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Islamic Story-Based Learning in Islamic Religious Education: Advancing Students' Literary Appreciation and Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to examine the role of narrative pedagogy in repositioning Islamic stories as reflective and aesthetic literary texts within Islamic Religious Education (IRE) and analyze their alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). **Theoretical framework:** The study relies on narrative pedagogy, literary appreciation theories, and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) frameworks to conceptualize religious narratives as tools for aesthetic, ethical, and socio-emotional engagement. **Literature review:** Previous scholarship highlights that traditional religious instruction often relies on cognitive rote learning, whereas narrative approaches transform abstract theological doctrines into contextualized, lived human experiences. **Method:** A qualitative literature-based analysis was employed to examine how narrative structures, aesthetic language, and symbolic meanings foster reflective religious understanding. **Results:** The results indicate that narrative elements—including plot, character development, conflict, and symbolism—enhance students' cognitive, emotional, and imaginative engagement, thereby encouraging critical interpretation, ethical reflection, and dialogical learning. Furthermore, aesthetic dimensions empower students to internalize core values of justice, peace, empathy, and social responsibility, directly supporting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. **Implications:** This research provides strategic pedagogical guidelines for IRE educators and curriculum designers to integrate literary-based narratives, cultivating inclusive, values-driven, and globally conscious student competencies. **Novelty:** The study offers an innovative conceptual synthesis by bridging Islamic narrative pedagogy, literary appreciation, and global sustainability goals, presenting a novel framework for modern religious education.

Keywords: islamic story-based learning, islamic religious education, literary appreciation, sdgs, narrative pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Conventional approaches to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) remain largely dominated by a cognitive–normative paradigm that prioritizes rote memorization and literal textual understanding over reflective, interpretive, and experiential learning. This orientation reduces IRE to a formalistic transmission of religious doctrines, limiting students' opportunities to internalize Islamic values in meaningful and contextual ways. As a result, learning processes tend to be monotonous, teacher-centered, and detached from students' lived realities. Empirical findings indicate that such approaches weaken student

engagement and fail to cultivate critical religious consciousness, as learners are positioned as passive recipients rather than active interpreters of religious meaning [1]. Consequently, IRE risks becoming a rigid normative subject that emphasizes compliance rather than moral reasoning, ethical sensitivity, and spiritual depth.

In the contemporary global landscape, educational paradigms are demanded to align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably SDG 4 (Quality Education: Target 4.7), which underscores the promotion of a culture of peace, non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity, as well as SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). However, the lack of technological integration and outdated pedagogical models in IRE widen the relevance gap between sacred religious content and students' socio-cultural responsibilities in achieving sustainable societies.

These limitations are further exacerbated by insufficient pedagogical competence among educators and the minimal use of diverse and innovative learning media. Many IRE teachers continue to rely on traditional instructional methods while struggling to adapt to the characteristics of digitally native learners. Studies have shown that the lack of technological integration in IRE instruction not only reduces instructional effectiveness but also widens the relevance gap between religious content and students' socio-cultural contexts (Susanti et al., 2024; Zakiyyah, 2024). Moreover, assessment practices in conventional IRE remain narrowly focused on cognitive achievement, neglecting affective, behavioral, and social dimensions of religious learning. This incomplete evaluation framework undermines the holistic goals of Islamic education, which emphasize the unity of knowledge, values, and practice.

The structural weaknesses of conventional IRE became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when educational institutions were compelled to shift toward remote and technology-mediated learning. Systematic reviews reveal that many Islamic education systems experienced pedagogical disorientation due to the absence of adaptive curricula and flexible instructional models [4]. This crisis underscores the urgent need for a paradigmatic transformation of IRE toward more integrative, reflective, and learner-centered approaches. Without reconstructing its epistemological and pedagogical foundations, IRE risks losing its transformative potential in nurturing ethical awareness, critical reflection, and compassionate religiosity among students in increasingly complex and pluralistic societies.

Previous studies on Islamic stories have largely positioned them as functional instruments of moral instruction and *da'wah*, emphasizing didactic messages over textual complexity. This utilitarian framing marginalizes the literary dimensions of Islamic narratives and reduces stories to vehicles for normative transmission. In contrast, this study reconceptualizes Islamic stories as educational literary texts that merit analysis through narrative structure, aesthetic language, and symbolic meaning. Research on narrative texts in Islamic education demonstrates that storytelling fosters deeper emotional engagement and intuitive comprehension than purely informative texts, enabling learners to internalize meaning through plot, character development, and narrative tension [5]. Moreover, Islamic narratives often draw upon folkloric and epic traditions rich in symbolic motifs and cultural topographies, positioning them as complex cultural texts rather than simple moral tales [6]. Viewing Islamic stories through a literary lens thus allows educators to move beyond moral prescription toward interpretive engagement and critical literacy [7].

