Journal of Sustainable Development Issues (JSDI)
P-ISSN : 2964-0628 | E-ISSN : 2963-4261 | Website: https://journals.scientium.id/index.php/jsdi

Children's Literature and Social Sustainability: Ethical Citizenship and Coercive Modernization in Kamil Kilani's *al-Malik al-Najjār*

Reza Sukma Nugraha[1*], Suryo Ediyono[2], Muhammad Farkhan Mujahidin[3], Alif Al Hilal Ahmad[4], Ahmad Jazuli[5]

[1,2,3,4,5] Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS)
*Corresponding e-mail: reza.sn@staff.uns.ac.id

Article Info

Keywords:
children's literature; social sustainability; narrative ethics; ethical citizenship; coercive modernization.

History of Article:
Received: 21-07-2026
Reviewed: 04-08-2026
Accepted: 30-08-2026
Published: 07-09-2026

DOI:
10.56282/jsdi.v5i1.621

Abstract

This article examines how Kamil Kilani's *al-Malik al-Najjār* constructs civic virtue and how that ethical model is complicated by the narrative's treatment of sovereign power and coercive reform. Using qualitative close reading, the study combines narrative ethics with social sustainability as a secondary interpretive framework. The analysis focuses on didactic framing, characterization, dialogue, dramatic staging, narrative evaluation, and closure. The findings show that the story promotes a productive model of citizenship grounded in labor, technical knowledge, personal discipline, national duty, and public service. Mikhail's experience, however, introduces a competing concern with individual agency, dignity, and protection from coercive authority. This tension becomes most visible when Peter recognizes the injustice of the military law threatening Mikhail, but resolves the case through personal sovereign intervention rather than institutional reform. The historical postscript intensifies the contradiction by acknowledging Peter's violence while partially legitimizing coercion and absolute authority as necessary for Russia's modernization. The article argues that *al-Malik al-Najjār* constructs productive citizenship more convincingly than socially sustainable citizenship. Its civic ideals remain constrained by a political order in which justice depends on sovereign discretion and national progress can qualify objections to violence. The study demonstrates how children's literature can contribute to sustainability research by revealing the cultural assumptions through which citizenship, authority, sacrifice, and development are made ethically intelligible.

Abstract

This article examines how Kamil Kilani's *al-Malik al-Najjār* constructs civic virtue and how that ethical model is complicated by the narrative's treatment of sovereign power and coercive reform. Using qualitative close reading, the study combines narrative ethics with social sustainability as a secondary interpretive framework. The analysis focuses on didactic framing, characterization, dialogue, dramatic staging, narrative evaluation, and closure. The findings show that the story promotes a productive model of citizenship grounded in labor, technical knowledge, personal discipline, national duty, and public

service. Mikhail's experience, however, introduces a competing concern with individual agency, dignity, and protection from coercive authority. This tension becomes most visible when Peter recognizes the injustice of the military law threatening Mikhail, but resolves the case through personal sovereign intervention rather than institutional reform. The historical postscript intensifies the contradiction by acknowledging Peter's violence while partially legitimizing coercion and absolute authority as necessary for Russia's modernization. The article argues that *al-Malik al-Najjār* constructs productive citizenship more convincingly than socially sustainable citizenship. Its civic ideals remain constrained by a political order in which justice depends on sovereign discretion and national progress can qualify objections to violence. The study demonstrates how children's literature can contribute to sustainability research by revealing the cultural assumptions through which citizenship, authority, sacrifice, and development are made ethically intelligible.

Keywords: children's literature; social sustainability; narrative ethics; ethical citizenship; coercive modernization.

1. Introduction

Sustainable development is often discussed through environmental and economic indicators, yet the social conditions that allow communities to endure, adapt, and remain just are no less consequential. The social dimension was present in early formulations of sustainable development but received less sustained attention than ecological protection and economic growth. Vallance et al. (2011) describe this imbalance as one reason for renewed interest in social sustainability, while more recent work has shown that the concept encompasses questions of equity, belonging, justice, power, participation, and quality of life. A systematic review by Peters et al. (2026), for example, found that educational research on social sustainability increasingly treats social relations and unequal access to participation as central concerns rather than peripheral outcomes of development. Social sustainability, from this perspective, concerns not only whether a society advances but also the relationships, institutions, and distributions of power through which that advancement occurs.

This social emphasis also opens sustainability research to cultural analysis. Culture does not simply accompany development; it supplies languages of value through which societies define desirable conduct, legitimate authority, collective responsibility, and acceptable forms of change. Soini and Birkeland (2014) identify several ways in which culture has been incorporated into sustainable development, including its treatment as a distinct dimension and as a basis for broader social transformation. Zheng et al. (2021) offer stronger empirical support for this connection. Drawing on more than 300 publications, they found links between cultural values and all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, covering 79 percent of their targets. Such findings suggest that sustainability is partly a cultural problem because policy and institutional arrangements operate within inherited assumptions about responsibility, progress, justice, and social order.

