Reconceptualising Spousal Character Formation: Integrating Islamic Ethical Thought and Western Developmental Theory

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary research in family studies increasingly highlights the importance of spousal character as a core determinant of marital satisfaction, relational stability, and long-term family well-being. Despite this growing recognition, scholarly engagement with the theoretical foundations of character formation in marriage remains limited, particularly in Muslim contexts where ethical frameworks are deeply rooted in religious tradition. Existing discussions often treat Islamic and Western perspectives as separate domains, leaving a conceptual gap in understanding how these traditions might complement each other in shaping moral behaviour within marital life. Addressing this gap, the present article examines the concept of spousal character formation through an integrative analysis of Islamic ethical thought and Western developmental theory, grounded exclusively in a qualitative document analysis of classical and contemporary texts. Relevant sources were selected through works in Islamic ethics and foundational literature in developmental psychology, followed by systematic content analysis to identify recurring concepts, thematic patterns, and conceptual divergences. The findings demonstrate that both traditions provide complementary insights into the moral dispositions that shape marital interaction, relational stability, and family well-being. Building on these insights, the proposed Integrated Character Formation Framework synthesises classical Islamic ethical principles with contemporary psychological theory, offering a holistic model for understanding how spouses develop the virtues, competencies, and relational behaviours essential for marital harmony. This interdisciplinary and textually grounded approach contributes to social science discourse by broadening theoretical conceptions of character formation and offering a culturally relevant foundation for future empirical and theoretical research on marital and family dynamics.

Keywords: Character, Islamic ethics, marital relationship, virtue, family well-being

INTRODUCTION

Character constitutes the foundational element that determines the quality, resilience, and sustainability of marital relationships. Within the institution of marriage, character functions as an internal compass that shapes patterns of interaction, decision-making, conflict management, and emotional regulation between spouses. Strong moral character among husbands and wives enhances marital harmony, supports cooperative problem-solving, and ultimately contributes to the long-term stability and psychological well-being of the family unit (Zaim & Salleh, 2020). This paper examines the conceptualisation of character development from Islamic and Western perspectives. The discussion compares the two traditions to examine similarities, divergences, and the epistemological underpinnings that inform their respective views. Such comparison allows a more comprehensive appreciation of how character is understood, formed, and operationalised in marital contexts, especially in multicultural and rapidly changing social environments. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for contemporary social science research, as character development intersects with broader social phenomena such as family dynamics, identity formation, moral development, and community well-being.

In contemporary social science discourse, character development within marriage is increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of family cohesion, marital satisfaction, and intergenerational socialisation. Scholars in the

fields of family studies, developmental psychology, education and religious ethics emphasise that character influences not only individual behaviour but also relational patterns such as empathy, conflict regulation, mutual respect, and long-term commitment (Hally & Haifa, 2025). However, theoretical engagement between Islamic ethical thought and Western developmental theory remains limited, despite both traditions offering sophisticated frameworks for understanding the moral and psychological dimensions of human conduct. By situating this discussion within an interdisciplinary lens, the present analysis seeks to enlighten how diverse epistemological traditions conceptualise character, and how these insights may be applied to strengthen marital relationships and family well-being in pluralistic societies.

Epistemology of Character According to Islamic and Western Scholars

Character, as a theoretical construct, has long attracted scholarly interest from Muslim and Western intellectual traditions. Muslim scholars in fields such as theology (ʿaqīdah), jurisprudence (fiqh), ethics (akhlāq), and philosophy have examined character as a core dimension of human perfection and spiritual elevation. In these traditions, character is conceptualised not only as social behaviour but also as an expression of inner moral states shaped by faith, discipline, and divine guidance (Abdul Rahim, 2019). According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology (2015) character is defined as the totality of an individual's attributes and personality traits, particularly their characteristic moral, social, and religious attitudes. Character is often used synonymously with personality. The Collins GEM Dictionary (2021) further interprets character as the mixture of traits or qualities that define an individual, object, or place. These attributes influence how a person responds to emerging situations, interacts with others, and manages internal emotional processes. Etymologically, the term derives from the Greek kharakter, which originally referred to an engraved mark, symbolically representing something that imprints itself clearly and enduringly (Etymonline, n.d.). The term evolved to encompass inner dispositions that shape personality and behaviour (Abdul Rahim, 2019).