Equally significant is the aesthetic and symbolic dimension of Islamic stories, which plays a central role in their educational potential. Studies in expressive writing and emotional–cognitive integration indicate that aesthetically rich language enhances students' cognitive processing, emotional resonance, and reflective depth in Islamic learning contexts [8]. Symbolic and poetic elements embedded in Islamic narratives function as carriers of cultural memory, ethical reflection, and identity formation, enabling learners to negotiate meaning rather than merely absorb doctrine [9]. From this perspective, Islamic stories

operate as sites of meaning-making where religious values are mediated through metaphor, symbolism, and narrative imagination, aligning with broader educational goals of holistic development and critical consciousness [10]. By repositioning Islamic stories as literary texts, this study offers a conceptual shift that strengthens their pedagogical relevance in Islamic Religious Education while expanding the epistemological foundations of IRE beyond moralistic and instrumental paradigms [11].

This study advances the field of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) by adopting narrative pedagogy, an approach that has traditionally been situated within language education and the humanities, yet remains underexplored in IRE scholarship. Rooted in the Qur'anic concept of *qasaṣ*, narrative pedagogy emphasizes meaning-making through storytelling that integrates truth, aesthetic beauty, and reflective explanation (*bayān*), thereby aligning pedagogy with the epistemological foundations of Islamic education [12]. Empirical evidence suggests that narrative-based texts facilitate deeper comprehension and emotional engagement than purely informative texts, enabling learners to internalize religious concepts through plot, character, and moral tension rather than through abstract doctrinal exposition [5]. By positioning narratives not merely as illustrative tools but as central pedagogical frameworks, this approach reorients IRE toward learner-centered, interpretive, and reflective modes of religious understanding.

However, the pedagogical use of religious narratives also entails critical tensions that must be carefully negotiated, particularly between student-centered experiential learning and the sacred status of religious texts. Comparative studies in Islamic and Christian religious education reveal that educators often struggle to balance interpretive openness with doctrinal reverence, especially when narratives from holy scriptures are employed as learning materials. These challenges are further complicated in multicultural and minority-Muslim contexts, where narrative pedagogy must be culturally responsive and pedagogically sensitive to learners' socio-religious realities [13]. Recent innovations, including the integration of multimedia and interactive visual storytelling, demonstrate promising potential to mediate these tensions by enhancing engagement while preserving reverence for sacred narratives [14]. Consequently, narrative pedagogy offers a transformative yet ethically grounded framework for IRE, expanding its pedagogical repertoire beyond normative transmission toward reflective, imaginative, and contextually embedded religious learning.

Previous studies on Islamic storytelling in education largely position stories as instrumental tools for moral instruction and religious transmission, with a strong emphasis on technological enhancement and basic literacy outcomes rather than on literary interpretation. Research has demonstrated that multimedia-based and digital storytelling approaches can increase student engagement and improve narrative writing or reading comprehension, particularly in early and basic education contexts [14]; [15]. Meanwhile, studies in religious education and literature at the secondary level emphasize the role of literary reading in fostering empathy, broadening students' worldviews, and strengthening literacy skills, yet these insights are rarely connected to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) [16]. In parallel, narrative pedagogy research across disciplines shows that storytelling enhances meaning-making by situating learners within coherent narrative contexts, but its application in IRE remains limited and under-theorized [17]. Research on literary appreciation further stresses the importance of culturally relevant and linguistically accessible texts, a dimension that is largely absent from conventional IRE curriculum design [18]; [19].

Table 1. Summary of Previous Studies Related to Islamic Storytelling, Narrative Pedagogy, and Literary Appreciation

Research Focus	Key Findings	Limitations / Research Gap
Islamic storytelling in education	Islamic stories effectively transmit moral and religious values; multimedia and digital storytelling enhance student engagement and basic literacy skills	Stories are treated mainly as pedagogical or moral instruments, not as literary texts with narrative and aesthetic depth
Religious education and literature (secondary level)	Literary reading fosters empathy, broadens worldviews, and strengthens literacy skills among students	Insights are rarely integrated into Islamic Religious Education (IRE)
Narrative pedagogy across disciplines	Story-based pedagogy enhances meaning-making by situating learners within narrative contexts	Narrative pedagogy is under-theorized and underutilized in IRE
Literary appreciation in secondary education	Culturally relevant and linguistically accessible texts improve reading comprehension and engagement	Literary appreciation is largely absent from conventional IRE curriculum design

Building on these gaps, the present study offers a novel integrative contribution by repositioning Islamic stories as educational literary texts within secondary Islamic Religious Education. Rather than treating stories merely as moral or technological instruments, this study embeds Islamic storytelling within a narrative pedagogy framework and systematically analyzes narrative structure, aesthetic language, and symbolic meaning as core pedagogical elements. This approach enables Islamic stories to function as sites of literary appreciation and reflective meaning-making, while simultaneously supporting religious understanding. By bridging Islamic storytelling, narrative pedagogy, and literary education, this research expands the epistemological and pedagogical horizons of IRE and contributes a theoretically grounded model for transforming IRE from a predominantly normative subject into a reflective, interpretive, and literature-based learning experience.