Literary narratives are one site where these assumptions are organized and transmitted. This issue becomes particularly pronounced in children's literature, which

has historically occupied an uneasy position between aesthetic expression and social instruction. Stories written for young readers frequently present models of conduct, relationships, and authority while also arranging the reader's sympathies toward particular characters and choices. The ethical work of such texts therefore cannot be reduced to the moral principles they state explicitly. Veldhuizen (2021) argues that ethics in children's literature must be examined across narrative levels because characterization, action, perspective, evaluation, and plot resolution may communicate ethical positions that reinforce or conflict with overt moral instruction. A narrative can advocate a virtue at one level while making a competing value attractive or legitimate at another. This distinction is especially pertinent to texts in which the education of the child is openly connected to the formation of a future member of society.

Kamil Kilani's literary project offers a productive case for examining this relationship. Kilani occupies a foundational position in modern Arabic children's literature, and his work was shaped by a sustained concern with pedagogy, language, knowledge, and moral formation. Abu Huraira (2024) situates Kilani's project within the emergence of modern Arabic children's literature and shows how his adaptations pursued pedagogical and ethical purposes alongside literary ones. Abdul Aziz (2011), examining 196 stories associated with Kilani's *Maktabat al-Atfal*, demonstrates that this pedagogical orientation extended beyond the stories themselves. Introductions, titles, glossaries, questions, explanatory additions, and other framing devices guided young readers toward particular forms of knowledge and moral interpretation. Kilani's didacticism was therefore not incidental to his literary practice. It was embedded in the architecture through which his stories addressed the child.

Al-Malik al-Najjar provides an unusually revealing instance of that architecture. In the introduction dated March 15, 1935, Kilani addresses the young reader directly and describes the dramatic story as a source of lessons and elevated admonitions intended to inspire ambition and kindle love of the homeland. The narrative then presents Peter the Great in the unfamiliar position of a monarch living and working among ordinary shipbuilders. His willingness to learn a manual trade, share the conditions of common workers, acquire technical knowledge abroad, and apply that knowledge to Russia produces a recognizable civic ethic. Labor becomes honorable, knowledge acquires public purpose, and service to the homeland takes precedence over personal comfort. Peter explicitly describes his return home as a duty that cannot be neglected, turning patriotism from an emotional attachment into an obligation to collective life.

Yet the same narrative complicates the civic ideal it constructs. Mikhail, Peter's fellow carpenter, has been conscripted into military service against his inclination and later deserts. Peter recognizes the severity of a law under which a deserter can be executed and characterizes such a law as unjust in relation to a person whose disposition is unsuited to military life. When Mikhail is eventually arrested, however, the problem is not resolved through a change in law or an institutional principle of justice. Peter orders his release because the emperor personally requires his skills. The officer responds by treating the sovereign's will as authoritative and beyond refusal. The episode therefore places personal benevolence above institutional redress. A vulnerable subject is saved, but the structure that made him vulnerable remains intact.

The historical postscript intensifies this tension. Kilani praises Peter's intellectual curiosity, manual labor, and efforts to modernize Russia, but also records his use of severe punishment, exile, violence against opponents of reform, and the imprisonment and death of his own son. More significantly, the narration partially rationalizes these actions by asserting that Russia benefited from Peter's harshness and that entrenched institutions could not have been transformed without severe coercion and absolute authority. National improvement is thus narrated through two ethical vocabularies that do not sit comfortably together: productive citizenship grounded in labor and knowledge, and modernization secured by concentrated power.

Previous scholarship has clarified important aspects of Kilani's pedagogical framing, adaptation practices, and ethical orientation. *Al-Malik al-Najjar* itself has also been examined through Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, with attention to Peter's interactions and the meanings generated between characters (Masrur & Hakim, 2024). What remains less examined is the relationship between the civic virtues Kilani promotes and the forms of authority through which his narrative imagines national progress. This question matters beyond the classification of the story's moral values. From the standpoint of social sustainability, responsibility and productive contribution cannot be separated from justice, agency, power, and the conditions under which collective goals are pursued.

This article therefore reads *Al-Malik al-Najjar* at the intersection of narrative ethics and social sustainability. It asks, first, how the text constructs civic virtue through didactic framing, labor, knowledge, national duty, and characterization. Second, it examines how representations of law, sovereign authority, and coercive modernization complicate that civic ideal. The argument is that Kilani's narrative develops a persuasive model of productive and patriotic citizenship while locating justice and reform within a political order heavily dependent on sovereign discretion. The resulting ethical tension distinguishes national modernization from social sustainability and shows why literary narratives matter to sustainability research: they do not merely preserve values but also make particular relations among citizenship, power, sacrifice, and progress imaginable.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Kamil Kilani and the Pedagogical Project of Arabic Children's Literature

Kamil Kilani's place in modern Arabic children's literature is closely tied to the educational design of his literary project. His stories did more than provide simplified narratives for young readers. They combined storytelling with linguistic instruction, historical knowledge, ethical guidance, and cross-cultural adaptation. This combination is particularly visible in Kilani's framing practices. In a study of 196 stories associated with his children's library, Abdul Aziz (2011) found that pedagogical framing occurred both outside and within the narrative proper. Introductions, titles, glosses, vocalization, explanatory notes, questions, references to the Qur'an, and textual additions were among the devices through which Kilani directed children toward particular forms of knowledge and interpretation. His adaptations therefore placed literary reading within a broader educational project rather than treating moral instruction as an incidental feature of the story.