From a psychological standpoint, character is understood as a constellation of habitual behavioural patterns, emotional tendencies, and personality traits that form stable aspects of an individual's identity. Character also represents society's evaluative judgment of whether certain behaviours are morally acceptable or unacceptable (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Thus, character development is not merely an internal phenomenon but is also shaped by cultural norms, social expectations, and environmental influences.

In Islamic epistemology, the foundation of character is revelation, with the Qur'an and Sunnah functioning as authoritative sources that outline moral principles and ethical behaviour. Reason (ʿaql) and human experience complement revelation in shaping character formation, while scholarly interpretation (ijtihād) refines practical ethical frameworks (al-Ghazali, 2017; Nugrahaeti & Firdaus, 2025). Consequently, character encompasses values, habits, and spiritual dispositions that are manifested both outwardly through behaviour and inwardly through moral conscience and spiritual awareness. This duality namely external conduct and internal spiritual orientation distinguish Islamic conceptions of character from secular, behaviourist, or purely psychological models, thereby offering a comprehensive model applicable to marital relationships and family life.

The Concept Of Character Development

The concept of character development refers to a holistic and continuous process of cultivating moral, emotional, intellectual, and social qualities that shape an individual's behaviour and identity. Rooted in both philosophical and psychological traditions, character development emphasizes the deliberate formation of virtues such as integrity, responsibility, compassion, and self-discipline, which guide individuals in navigating life's challenges and moral choices. This process is influenced by multiple factors, including spiritual beliefs, family upbringing, education, and socio-cultural environments, all of which interact to mould a person's ethical dispositions and decision-making patterns. In contemporary scholarship, character development is increasingly viewed as a dynamic interplay between internal dispositions and external contexts, underscoring its significance in fostering personal well-being, healthy relationships, and socially responsible citizenship. Accordingly, a comparative exploration between the Islamic perspective and the Western perspective on character development offers valuable insights for enriching both theoretical understanding and practical applications.

The Concept of Character Development According to Islamic Ethical Thoughts

In Islamic scholarly discourse, character (akhlāq) is closely interrelated with moral and spiritual development. The term akhlāq (plural of khuluq) denotes disposition, behaviour, temperament and ethical conduct. In Islamic terminology, akhlāq is firmly rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, forming the ethical foundation for human conduct. Islam divides akhlāq into two major categories: virtuous traits (akhlāq mahmūdah) and blameworthy traits (akhlāq madhmūmah). Good character governs behaviour toward Allah SWT and fellow human beings (Yuliharti, 2018). This dual responsibility underscores Islamic ethics as inherently relational, linking spirituality to social conduct. The Qur'an explicitly commands justice, kindness, and the avoidance of immoral acts in Surah al-Nahl verse 90:"Indeed, Allah commands justice, excellence, and giving to relatives; and He forbids immorality, wrongdoing and oppression."

The character of Prophet Muhammad PBUH serves as the ultimate model of ethical conduct, as reflected in the hadith: "I was sent to perfect noble character."(Riwayat Ahmad: 45). The Qur'an similarly affirms the Prophet's sublime character in Surah al-Qalam verse 4:"And indeed, you are truly of a great moral character."