The purpose of this study is to reconceptualize the role of Islamic stories in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) by positioning them not merely as instruments of moral instruction, but as educational literary texts that possess narrative, aesthetic, and symbolic value. This research aims to examine how the integration of narrative pedagogy within secondary-level IRE can enhance students' literary appreciation, including their ability to interpret narrative structure, aesthetic language, and symbolic meaning in Islamic stories. Furthermore, the study seeks to explore the pedagogical potential of Islamic storytelling to foster reflective and interpretive religious understanding, moving beyond cognitive-normative learning toward more meaningful engagement with Islamic values. Through this approach, the research intends to offer a theoretically grounded and pedagogically integrative model that bridges Islamic education, narrative pedagogy, and literary studies, contributing to the development of a more holistic and reflective framework for contemporary IRE.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional approaches to Islamic Religious Education (IRE) have predominantly relied on cognitive rote learning and dogmatic instruction. While effective for memorization, this conventional paradigm often limits students' deeper socio-emotional engagement and detaches theological doctrines from real-world contexts. Recent scholarship in educational theory advocates for a paradigm shift toward narrative pedagogy, asserting that storytelling acts as an immersive medium capable of transforming abstract religious principles into contextualized, lived human experiences. Through narrative engagement, learners interact with moral dilemmas, character arcs, plot development, and aesthetic symbolism, which collectively foster literary appreciation, empathy, and critical reflection [18]; [19].

Furthermore, contemporary educational literature increasingly explores the intersection between religious education and global sustainability frameworks. Rather than treating religious studies in isolation, emerging research highlights how values-driven instruction can actively support the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Integrating story-based learning within religious curricula enables students to internalize core ethical values—such as justice, peace, empathy, and social responsibility—that align directly with key global targets, including Quality Education (SDG 4) and Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16).

Narrative pedagogy thus bridges the gap between traditional theological instruction and modern socio-emotional skill development. By treating Islamic stories not merely as historical anecdotes but as reflective, aesthetic literary texts, educators encourage dialogical learning and ethical interpretation. Literature confirms that story-based learning enriches students' imaginative capacity while cultivating a holistic, values-driven religious consciousness. Consequently, existing scholarship strongly supports narrative-based PAI as an innovative, highly effective pedagogical framework that enhances literary appreciation, nurtures ethical maturity, and empowers young learners to contribute meaningfully to sustainable, peaceful, and inclusive societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with a literature-based and conceptual analysis design, aiming to develop a pedagogical framework for integrating Islamic stories as educational literary texts within Islamic Religious Education (IRE). The research focuses on analyzing how narrative pedagogy can be applied to enhance students' literary appreciation and reflective religious understanding at the secondary education level.

Data sources consist of primary scholarly articles indexed in reputable international journals (Scopus/WoS) related to Islamic storytelling in education, narrative pedagogy, religious education and literature, and literary appreciation in secondary education. Secondary sources include curriculum documents, textbooks of Islamic Religious Education, and relevant theoretical works on narratology and literary pedagogy. Data were collected through systematic literature selection, guided by relevance, recency, and theoretical contribution.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis, involving three stages: (1) identification of dominant themes in previous studies, (2) categorization of concepts related to narrative structure, aesthetic language, and symbolic meaning, and and SDG indicators (SDG 4 and SDG 16). (3) synthesis of findings to construct an integrative narrative pedagogy model for IRE. To ensure validity, the study applied theoretical triangulation by comparing perspectives from Islamic education, literary studies, and narrative pedagogy. The outcome of this process is a conceptual pedagogical model that repositions Islamic stories as literary texts and expands the epistemological and pedagogical foundations of contemporary IRE [20].

TheS methodological process of this research is systematically designed to map the transformation of narrative-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) learning. To provide a clear overview of the analytical stages, the research workflow is structured progressively, starting from identifying fundamental problems to formulating an innovative pedagogical model. Each level reflects an analytical step connecting literature review, curriculum document collection, and thematic analysis of Islamic story structures. This structured framework ensures that the integration between literary appreciation values and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets is constructed logically. The comprehensive visualization of this research workflow is presented in the following diagram.