This pedagogical orientation was also connected to Kilani's role in the formation of modern Arabic literature for children. Abu Huraira (2024), examining Kilani's project between 1927 and 1959, situates his work within the development of modern Arabic children's literature and the wider process of *ta'rīb*. His study of Kilani's engagement with *One Thousand and One Nights* shows that Kilani sometimes worked through European versions prepared for children rather than returning directly to the Arabic textual tradition. Adaptation, in this context, involved more than linguistic transfer. It participated in the production of a modern Arabic child reader by reorganizing inherited and foreign narrative materials according to contemporary pedagogical expectations (Abu Huraira, 2024).

Studies of Kilani's adaptations further indicate that his educational agenda did not necessarily entail radical linguistic or cultural simplification. Omar (2021), in her examination of Kilani's adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, argues that Kilani significantly modified the formal structure of the source while retaining much of its conceptual and cultural content. His intervention was therefore selective: he reshaped the work for young Arabic readers without reducing adaptation to cultural domestication or lexical simplification (Omar, 2021). Such findings complicate any account of Kilani as merely a moralizing writer. His literary practice involved choices about narrative form, cultural mediation, audience, and the kinds of knowledge deemed appropriate for children.

Research conducted in Indonesia has often approached Kilani's stories through the identification of moral values. Badi et al. (2020), for instance, classify the moral content of *Jelifer Fii Bilaadi Al-'Amaaliqah* into religious values, positive personal traits, and values regulating social relationships. Their categories include responsibility, courage, honesty, independence, diligence, care, tolerance, and cooperation. The study then considers how these values may be incorporated into Arabic prose instruction (Badi et al., 2020). This approach establishes the pedagogical relevance of Kilani's writing, but it primarily treats morality as identifiable content contained within the literary work.

Al-Malik al-Najjār has also received direct scholarly attention. Masrur and Hakim (2024) analyze Peter's interactions through Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism. They identify patterns in which meaning emerges from interpersonal interaction and is subsequently interpreted by the characters. Their findings demonstrate that the story's characterization depends substantially on dialogue and social encounters rather than on descriptive narration alone (Masrur & Hakim, 2024). The study is useful for understanding Peter as a socially constructed character, but it does not investigate how the narrative itself evaluates his actions, how didactic framing affects those evaluations, or how apparently positive civic values interact with unequal relations of authority.

Taken together, scholarship on Kilani has established several important features of his work: explicit pedagogical framing, adaptation as a strategy of cultural and literary mediation, moral instruction, and the importance of interaction in characterization. These findings provide the necessary foundation for the present study. They also leave a critical question unresolved. Identifying the values a story names or embodies does not establish whether all elements of the narrative support the same ethical position. A text may praise responsibility, loyalty, or public service while simultaneously presenting forms of power

that complicate those virtues. Addressing that problem requires attention not only to moral content but to the narrative processes through which judgment is produced.

2.2. Narrative Ethics and Ethical Contradiction in Children's Literature

Narrative ethics provides a framework for examining that distinction. Phelan (2014) defines narrative ethics through the intersection of storytelling and moral value, distinguishing among the ethics of the told, the ethics of the telling, the ethics of writing or producing, and the ethics of reading or reception. The first concerns characters, actions, conflicts, and choices within the represented world. The second concerns the ethical consequences of how those actions and characters are narrated. This distinction is particularly useful when a story's evaluative structure cannot be reduced to the morality of individual characters (Phelan, 2014).

For the present study, the difference between the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling is essential. Peter's actions, Mikhail's decisions, the threat of military punishment, and the exercise of sovereign mercy belong to the ethical world of the story. Yet their significance also depends on narrative arrangement. The placement of praise, the sequence in which information is revealed, the dramatic movement between social equality and royal hierarchy, and the explanatory historical postscript all influence how those actions are evaluated. Narrative ethics therefore allows the analysis to move from asking whether an act is presented as good or bad to asking how the text organizes the reader's judgment of that act.

Veldhuizen (2021) develops this approach specifically in relation to children's literature. Her analysis of Robert Westall's *The Machine Gunners* shows that ethical meaning may be distributed across different narrative strategies and that those strategies need not produce a single, consistent moral position. Characterization, focalization, action, consequences, and evaluative narration can support competing ethical interpretations within the same work. The relevance of this approach lies in its refusal to equate explicit moral instruction with the total ethical structure of a narrative. A children's text may state one value while its plot or narrative evaluation introduces another (Veldhuizen, 2021).

This point has been extended in later work on ethically ambiguous characters. Meibauer and Kümmerling-Meibauer (2024) argue that narrative ethics is particularly useful when literary characters cannot be classified adequately as either moral exemplars or negative examples. Their analysis of truth, deception, responsibility, and moral judgment in young adult literature stresses the importance of contextualized actions and conflicting motives. Rather than treating moral education as the transmission of fixed rules, their study examines the ethical space produced when narratives invite readers to consider why actions occur, what consequences follow, and which competing values are at stake (Meibauer & Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2024).

These studies suggest a more precise way to examine didactic children's literature. Didactic intention does not guarantee ethical coherence. An author may seek to promote a recognizable virtue while constructing a plot in which that virtue becomes associated with questionable means. Likewise, a character may be offered as exemplary in one domain while occupying a morally unstable position in another. In *al-Malik al-Najjār*, this problem becomes especially important because the same figure is associated with

diligence, knowledge, friendship, patriotism, sovereign privilege, political coercion, and violence. Narrative ethics makes it possible to reconstruct the relations among these features without assuming in advance that the text either endorses or condemns Peter as a whole.