Classical Islamic scholars developed extensive frameworks for understanding and cultivating character. Building upon this foundational framework, Ibn Miskawayh elaborated a systematic approach to the cultivation of virtue that underscores his status as one of the earliest ethical theoreticians in the Islamic intellectual tradition (Nugrahaeti & Firdaus, 2025). He asserted that the harmonious balance of the three faculties of intellect, anger, and desire can only be achieved through disciplined moral training, continuous self-monitoring, and the intentional habituation of virtuous actions. For Ibn Miskawayh (1909) character is inherently malleable, and ethical transformation requires purposeful effort to strengthen the rational faculty so that it may regulate the lower impulses and guide the soul toward moderation. He also acknowledged the significant role of external influences such as education, companionship, and social environment in shaping moral dispositions, emphasising that individuals are deeply affected by the character of those with whom they associate. This multidimensional perspective demonstrates his commitment to integrating philosophical reasoning with practical ethical guidance, resulting in a model that views character as both an inner psychological state and an acquired moral habit. Through this synthesis, Ibn Miskawayh provides a rich conceptual foundation for understanding moral psychology within Islamic thought, one that remains relevant for contemporary discussions on character formation and ethical self-development.

Al-Mawardi broadened the scope of character formation to include social and political dimensions, asserting that personal morality directly affects societal welfare and political stability (Abdullah et al., 2023). His work Adab al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn remains influential in discussions about ethics in governance and public life. Al-Ghazali, in Iḥyā' ʿUlūm al-Dīn (2017), integrated legal, theological, and spiritual sciences, placing tazkiyyah al-nafs (purification of the soul) at the heart of character formation. For al-Ghazali, character is shaped through spiritual discipline, self-reflection, emotional regulation, and consistent ethical practice guided by divine revelation. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah later reinforced the idea that character reflects the state of one's faith, asserting that noble character arises from a sound heart and strong belief, while immoral traits indicate spiritual deficiency (Barid & Jayadi, 2020).

Collectively, Islamic scholars conceptualise character development as a holistic, lifelong process that integrates spiritual purification, moral reasoning, disciplined behaviour, and emotional balance. Character is not merely a social expectation but a religious obligation tied to human purpose and relationship with Allah and society.

The Concept of Character Development According to Western Scholars

In Western scholarship, character development has been shaped by contributions from moral philosophy, psychology, developmental theory, and contemporary behavioural sciences. These approaches focus on understanding how individuals acquire moral reasoning, personal virtues, and behavioural patterns. Aristotle remains a foundational figure, proposing the notion of arete (virtue) and the "golden mean" or the balanced midpoint between excess and deficiency (Broadie, 1991). For Aristotle, character is formed through habituation; consistent practice and deliberate training cultivate virtues such as courage, temperance, and justice (Aristotle,

2009). His perspective supports the idea that ethical behaviour can be taught and strengthened over time through intentional education, a principle that continues to inform modern virtue ethics (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018).

In the field of developmental psychology, Lawrence Kohlberg proposed a six-stage model of moral development grouped into three levels: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional (Kohlberg, 1981; Crain, 2011). His theory highlights the maturation of moral reasoning from simple obedience to universal ethical principles. This framework is highly influential in understanding how socialisation, education, and cognitive growth shape moral character. Jean Piaget, whose work preceded Kohlberg, argued that moral reasoning develops in tandem with cognitive maturation (Piaget, 1981). According to Piaget, children move from heteronomous morality (obedience to authority) to autonomous morality (internalised ethical principles), suggesting that character is intertwined with intellectual development.

Contemporary psychologists have expanded the discussion to include positive psychology, emphasising strengths, virtues, and resilience as essential components of character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). This shift underscores the role of emotional well-being, positive behaviour, and social environment in shaping personality and moral conduct. Western approaches, therefore, frame character development as a function of cognitive growth, environmental influences, educational processes, and behavioural conditioning, offering insights that are widely applied in social science research on family dynamics and interpersonal relationships.

Comparison Between Islamic and Western Perspectives on Character Development

A comparative examination of Islamic and Western perspectives reveals complementary yet distinct approaches to understanding and cultivating character. Both traditions aim to develop individuals who demonstrate moral integrity, social responsibility, and ethical conduct, but they differ significantly in their philosophical foundations, goals, and methodologies.