Figure 1. Research Flow Diagram

The flowchart above illustrates the continuity of the research process from initial conception to final synthesis. Beginning with the identification of conventional IRE limitations, the stages move toward reviewing previous studies and developing a theoretical framework. The collected data is then analyzed through a thematic approach to explore aesthetic language and symbolic meanings in Islamic narratives. The results of this analysis are synthesized across disciplines to yield novel research contributions. Overall, this diagram visualizes how the Islamic narrative approach can be repositioned from mere doctrinal memorization into a dynamic, appreciative, and globally relevant learning medium for sustainable development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Repositioning Islamic Stories as Educational Literary Texts in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Learning

The analysis of the narrative structure of Islamic stories highlights a significant shift in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) from normative value transmission toward reflective and meaning-centered learning. Narrative elements such as plot, characters, conflict, and resolution function as pedagogical instruments that encourage students to engage in critical interpretation rather than passive moral reception. A coherent plot enables learners to trace moral causality, while ethical conflicts embedded in Islamic narratives invite reflective inquiry into value-based decision-making. Studies demonstrate that the analytical use of Qur'anic stories and Islamic narratives enhances students' cognitive engagement and reflective thinking, as learning extends beyond literal comprehension to the construction of contextual meaning [21]. Analyzing characters' ethical dilemmas allows students to unpack values such as justice, social harmony, and empathy, creating direct resonance with SDG 16 (Peace and Justice) and SDG 4 (Holistic Quality Education).

Characters within Islamic stories play a crucial role in fostering reflective learning, as they embody symbolic representations of moral struggle, ethical reasoning, and spiritual

growth. Through character analysis, students are encouraged to explore motivations, dilemmas, and internal conflicts, allowing Islamic values to be understood in a more humanistic and contextual manner. Research on narrative-based approaches in Islamic Religious Education, particularly the use of Rumi's Mathnawi, indicates that storytelling centered on character development deepens students' moral internalization by engaging both emotional and intellectual dimensions of learning [22]. This reflective process is further strengthened through dialogical pedagogies, such as discussion and musyawarah, which cultivate critical dialogue and collective meaning-making in Islamic educational contexts [23].

Furthermore, conflict and resolution within Islamic narratives provide a reflective framework that supports the development of ethical reasoning and critical thinking skills. Moral conflicts are not merely narrative devices but serve as pedagogical spaces where students evaluate choices, consequences, and values in relation to contemporary life. The resolution of these conflicts, often reinforcing principles such as justice, patience, and faith, allows learners to reflect on moral learning as a dynamic process rather than a fixed outcome. Empirical studies on reflective storytelling demonstrate that narrative-based learning significantly enhances student engagement and depth of reflection by positioning learners as active interpreters of meaning [24]. Consequently, the analysis of Islamic narrative structures positions IRE as a reflective, dialogical, and contextually responsive learning space.

The aesthetic dimension of language in Islamic stories plays a central role in enriching students' aesthetic experience and literary appreciation within Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Elements such as stylistic expression and diction are not merely ornamental but function as cognitive-affective mediators that shape how learners perceive, feel, and interpret Islamic values. The use of refined language, rhythmic expressions, and evocative narrative styles characteristic of classical Arabic literary traditions creates an immersive aesthetic experience that invites learners into deeper engagement with the text. Research in Arabic poetics emphasizes that aesthetic language fosters a sense of wonder and reflective awareness, enabling learners to experience meaning not only intellectually but also emotionally [25]. Similarly, studies on Qur'anic discourse highlight how precise diction and linguistic universality enhance communicative power, reinforcing the pedagogical importance of careful word choice in transmitting ethical and spiritual values [26].

Metaphor and symbolism further intensify the aesthetic and interpretive depth of Islamic stories by conveying abstract spiritual meanings through concrete and imaginative forms. Metaphorical language allows complex theological and moral concepts to be internalized through imagery that resonates with learners' lived experiences. In Islamic aesthetic traditions, metaphor and symbolic patterns are widely used to represent transcendence, order, and spirituality, as evidenced in studies of Islamic geometry and sacred design [27]. When applied to narrative texts in IRE, such symbolic expressions encourage students to move beyond literal readings toward interpretive engagement, cultivating higher-order thinking and symbolic literacy. This process aligns with cognitive and metaphorical studies in Islamic art and design, which demonstrate that symbolism facilitates deeper reverence and internalization of values through aesthetic perception [28].

Through the integration of aesthetic language, metaphor, and symbolism, Islamic storytelling contributes to a more humanistic and dialogical model of IRE learning. Aesthetic experience enables learners to encounter Islamic teachings as lived and felt realities rather than rigid doctrinal formulations. Studies on aesthetic heritage in Islamic education suggest that engagement with beauty and artistic expression supports moral development, empathy, and reflective self-awareness among Muslim youth [29]. Moreover, aesthetic learning fosters dialogical interaction, as students are encouraged to articulate personal interpretations and negotiate meaning collectively, a process central to competence-oriented and transcultural literary education [30]. Consequently, the aesthetic dimension of Islamic stories strengthens IRE as a space for meaningful value

internalization, where linguistic beauty becomes a bridge between religious knowledge, personal reflection, and ethical formation.