The present study therefore uses narrative ethics as its primary analytical framework. It examines didactic framing, characterization, dialogue, action, conflict, narrative evaluation, dramatic staging, and closure as interconnected sites of ethical meaning. The purpose is not to infer actual responses from historical or contemporary children. No reception data are available for such a claim. The analysis instead concerns the ethical positions made available by the textual organization of the narrative and the forms of judgment toward which that organization directs its implied reader.

2.3. Culture, Citizenship, and Social Sustainability

The second conceptual field concerns social sustainability. Early sustainability research often gave greater visibility to environmental and economic questions than to the social dimension, despite the social mandate embedded in the broader concept of sustainable development. Vallance et al. (2011) respond to this imbalance by distinguishing three forms of social sustainability: development sustainability, bridge sustainability, and maintenance sustainability. Of particular relevance here is development sustainability, which includes concerns such as basic needs, social capital, justice, and equity. Their formulation makes clear that development cannot be evaluated only by the material changes it produces. The social arrangements under which those changes occur are also part of the sustainability question (Vallance et al., 2011).

Later research has sharpened the role of justice and power. Nilsson Dahlström's (2025) review of social sustainability in education identifies equality and opportunity, social justice, and citizenship and participation as recurring areas of concern. Peters et al. (2026), in a systematic review of 98 studies, similarly show that contemporary discussions of social sustainability increasingly address justice, equality, power, equity, belonging, diversity, quality of life, and basic needs. Their review also stresses that social sustainability cannot be detached from the particular social problems to which it responds. Definitions become analytically useful when they are tied to recognizable predicaments such as exclusion, unequal power, unmet needs, or the reproduction of domination (Nilsson Dahlström, 2025; Peters et al., 2026).

This emphasis makes culture relevant to sustainability analysis. Soini and Birkeland (2014) show that scholarship has assigned culture several different roles in sustainable development, including culture as a distinct dimension of sustainability and culture as a condition through which social transformation becomes possible. Their analysis cautions against treating culture as a stable or self-explanatory category, but it also demonstrates that meanings, practices, identities, and inherited forms of value are part of the conditions under which societies understand and pursue development (Soini & Birkeland, 2014).

Zheng et al. (2021) provide broader evidence for this connection. Their synthesis of more than 300 publications links cultural values to all 17 Sustainable Development Goals and to 79 percent of their targets. Their argument does not reduce sustainable development to cultural attitudes, nor does it imply that all inherited values should be

preserved. Rather, culture mediates the ways in which development goals are interpreted, negotiated, and implemented. Cultural assumptions can support sustainability objectives, but they can also generate trade-offs or reinforce practices that impede them (Zheng et al., 2021).

For literary analysis, this distinction is useful because narratives participate in the cultural production of ideas about citizenship, responsibility, authority, sacrifice, and progress. A children's story does not constitute a sustainability policy, but it can articulate a model of social membership. It can assign dignity to certain forms of labor, define the relationship between individual and collective interests, portray obedience or dissent as ethically meaningful, and establish whether justice rests on stable principles or personal authority. These questions connect literary ethics to social sustainability without requiring the historical text itself to contain a modern sustainability vocabulary.

Accordingly, this study treats social sustainability as a secondary interpretive framework rather than as an authorial intention attributed to Kilani. Four dimensions are particularly relevant to *al-Malik al-Najjār*: civic responsibility, human dignity and social justice, citizenship and agency, and power and accountability. These dimensions are derived from the broader sustainability literature on justice, equity, participation, citizenship, and power (Nilsson Dahlström, 2025; Peters et al., 2026; Vallance et al., 2011). They provide a basis for examining whether the civic virtues promoted by the narrative remain compatible with the social relations through which national development is achieved.

The intersection of these two bodies of scholarship creates the analytical space for the present study. Research on Kilani has established his pedagogical and moral concerns, while narrative ethics demonstrates that stated values and narrative ethics may diverge. Social sustainability adds a further question by asking what kind of social order those ethical arrangements make imaginable. The issue is therefore not whether *al-Malik al-Najjār* "contains" sustainability values. It is whether its model of productive citizenship, justice, and national progress rests on social relations that can be reconciled with contemporary understandings of socially sustainable development.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative literary textual analysis based on close reading. The analysis treats *al-Malik al-Najjār* as a constructed narrative rather than as a transparent record of historical events or an empirical representation of Peter the Great. The object of inquiry is therefore not the historical accuracy of Kilani's account, but the ethical organization of the text: how characters, actions, dialogue, narrative commentary, dramatic staging, and paratextual framing work together to construct particular ideas of citizenship, authority, and national development.

The primary source is Kamil Kilani's *al-Malik al-Najjār* in the 2013 Hindawi edition. The edition states that the date of the work's original publication is unknown, although Kilani's introduction is dated March 15, 1935. For this reason, the study treats 1935 as the date attached to the surviving introduction rather than as a verified date of first publication. The text consists of an introductory address to the young reader, two dramatic chapters, and a concluding historical section titled *Ilmāmah*. These components

were analyzed as a single textual structure because the introduction and historical postscript directly shape the ethical interpretation of the dramatic narrative.

