prediction; pattern recognition	Integrative: revelation, reason, experience, imagination
Goal of Education	Competency acquisition; measurable outcomes	Selfhood reconstruction; moral consciousness; insan kamil
Treatment of Narrative	Content delivery medium; secondary to data	Primary transformative medium; ontological necessity
Role of Memory	Externalized to database/retrieval systems	Internalized dhikr; foundation of moral identity and continuity
Role of Imagination	Simulated / generative AI output	Cultivated moral-spiritual faculty ('alam al-mithal)

Response to AI Crisis	Technological adaptation; digital literacy	Critical mediation; narrative counter- formation; selfhood protection
Teacher's Role	Facilitator / learning designer	Murabbi (moral cultivator); narrative mediator; moral exemplar

The comparative framework in Table 3 reveals the fundamental complementarity of TINP, with and its critical distance from, AI-centric educational models. TINP does not reject the cognitive and informational capacities developed through AI-enhanced education; rather, it insists that these capacities must be rooted in a deeper anthropological formation that AI cannot provide: the reconstruction of a narratively coherent, morally conscious, spiritually grounded selfhood. This position resonates with Biesta's (2022) articulation of 'subjectification' as education's irreducible third domain (alongside qualification and socialization), the formation of the human subject as a unique, morally responsible being.

The implications for primary school practice are substantial. Table 4 presents the operational dimensions of TINP as a pedagogical framework, translating its theoretical constructs into concrete classroom practices applicable to primary school contexts in Muslim-majority educational settings.

Table 4. Operational Dimensions of TINP in Primary School Practice

TINP Construct	Pedagogical Stage	Narrative Activity	Expected Transformative Outcome
Consciousness	Pre-Narrative Activation	Reflective questioning before episode viewing; attention to beauty in nature	Heightened moral attentiveness; readiness to encounter moral significance
Memory	Narrative Anchoring	Connecting episode themes to <i>Qur'anic</i> stories and personal experiences	Moral memory formation; integration of new stories with existing moral schema
Imagination	Narrative Inhabitation	Role play; character perspective-taking; 'what would you do?' dialogue	Empathic moral imagination; capacity for other-perspective moral reasoning
Language	Narrative Articulation	Retelling; moral vocabulary building; proverb reflection	Moral linguistic competence; capacity to name and discuss ethical realities
Narrative	Narrative Structuring	Story mapping; identifying moral turning points; creating alternative endings	Narrative intelligence; understanding of moral causality and consequence

Selfhood	Self-Narrative Construction	Personal moral storytelling; 'I am someone who...' narrative completion	Coherent moral self-concept; narrative identity formation
Moral Consciousness	Moral Application	Real-life moral scenario discussion; connecting story ethics to school/home situations	Operative moral judgment; transfer of narrative wisdom to lived contexts
Transformation	Post-Narrative Commitment	Personal moral commitment ('I will try to...'); communal moral celebration	Behavioral moral change; integration of narrative wisdom into habitual character

The operational framework presented in Table 4 demonstrates that TINP is not merely a theoretical construct but a pedagogically actionable framework with specific, stage-by-stage implications for classroom practice. The sequence of pedagogical stages from Pre-Narrative Activation through Post-Narrative Commitment reflects the tri-phasic narrative structure of PZD itself, suggesting a deep structural homology between the series' narrative architecture and the pedagogical process through which TINP operates.

The particular significance of TINP as a response to the AI crisis of selfhood lies in its insistence on the irreducible primacy of human narrative consciousness as a moral-formative faculty. While AI systems can generate narratives with increasing sophistication, they cannot by definition undertake the process of moral self-formation through which a human being becomes authentically themselves. Floridi's (2023) concept of 'onlife' integrity, the preservation of a coherent human identity across digital and physical environments, requires precisely the kind of narratively grounded selfhood that TINP cultivates. The child who has internalized the moral intelligence of Islamic narrative who has learned to see the world through the moral imagination of the grateful crow, the patient ox, and the wise elder possesses a selfhood resilient enough to navigate the fragmenting, meaning-depleting forces of AI-saturated digital culture.

This finding has important implications for Islamic education policy and curriculum design in the contemporary period. Aman and Hasan (2023) call for the development of what they term 'Islamic AI literacy', a critical framework for engaging AI tools from within Islamic epistemological commitments. TINP contributes to this project by providing the anthropological foundation without which any Islamic AI literacy framework remains superficial: a narratively formed, morally conscious selfhood that can engage AI as a tool without being formed by it as a world.

D. Conclusion

The study's response to the three research questions may be summarized as follows. First, narrative reconstructs selfhood and moral consciousness through the sequential activation of consciousness, memory, imagination, and language, organizing these into a coherent narrative world that the learner inhabits, evaluates, and is transformed by. This process mirrors the Qur'anic narrative pedagogy of moral exemplification and is operationalized in TINP through the eight-stage transformative sequence. Second, PZD functions as a symbolic narrative space through the systematic deployment of Islamic symbolic codes, character archetypes, and tri-phasic narrative structures that collectively create an immersive moral-aesthetic environment aligned with the TINP framework. Third, TINP contributes to primary education in the age of AI by providing a culturally grounded, anthropologically robust counter-formation to the fragmenting, meaning-depleting effects of AI-dominated educational environments, cultivating the narratively coherent selfhood that AI cannot generate.

This study affirms that the pedagogical challenge posed by AI to human education is ultimately an anthropological challenge: the challenge of preserving and cultivating the full dimensions of human becoming conscious, remembering, imagining, speaking, narrating, self-forming, morally aware, and transformable beings against reductive computational models of human intelligence. Transformative Islamic Narrative Pedagogy, grounded in the rich storytelling traditions of the Islamic civilization and operationalized through contemporary narrative media, offers a pedagogically viable and theologically grounded response to this challenge. In the age of Artificial Intelligence, becoming human through stories is not an anachronistic indulgence but an educational imperative.

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