The symbolic meanings embedded in Islamic stories play a crucial role in shaping students' contextual understanding of Islamic values by transforming abstract teachings into lived and interpretable experiences. Religious symbols and metaphors in Islamic literature function as semiotic bridges that connect theological principles with social realities. Literary studies demonstrate that metaphorical expressions in Islamic narratives such as those found in Hamka's *Di Bawah Lindungan Ka'bah* effectively communicate foundational values, including faith (*hablun min Allah*) and social ethics (*hablun min al-nās*), through symbolic representation rather than direct moral instruction [31]. This symbolic mode of storytelling allows students to engage with Islamic teachings in a reflective and interpretive manner, fostering deeper comprehension that extends beyond textual normativity.

From an educational perspective, symbolic narratives facilitate the internalization of Islamic values by encouraging learners to relate religious meanings to their personal and social experiences. Islamic values derived from the Qur'an and Hadith are not only doctrinal principles but also ethical frameworks that guide everyday behavior and decision-making [32]. When these values are embedded symbolically within stories, students are more likely to interpret them contextually and apply them to contemporary challenges. Empirical research on religious symbols in daily life and digital communication further indicates that symbolic engagement contributes to identity formation and reflective awareness, suggesting that symbolic storytelling in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) can strengthen students' moral reasoning and self-understanding [33]; [34].

Moreover, the use of symbolic meaning in Islamic stories supports a broader reconceptualization of Islamic values as socially and culturally relevant rather than exclusively religious or prescriptive. Scholars argue for a shift toward a "religio-secular" understanding of values, recognizing that Islamic ethics intersect with universal human concerns such as justice, compassion, and social responsibility [35]. Islamic literature inspired by the Qur'an exemplifies this integration by addressing human emotions and social dilemmas while simultaneously offering moral guidance and aesthetic engagement. Through such symbolic narratives, IRE learning evolves into a dynamic process of value internalization, enabling students to contextualize Islamic teachings meaningfully and respond ethically to the complexities of contemporary life.

The Implementation of Narrative Pedagogy in Strengthening Literary Appreciation and Reflective Religious Understanding

The pedagogical execution of narrative-based IRE progresses through a structured transformative trajectory. As illustrated in Figure 1, the instructional cycle spans four sequential stages: starting from aesthetic literary immersion, proceeding to semiotic decoding of narrative structures, engaging in dialogic *tadabbur* (*musyawarah*), and culminating in transformative SDG-oriented praxis. (Sisipkan Gambar 1 di sini) Figure 1. The four-stage pedagogical cycle of Islamic narrative learning: from literary immersion to transformative SDG-aligned action.

Story-based learning in Islamic Religious Education (IRE) serves as an effective medium for strengthening students' appreciation of religious literature by engaging them with narrative structures, symbolic meanings, and moral messages embedded in Islamic texts. Through exposure to stories of prophets, companions, and morally exemplary figures, students are encouraged to analyze plot development, character dynamics, and ethical symbolism, which are core elements of literary appreciation. Recent studies indicate that narrative-based Islamic learning enhances students' interpretive literacy by enabling them to move beyond surface-level comprehension toward deeper engagement with textual meanings and values [36]. This approach positions IRE not merely as doctrinal instruction,

but as a space for cultivating literary sensitivity and reflective reading practices rooted in religious narratives.

To conceptualize the pedagogical transition, this study delineates a structured four-stage transformative framework. The model illustrates how traditional religious narratives evolve from passive text reception into active global civic engagement. By integrating aesthetic appreciation, critical decoding, reflective dialogue, and practical action, the paradigm bridges Islamic moral instruction with international sustainability standards, as visualized in Figure 2 below.

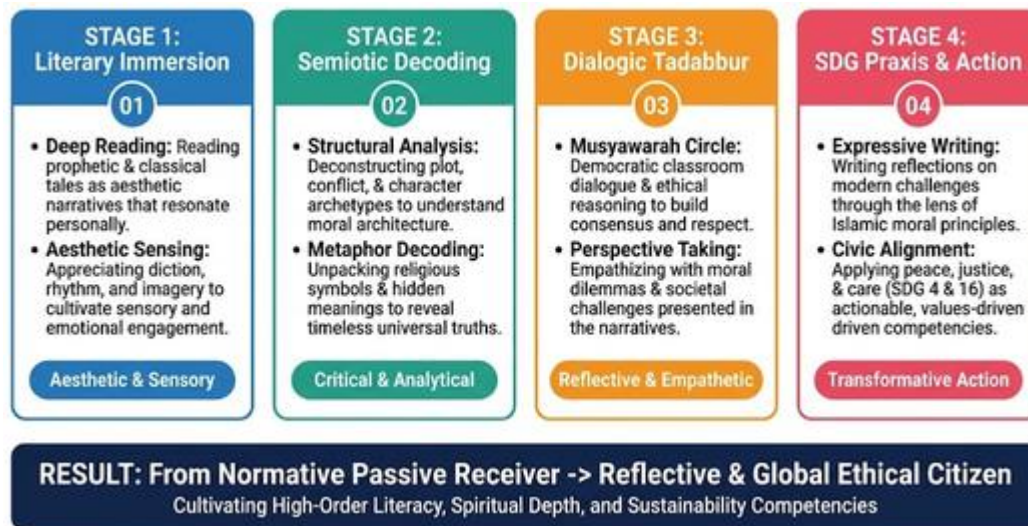


Figure 2. The Four-Stage Transformative Pedagogy Framework for Integrating SDGs in Islamic Education