The selection of *al-Malik al-Najjār* was purposive. The text explicitly frames itself as instructive reading for the young and associates its ethical purpose with lessons, moral exhortation, ambition, and love of the homeland. At the same time, the story places these stated values alongside military coercion, personal sovereign authority, severe punishment, and the retrospective justification of absolute power. The coexistence of these elements makes the text particularly suitable for examining the relationship between didactic intention and narrative ethics.

Narrative ethics serves as the primary analytical framework. Following Phelan (2014), the analysis distinguishes between the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling. The ethics of the told concerns the moral relations within the represented world, including characters' decisions, conflicts, obligations, and consequences. The ethics of the telling concerns the ways in which narration, evaluation, sequencing, characterization, and closure influence the ethical significance assigned to those events (Phelan, 2014). This distinction is useful for a text in which explicit statements of virtue do not necessarily coincide with the ethical implications of the plot.

The procedure also draws on Veldhuizen's (2021) application of narrative ethics to children's literature. Veldhuizen demonstrates that characterization, focalization, action, and evaluative commentary may produce ethical signals that support or contradict one another. Accordingly, this study does not assume that a value explicitly praised by Kilani represents the final ethical position of the narrative. Instead, it examines whether different textual levels reinforce, qualify, or destabilize the didactic values announced in the introduction (Veldhuizen, 2021).

Social sustainability is used as a secondary interpretive framework rather than as an intention attributed to Kilani. The analysis focuses on four dimensions drawn from the literature: civic responsibility, human dignity and social justice, citizenship and agency, and power and accountability (Nilsson Dahlström, 2025; Peters et al., 2026; Vallance et al., 2011). Narrative ethics establishes how the text organizes moral judgment; social sustainability is then used to assess the civic and political relations produced by that organization.

The analysis proceeded sequentially. First, the introduction, dramatic chapters, and *Ilmāmah* were read for explicit ethical statements and recurrent concerns with work, duty, homeland, independence, punishment, reform, and authority. Second, relevant passages were classified by narrative function, including framing, characterization, dialogue, action, dramatic staging, evaluative commentary, and closure. Third, ethical signals were compared across these levels to identify reinforcement or contradiction. Only after this textual reconstruction were the findings interpreted through the four dimensions of social sustainability. The study makes no claims about actual child responses or measurable educational effects; references to readers concern positions constructed by the text.

4. Analysis

4.1. Didactic Framing and the Making of the Civic Subject

The ethical direction of *al-Malik al-Najjār* is established before the dramatic action begins. Kilani addresses the young reader as *al-ṣabiyy al-ʿazīz* and presents the story as a source of *ʿibar* and *mawāʿiẓ*, lessons and moral exhortations associated with aspiration and *ḥubb al-waṭan*, love of the homeland (Kilani, 2013, p. 7). The paratext therefore supplies a preferred ethical horizon: the child is invited to read for conduct worth emulating, and patriotism is named in advance as one criterion of judgment. This use of framing is consistent with Abdul Aziz's (2011) account of Kilani's pedagogical practice, but here the frame has a distinctly civic function. Moral formation is tied to membership in a political community.

The opening scene gives that civic ideal a social form. Peter appears as a carpenter in a Dutch shipyard rather than as an emperor (Kilani, 2013, p. 9). Because the title has already disclosed his identity, manual labor becomes evidence of humility rather than a loss of status. Fellow workers praise his diligence, character, and devotion to work and treat him as an example of the sincere laborer (Kilani, 2013, pp. 9–10). His moral authority is thus earned through conduct before his political authority is revealed.

The dialogue about returning to Russia connects this work ethic to national duty. Peter treats his departure not as preference but as an obligation that should not be neglected (Kilani, 2013, p. 10). Patriotism acquires a practical form: useful knowledge is learned abroad and returned to the homeland. At this stage, explicit didactic framing and characterization reinforce one another. In Veldhuizen's (2021) terms, the major ethical signals are aligned around labor, learning, discipline, and service. The tension emerges only when the story asks how such service is organized by political power.

4.2. Labor, Knowledge, and National Duty as Social Virtues

Peter and Mikhail are both carpenters, but work has different ethical meanings for them. Peter enters manual labor voluntarily to acquire knowledge for national reform. The *Ilmāmah* later describes him working for ordinary wages, living among craftsmen, and studying shipbuilding and related technical skills for Russia's benefit (Kilani, 2013, pp. 23–25). Knowledge is valued because it can be converted into public usefulness, while manual work challenges the assumption that social rank should determine the dignity of an occupation.

Mikhail reaches carpentry from the opposite direction. He recounts being compelled into military service despite finding that life unsuited to him, then experiencing harsh treatment before deserting (Kilani, 2013, pp. 12–13). As a carpenter he experiences *niʿmat al-istiqlāl*, the blessing of independence, and imagines supporting himself, his mother, and his fiancée through his wages (Kilani, 2013, p. 15). Work therefore signifies both contribution and agency: Peter's labor serves national development, while Mikhail's labor restores a degree of self-direction and dignity.