The conceptual model demonstrates the progressive cognitive and socio-emotional trajectory experienced by learners. Beginning with literary immersion, students systematically advance toward semiotic analysis and empathetic deliberation. Ultimately, this reflective process culminates in transformative action, enabling learners to internalize core ethical values while actively advancing sustainable development goals within their immediate social and academic communities.

Furthermore, Islamic stories function as a powerful vehicle for internalizing moral values through aesthetic and linguistic engagement. Narrative texts in IRE often employ expressive language, metaphors, and emotionally resonant storytelling that stimulate students' affective and cognitive dimensions simultaneously. Empirical research demonstrates that narrative writing and reflective storytelling grounded in religious character values significantly improve students' narrative literacy, ethical awareness, and expressive abilities [15]. Similarly, expressive and reflective writing based on Islamic narratives has been shown to integrate emotional and cognitive processes, allowing students to articulate religious values in a more personal and meaningful manner [8]. These findings confirm that literary engagement in IRE contributes to both character formation and the development of interpretive competence.

From a pedagogical perspective, the integration of story-based learning within innovative instructional models further strengthens students' appreciation of religious literature. The use of interactive media, such as character-based Islamic story e-books, enhances students' motivation and comprehension by combining narrative content with visual and digital literacy [36]. In addition, when narrative learning is integrated with problem-based learning or reflective discussion models, students demonstrate higher levels of critical thinking and contextual understanding of Islamic teachings [37]. Thus, story-based IRE learning not only enriches literary appreciation but also supports the

development of reflective, critical, and value-oriented religious understanding suitable for contemporary educational contexts.

Narrative-based Islamic Religious Education (IRE) plays a crucial role in fostering students' emotional engagement by transforming religious content into lived and felt experiences. Through stories drawn from the Qur'an, prophetic traditions, and morally exemplary figures, learners are not only exposed to religious doctrines but are also invited to emotionally connect with the struggles, choices, and values represented in the narratives. Empirical evidence shows that narrative texts significantly enhance learners' comprehension and engagement compared to purely informative texts, as storytelling enables students to relate personally to the material and internalize Islamic values more meaningfully [5]. This emotional involvement supports deeper reflection, allowing students to perceive religious teachings as relevant to their own moral and spiritual development.

In addition to emotional engagement, narrative pedagogy strengthens students' imaginative capacities by encouraging them to visualize abstract Islamic concepts and ethical dilemmas within concrete story worlds. Story-driven learning has been shown to improve creativity, empathy, and conceptual understanding by engaging learners holistically across cognitive, affective, and imaginative domains [38]. Within Islamic education, imaginative engagement enables students to reconstruct moral scenarios, empathize with characters, and explore alternative perspectives grounded in Islamic values. Such imaginative processes are essential for moving beyond literal interpretation toward a more nuanced and reflective understanding of religious teachings, particularly in addressing contemporary social and ethical challenges.

Pedagogically, emotional and imaginative engagement is further enhanced through reflective, inquiry-based, and multimedia-supported narrative approaches. Group inquiry models that integrate religious character values have been found to increase student participation, narrative competence, and moral awareness (Mulyani et al., 2025). Moreover, the incorporation of interactive visual storytelling and digital media enriches students' sensory and emotional experiences, making Islamic narratives more accessible and engaging [14]. When combined with reflective pedagogies such as Hikmah-based inquiry, narrative learning encourages higher-order thinking, self-reflection, and critical engagement with Islamic principle [39]. These approaches demonstrate that narrative-based IRE effectively cultivates emotional depth, imaginative engagement, and reflective religious understanding within culturally responsive educational contexts [40].

Narrative pedagogy contributes significantly to the development of reflective and interpretative religious understanding by enabling students to engage with religious texts beyond literal comprehension. Through stories, learners are invited to explore multiple perspectives, moral dilemmas, and contextual meanings embedded in religious narratives. For example, pedagogical use of parables and symbolic stories encourages students to recognize the limitations of singular interpretations and to appreciate plural perspectives within religious understanding [41]. Similarly, studies in primary religious education demonstrate that narrative engagement with stories such as the Moses narratives supports students' ability to articulate personal meaning and to reflect on the underlying reasons and values conveyed through religious teachings [42]. These findings indicate that narrative-based learning fosters interpretative openness and reflective awareness from early stages of education.