The contrast exposes an ethical asymmetry. Peter can enter and leave the identity of an ordinary worker by choice; Mikhail is assigned a military identity by force, and leaving it makes him liable to punishment. Mikhail nevertheless distinguishes the ruler from the institution that harmed him and expresses a wish to serve Peter as a craftsman rather than a soldier (Kilani, 2013, pp. 13–14). Service to society, service to the homeland, and service to the sovereign begin to converge. The convergence becomes unstable once the law governing Mikhail's desertion moves to the center of the plot.

4.3. The Sovereign Exception: From Unjust Law to Personal Mercy

Mikhail's status as a deserter shifts the narrative from civic virtue to law and authority. He faces execution if discovered, yet Peter, still concealing his identity, calls the rule governing deserters *al-qānūn al-jāʾir*, an unjust law, and questions the justice of punishing someone whose abilities and disposition do not fit military service (Kilani, 2013, p. 13). The story therefore recognizes a structural problem rather than presenting Mikhail merely as an object of sympathy.

The second chapter does not resolve that problem through legal reform. Instead, it restores the hierarchy suspended in the shipyard. Peter appears in fine clothing, his imperial identity is disclosed, Mikhail is ordered to kneel, and Mikhail's mother falls at the ruler's feet (Kilani, 2013, pp. 18, 20). The staging makes sovereignty visible through bodies and space. Peter's movement into ordinary labor had been elective and reversible; Mikhail's subjection to military authority is compulsory and potentially fatal.

The contrast between the two scenes also changes the basis of Peter's authority. In the shipyard, admiration precedes rank and rests on conduct. In Moscow, obedience follows from rank itself. The movement from worker's clothing to royal attire therefore marks more than a disclosure of identity: it converts an apparently horizontal friendship into a relation structured by unequal capacity to command, punish, and pardon. The narrative retains the emotional language of friendship, but the political conditions of that friendship have changed.

When an officer insists that Mikhail must face a military tribunal, Peter simply orders his release because he needs him (Kilani, 2013, p. 20). The officer answers that the sovereign's will is authoritative, sacred, and beyond reversal (Kilani, 2013, p. 20). The immediate outcome is humane, but the mechanism is discretionary. Mikhail is not protected by a principle that could be claimed by other deserters. He survives because the emperor knows him, values his skills, and chooses to intervene.

Peter then appoints Mikhail a baron and places him in charge of a shipbuilding facility in St. Petersburg (Kilani, 2013, pp. 21–22). The plot therefore resolves individual vulnerability without resolving institutional injustice. At the level of the told, Peter is merciful; at the level of the telling, mercy depends on concentrated personal power. The scene produces a sovereign exception in which the ruler can suspend a harmful rule for a favored individual while leaving the rule itself intact.

4.4. Coercive Modernization and Ethical Closure

The *Ilmāmah* enlarges this problem from one legal case to Peter's national project. It praises his intellectual curiosity, technical learning, and efforts to modernize Russia, then records his use of killing, torture, exile, and imprisonment against opponents of reform, including his own son (Kilani, 2013, p. 24). The narratorial evaluation is decisive. Peter's cruelty is acknowledged as a moral defect, but the text immediately adds that Russia benefited from it and that reform required severe coercion and absolute authority (Kilani, 2013, p. 24).

This qualification is important for the ethics of the telling. The narrated acts provide grounds for condemnation, but the narrator redirects attention toward their effectiveness. Moral judgment is therefore organized through a tension between means

and outcomes. The text does not erase violence; it places violence inside a teleology of successful reform. Peter's achievements become part of the argument by which the severity of his methods is made narratively tolerable.

This sequence places ethical judgment under the pressure of historical efficacy. Violence is not denied, yet successful modernization qualifies its condemnation. The patriotic logic also changes. Earlier, Peter's service to the homeland involves voluntary self-sacrifice: he gives up comfort, works, and learns. In the postscript, the same appeal to national benefit authorizes sacrifices imposed on others. The narrative does not sufficiently separate these two forms of sacrifice.

The final paragraph returns to Peter as a model of labor, explaining that his work in the shipyard should encourage people not to despise humble occupations (Kilani, 2013, p. 25). The closure selects the exemplary worker as the story's final pedagogical image without resolving the preceding account of absolute power. The result is ethical ambivalence rather than a stable moral lesson. *Al-Malik al-Najjār* constructs civic virtue persuasively at the level of personal conduct, but its account of political authority makes justice dependent on sovereign discretion and allows national achievement to mitigate objections to coercion.

5. Discussion

5.1. Productive Citizenship without Institutional Justice

The analysis identifies a civic ethic built around work, knowledge, responsibility, and contribution. Peter's labor converts technical learning into public service; Mikhail's carpentry provides livelihood, independence, and a form of participation suited to his abilities. These values fit the social dimension of sustainability insofar as development concerns not only material change but also the quality of relations between individuals and the community (Vallance et al., 2011). The difficulty begins when contribution becomes compulsory. Peter chooses how to serve the homeland, whereas Mikhail is assigned a military function and threatened with death for leaving it.

This asymmetry matters because contemporary accounts of social sustainability treat justice, equality, participation, belonging, and power as constitutive rather than secondary concerns (Peters et al., 2026). Kilani's narrative itself recognizes the injustice of Mikhail's legal position, but it solves the case through sovereign favor. The distinction is between a just outcome and a just institution. Peter can save Mikhail, yet his intervention provides no durable protection for people who lack the ruler's attention.