Narrative pedagogy facilitates reflective learning by connecting religious knowledge with students' lived experiences and contemporary realities. When students are encouraged to discuss, reinterpret, and contextualize religious stories, they develop the capacity to extract ethical insights (hikmah) relevant to modern social issues. Research highlights that reflective narrative practices support students' moral reasoning, self-awareness, and ethical sensitivity by positioning learners as active interpreters of meaning rather than passive recipients of doctrine [41]. In this sense, pedagogical narrative transforms religious education

into a dialogical process, where religious values are continuously examined, negotiated, and applied within changing social and cultural contexts.

From a broader pedagogical perspective, narrative-based approaches also strengthen students' critical and reflective skills by encouraging dialogue, questioning, and meaning-making. Narrative inquiry and reflective discussion enable learners to critically assess social norms, power relations, and moral assumptions embedded within religious stories, fostering a more conscious and responsible religious identity [43]. By engaging students in interpretative dialogue, pedagogical narrative supports the development of a reflective religious consciousness that is both grounded in tradition and responsive to contemporary challenges. Thus, narrative pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education not only deepens interpretative understanding but also equips students with the reflective capacities necessary for ethical engagement in plural and dynamic societies.

Table 2. Summary of Reflective and Interpretative Religious Understanding through Narrative Pedagogy

Aspect	Core Contribution of Narrative Pedagogy
Interpretative Understanding	Encourages students to move beyond literal meanings by interpreting symbols, values, and moral messages embedded in religious narratives.
Reflective Engagement	Facilitates personal reflection (<i>tadabbur</i>) by connecting religious stories with students' lived experiences and ethical considerations.
Dialogical Learning	Promotes discussion and multiple perspectives, enabling students to critically engage with religious meanings in plural and social contexts.
Contextual Relevance	Supports the reinterpretation of religious values to address contemporary social, moral, and cultural challenges.
Critical Religious Awareness	Develops reflective and ethical consciousness, positioning students as active meaning-makers rather than passive recipients of doctrine.

Table 2 highlights the key dimensions through which narrative pedagogy reshapes students' engagement with Islamic Religious Education (IRE). By shifting the instructional focus from rigid, dogmatic reception toward active interpretative understanding, narrative pedagogy enables learners to decode rich symbolic meanings and internalize core ethical values. Through personal reflection (*tadabbur*) and dialogical classroom engagement, students bridge historical religious narratives with their own lived realities and contemporary societal challenges. Ultimately, this framework fosters critical religious awareness, transforming passive learners into reflective, ethically grounded, and socially conscious meaning-makers capable of contributing meaningfully to global sustainability goals.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that repositioning Islamic stories as educational literary texts fundamentally transforms the pedagogical orientation of Islamic Religious Education (IRE). Rather than functioning solely as instruments of normative value transmission, Islamic narratives become reflective learning media that invite students to interpret meaning, evaluate moral choices, and engage critically with religious values. This shift aligns with contemporary critiques of traditional IRE, which often emphasize memorization and doctrinal compliance at the expense of reflective understanding [21]. Integrating narrative pedagogy into IRE addresses the long-standing limitation of rote learning by actively engaging learners in meaning-making and values construction.

By foregrounding narrative structure plot, character, conflict, and resolution IRE learning evolves into a meaning-centered process that positions learners as active constructors of religious understanding.

The role of characters within Islamic stories emerges as particularly significant in fostering reflective and humanistic engagement with Islamic values. Characters are not presented as idealized moral icons but as symbolic representations of ethical struggle, doubt, and spiritual growth. Through character analysis, students explore motivations,

dilemmas, and moral consequences, enabling them to relate Islamic teachings to their own lived experiences. This finding supports previous research demonstrating that character-centered storytelling, such as the pedagogical use of Rumi's Mathnawi, enhances moral internalization by integrating emotional and intellectual dimensions of learning [22]. Dialogical practices, including discussion and musyawarah, further strengthen this process by facilitating collective meaning-making and critical dialogue [23].

Narrative conflict and resolution also function as powerful pedagogical spaces for ethical reflection and critical thinking. Moral conflicts embedded in Islamic stories encourage students to evaluate alternative choices and reflect on their ethical implications within contemporary contexts. The resolution of these conflicts reinforces Islamic principles such as justice, patience, and faith, not as fixed doctrines but as dynamic moral processes. This supports Flaserud's assertion that reflective storytelling enhances depth of understanding by positioning learners as interpreters rather than passive recipients of moral lessons [24]. Consequently, narrative-based IRE promotes ethical reasoning as an ongoing interpretative activity rather than a predetermined moral outcome.

The aesthetic dimension of Islamic storytelling significantly contributes to students' literary appreciation and affective engagement. Linguistic features such as refined diction, rhythmic expression, and evocative narrative styles act as cognitive-affective mediators that deepen students' immersion in the text. Consistent with Harb, the findings suggest that aesthetic language fosters reflective awareness by engaging learners emotionally as well as intellectually [25]. Moreover, the pedagogical use of aesthetic Qur'anic discourse reinforces the communicative power of language in transmitting ethical and spiritual meanings [26], highlighting the centrality of linguistic beauty in effective Islamic education.

Metaphor and symbolism further enhance students' interpretative engagement by translating abstract theological concepts into concrete and imaginative forms. Symbolic expressions allow learners to internalize complex values through imagery that resonates with their social realities. This finding aligns with studies in Islamic aesthetics and sacred design, which emphasize the role of symbolism in facilitating deeper reverence and value internalization [27]; [27]. Within IRE learning, symbolic storytelling encourages higher-order thinking and symbolic literacy, enabling students to move beyond literal interpretations toward contextual and reflective meaning-making.

From an educational perspective, symbolic narratives support the contextualization of Islamic values within students' personal and social lives. By embedding values such as *hablun min Allah* and *hablun min al-nās* symbolically rather than prescriptively, Islamic stories foster reflective moral reasoning and identity formation [31]; [32]. This supports Panjwani's argument for a religio-secular understanding of Islamic values, where religious ethics intersect with universal human concerns such as justice, compassion, and social responsibility [35]. Thus, narrative-based IRE facilitates a more inclusive and socially responsive understanding of Islam.

From the perspective of SDG 4 (Target 4.7), narrative-based IRE provides an inclusive, transcultural, and humanistic learning environment where students cultivate critical literacy and intercultural empathy. Engagement with narrative structures, symbolic meanings, and moral messages encourages students to read Islamic texts critically and reflectively. Empirical evidence confirms that story-based Islamic learning enhances interpretative competence and literary sensitivity by moving learners beyond surface comprehension [36]. Furthermore, expressive and reflective writing activities grounded in Islamic narratives integrate cognitive and affective learning, contributing to both narrative literacy and character formation [15]; [44].

Concurrently, by reflecting on prophetic and classical narratives centered on fairness, reconciliation, and stewardship, learners internalize principles aligned with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). Consequently, narrative pedagogy bridges sacred heritage

with modern sustainability challenges, positioning Islamic education as an active contributor to global ethical citizenship.

Narrative pedagogy significantly contributes to the development of reflective and interpretative religious consciousness. By connecting religious stories with contemporary realities, students are encouraged to extract hikmah relevant to modern ethical challenges. Narrative inquiry and dialogical reflection foster critical awareness, empathy, and ethical responsibility, positioning learners as active meaning-makers within plural social contexts [41]; [43]. In this sense, narrative-based IRE not only deepens students' religious understanding but also equips them with reflective capacities essential for ethical engagement in dynamic and diverse societies.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that repositioning Islamic stories as educational literary texts within Islamic Religious Education (IRE) significantly enhances students' reflective, interpretative, and contextual understanding of Islamic values. Narrative elements such as plot, character, conflict, symbolism, and aesthetic language function not merely as storytelling components but as pedagogical instruments that transform IRE learning from normative transmission into meaning-centered and dialogical engagement. Through narrative pedagogy, students are encouraged to actively interpret moral messages, relate religious teachings to lived experiences, and develop ethical reasoning grounded in Islamic principles. This study concludes that repositioning Islamic stories as educational literary texts within Islamic Religious Education (IRE) enhances students' reflective, interpretative, and aesthetic engagement while advancing the core mandates of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 and SDG 16. Narrative elements such as plot tension, character introspection, metaphor, and aesthetic diction serve as powerful pedagogical catalysts transforming passive doctrinal learning into critical, dialogical, and socially responsible consciousness. By bridging Islamic storytelling with narrative pedagogy and global sustainability goals, this framework equips learners with the ethical discernment, empathy, and reflective literacy required to navigate complex challenges in contemporary pluralistic societies. Furthermore, the integration of aesthetic, symbolic, and narrative dimensions strengthens students' literary appreciation and emotional engagement, enabling Islamic teachings to be internalized as lived and felt realities rather than rigid doctrines. Narrative-based learning fosters critical religious awareness, interpretative openness, and reflective consciousness, positioning learners as active meaning-makers within plural and dynamic social contexts. Consequently, narrative pedagogy offers a viable and transformative model for contemporary IRE, contributing not only to character formation and religious understanding but also to the development of reflective, ethical, and culturally responsive Muslim learners.

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Author Contribution

Septyana Tentiasih conceptualized the study, conducted data collection, and drafted the manuscript. Khozin supervised the research design, refined the theoretical framework, performed critical revisions, and approved the final manuscript for publication submission.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no known financial or non-financial conflicts of interest related to this study. This research was conducted solely for academic purposes, with full independence in data interpretation and analysis.

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