That distinction also exposes the limits of personal virtue as a political safeguard. Compassion may correct one injustice when authority is concentrated in a benevolent individual, but it cannot guarantee equal treatment across cases. A socially sustainable order requires more than the moral quality of the person at the center of power; it requires procedures and constraints that do not depend on personal access, loyalty, or usefulness. Mikhail's rescue is ethically appealing precisely because the surrounding structure remains precarious.

The episode therefore constructs productive citizenship without a corresponding model of institutional justice. The ideal citizen works, learns, remains loyal, and contributes to national development; the ideal ruler is expected to use concentrated power wisely. This arrangement can produce mercy, but it offers few safeguards when

the same authority becomes coercive. The contrast with SDG 16 is useful as a contemporary interpretive benchmark, not as a historical standard imposed on Kilani. Its emphasis on justice, rule of law, accountable institutions, and reduced violence clarifies why benevolent discretion cannot substitute for institutional accountability (United Nations, n.d.).

5.2. National Development versus Social Sustainability

The historical postscript makes the distinction between modernization and social sustainability explicit. Peter's reforms produce technological, military, and urban change, but the narrative also links those achievements to violence and absolute authority. The text does not celebrate cruelty without reservation; it acknowledges a moral defect and then qualifies that judgment through national benefit. Progress becomes the ground on which coercion is made partially defensible.

The narrative therefore separates neither modernization from political authority nor national benefit from the ruler who claims to embody it. Peter's success gives his decisions retrospective legitimacy, while opponents of reform receive little independent ethical consideration. This creates a narrow space for dissent: resistance can be read less as disagreement over methods than as resistance to progress itself. Social sustainability is useful here because it asks whether participation, justice, and accountability remain possible when development is narrated through such concentrated authority.

Social sustainability asks a different question from whether modernization succeeds. It asks what social relations make development possible and what costs are normalized in the process. Justice and equity are therefore part of development itself rather than consequences that can be postponed until material transformation is complete (Peters et al., 2026; Vallance et al., 2011). From this perspective, Peter's movement from self-sacrifice to the sacrifice of others is decisive. Giving one's own labor or comfort to the homeland is ethically distinct from authorizing violence against others in the name of the same collective good.

The story further narrows that distinction by repeatedly bringing homeland, state, and sovereign into alignment. Mikhail can serve Russia by serving Peter, while resistance to Peter's reforms is narrated largely as resistance to national improvement. This configuration leaves limited space for legitimate disagreement. The point is not to judge a 1930s children's text by contemporary policy language, but to identify the social order its narrative makes intelligible. *Al-Malik al-Najjār* imagines modernization effectively; it remains more ambivalent about the limits that justice, agency, and accountability should place on the power used to achieve it.

5.3. Children's Literature as a Cultural Site of Sustainability

The case also clarifies what literary studies can contribute to sustainability research. Culture shapes the terms through which societies understand responsibility, authority, progress, and collective obligation. Soini and Birkeland (2014) show that culture may function as a dimension of sustainability or as a condition of social transformation, while Zheng et al. (2021) demonstrate that cultural values intersect extensively with the Sustainable Development Goals. Neither argument requires cultural inheritance to be

treated as inherently beneficial. Values can support sustainable relations or reproduce tensions that deserve criticism.

For this reason, a sustainability-oriented reading of children's literature should not search only for affirmative themes that resemble present-day SDG terminology. It should also examine the narrative conditions under which desirable values become persuasive. Labor, patriotism, discipline, and public service may contribute to social cohesion, but their ethical implications change when they are linked to unequal agency or unchecked power. The literary text becomes valuable not because it offers a ready-made sustainability lesson, but because it preserves those tensions in a form that can be analyzed.

Children's literature is especially useful for examining this process because its ethical address is often explicit. Narrative ethics shows why such texts should not be reduced to inventories of desirable values: framing, characterization, plot, and evaluation may transmit competing ethical signals (Veldhuizen, 2021). In Kilani's story, labor, learning, and public responsibility remain attractive values, but their implications change when they are joined to obedience, sovereign privilege, and coercive reform.

A humanities approach to sustainability can therefore ask how narratives imagine the relations on which collective futures depend. Who is expected to contribute, who may choose the form of that contribution, who defines the common good, and what kinds of sacrifice are treated as acceptable? Target 4.7 of the SDGs, with its emphasis on human rights, a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship, and culture's contribution to sustainable development, makes these questions pertinent to sustainability-oriented cultural analysis (United Nations Statistics Division, n.d.). The value of *al-Malik al-Najjār* lies not in containing a fixed set of "sustainability values," but in exposing the difference between cultivating socially useful virtues and constructing social relations that remain just when power is unequally distributed.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that *al-Malik al-Najjār* constructs civic virtue through labor, technical learning, discipline, national duty, and public service, yet complicates that model when political authority enters the narrative. Peter's work among carpenters gives social value to knowledge and manual labor. Mikhail's carpentry adds another dimension by linking work to independence and personal dignity. Together, these trajectories establish a productive model of citizenship in which individual capacities acquire ethical meaning through participation in collective life.

The limit of that model appears in Mikhail's legal vulnerability. Peter recognizes the injustice of the military law that threatens him, but the narrative resolves the problem through personal sovereign intervention rather than a principle applicable to others in the same position. Justice is achieved, but it remains dependent on the ruler's discretion. The *Ilmāmah* extends this problem by acknowledging Peter's violence while partially rationalizing coercion and absolute authority through national benefit and historical necessity (Kilani, 2013, p. 24).

Read through social sustainability, the distinction is between productive citizenship and socially sustainable citizenship. The first values contribution, knowledge, responsibility, and service. The second also requires social relations in which dignity,

agency, justice, and accountability constrain power (Peters et al., 2026; Vallance et al., 2011). *Al-Malik al-Najjār* is most persuasive in imagining the productive citizen and most ambivalent in imagining the political conditions under which that citizen lives.

The study also supports a broader role for literary analysis within sustainability scholarship. Literary texts need not employ contemporary sustainability terminology to organize cultural assumptions about progress, authority, sacrifice, and belonging. Their relevance lies in how those assumptions are narrated and evaluated. This approach avoids treating children's literature as a repository of positive values and instead examines the relations among virtues, institutions, and power.

The argument is limited to one text and does not represent Kilani's entire oeuvre or Arabic children's literature as a whole. It also makes no claim about historical or contemporary reader response. Future research could test whether similar tensions between civic instruction and political authority recur across Kilani's historical adaptations or in a broader corpus of twentieth-century Arabic children's literature. Within these limits, the story demonstrates that civic virtue alone does not secure socially sustainable relations. The organization and accountability of power remain equally decisive.

Acknowledgement

This article is supported by the Institute for Research and Community Service of Universitas Sebelas Maret (UNS) through the Research Group Community Service Grant under contract number 463/UN27.22/PT.01.03/2026.

References

Abdul Aziz, A. A. (2011). Framing translated and adapted children's literature in the Kilani project: A narrative perspective [Abstract of doctoral dissertation]. *New Voices in Translation Studies, 7*(1). https://doi.org/10.14456/nvts.2011.6

Abu Huraira, K. (2024). "Sindbad Who?": Arabization and the transformation of *One Thousand and One Nights* and the modern Arabic children literature (The project of Kamel Kilani 1927–1959). *Al-Markaz: Majallat al-Dirāsāt al-ʿArabiyya, 3*(1), 101–130. https://doi.org/10.1163/27728250-12340038

Badi, N., Ridwan, N. A., Huda, I. S., & Mahliatussikah, H. (2020). An analysis of moral values in Kamil Kilani's "Jelifer Fii Bilaadi Al-'Amaaliqah" and its application in Diraasah Natsriyah. *Al-Arabi: Journal of Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language, 4*(2), 163–181. https://journal2.um.ac.id/index.php/alarabi/article/view/17424

Kilani, K. (2013). *Al-Malik al-Najjār* [The carpenter king]. Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture.

Masrur, M. S., & Hakim, A. R. (2024). **دراسة التفاعل الرمزي لشخصية بطرس في الملك النجار لكامل كيلان باستخدام نظرية هربرت بلمر** [A study of symbolic interaction in the character of Peter in Kamil Kilani's *Al-Malik al-Najjār* using Herbert Blumer's theory]. *Ma'dubah: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Arab, 2*(2), 795–811. https://urj.uin-malang.ac.id/index.php/Madubah/article/view/6565

Meibauer, J., & Kümmerling-Meibauer, B. (2024). Being silent about the truth: Narrative ethics in Mats Wahl's *I ballong över Stilla havet*. *Children's Literature in Education, 55*(1), 75–90. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-022-09480-1

Nilsson Dahlström, Å. (2025). Challenges and opportunities for social sustainability in education: A scoping review. *Cogent Social Sciences, 11*(1), Article 2491706. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2491706

Omar, L. I. (2021). Kamil Kilani's adaptation of Shakespeare in Arabic children's literature: Acculturation versus enculturation. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 11*(12), 1636–1646. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1112.16

Peters, A.-K., Edling, S., & Francia, G. (2026). Conceptions of social sustainability in the context of education: A systematic literature review. *Sustainability Science, 21*, 1935–1951. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-026-01842-8

Phelan, J. (2014). Narrative ethics. In P. Hühn, J. C. Meister, J. Pier, & W. Schmid (Eds.), *Handbook of narratology* (2nd ed., pp. 531–546). De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110316469.531

Soini, K., & Birkeland, I. (2014). Exploring the scientific discourse on cultural sustainability. *Geoforum, 51*, 213–223. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2013.12.001

United Nations. (n.d.). *Goal 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions*. United Nations Sustainable Development. https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/

United Nations Statistics Division. (n.d.). *Goal 4, Target 4.7: Metadata repository*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata?Goal=4&Target=4.7

Vallance, S., Perkins, H. C., & Dixon, J. E. (2011). What is social sustainability? A clarification of concepts. *Geoforum, 42*(3), 342–348. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.01.002

Veldhuizen, V. N. (2021). Narrative ethics in Robert Westall's *The Machine Gunners*. *Children's Literature in Education, 52*, 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-020-09398-6

Zheng, X., Wang, R., Hoekstra, A. Y., Krol, M. S., Zhang, Y., Guo, K., Sanwal, M., Sun, Z., Zhu, J., Zhang, J., Lounsbury, A., Pan, X., Guan, D., Hertwich, E. G., & Wang, C. (2021). Consideration of culture is vital if we are to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. *One Earth, 4*(2), 307–319. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.01.012