In Islam, character development is a spiritually anchored process that emphasises tazkiyyah al-nafs (purification of the soul), adherence to divine guidance, and the integration of morality with worship. Character formation is seen as a means to attain ihsān; excellence in one's relationship with Allah and society. The framework is holistic, integrating spiritual, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions.

Western perspectives, meanwhile, emphasise psychological growth, cognitive development, and the impact of socialisation and environment. These approaches focus on cultivating moral reasoning, autonomy, and socially responsible behaviour.

Table 1: Comparison of Character Development Elements According to Islamic and Western Scholars

Aspect	Islamic Perspective	Western Perspective
Foundation	Akhlāq grounded in the Qur'an and Sunnah.	Behaviour and morality based on social norms and philosophical reasoning.
Source	Divine revelation, Shariah, prophetic example.	Rational inquiry, empirical research, psychological theories.
Approach	Holistic, integrating spiritual, emotional, and behavioural aspects.	Individualistic: centred on moral cognition, personal development, and social norms.
Objective	Attain well-being in this world and the hereafter; strengthen relationship with Allah and humanity.	Achieve social harmony, personal growth, and moral autonomy.
Methods	Spiritual discipline, tazkiyyah al-nafs, religious education, consistent ethical practice.	Habit formation, behavioural reinforcement, education, and cognitive development.
Aspect	Islamic Perspective	Western Perspective

Islamic perspectives offer a comprehensive model that integrates spiritual and moral dimensions, while Western frameworks contribute psychological and developmental insights. Together, these perspectives enrich contemporary social science discussions on family relationships, moral formation, and character education, highlighting the relevance of both spiritual and psychological constructs in nurturing healthy spousal relationships.

Integrative Conceptual Synthesis: Towards a Reconceptualization of Spousal Character Formation

The comparative analysis between Islamic ethical thought and Western developmental theory reveals a series of intersections that allow for a reconceptualization of spousal character formation. While Islamic scholarship places primacy on spiritual purification, moral intentionality, and the cultivation of virtuous behaviour through divine guidance, Western theories emphasise cognitive maturation, behavioural conditioning, and the influence of social and environmental structures. Integrating both traditions offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how character develops within marital contexts.

From an Islamic perspective, character is fundamentally anchored in tazkiyyah al-nafs, which nurtures internal virtues such as sincerity, compassion, patience, and justice. These traits serve as the ethical bedrock for harmonious marital interaction. Meanwhile, Western developmental theory contributes empirical insights into how cognitive processes, emotional regulation, moral reasoning, and social learning shape relational behaviour. Together, these perspectives highlight that spousal character formation is neither wholly innate nor purely situational; rather, it emerges from the interplay between spiritual consciousness, personal agency, cognitive development, and socio-cultural influences.

This synthesis advances the argument that marital character development is best understood through a multi-layered approach that integrates spiritual, moral, psychological, and social dimensions. In this sense, the reconceptualization proposed here moves beyond dichotomous frameworks and instead promotes an interdisciplinary understanding aligned with contemporary social science discourse.

Integrated Character Formation Framework for Spouses

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes the Integrated Character Formation Framework for Spouses. The framework conceptualises character development as a dynamic, multi-dimensional process shaped by spiritual, cognitive, behavioural, and socio-cultural influences. It highlights that spousal character formation does not occur in isolation but emerges through the interaction of four key domains:

a. Spiritual-Moral Foundations: This domain represents the ethical and spiritual grounding derived from tazkiyyah al-nafs, Qur'anic guidance, prophetic teachings, and classical Islamic scholarship. These sources cultivate inward virtues such as patience (ṣabr), benevolence (iḥsān), humility, justice, and God-consciousness (taqwā). Such virtues form the moral core through which spouses approach marital responsibilities and interpersonal interactions.

b. Cognitive-Moral Development: This domain incorporates insights from Aristotle's virtue habituation, Piaget's cognitive developmental stages, and Kohlberg's moral reasoning framework. These theories emphasise how individuals acquire the ability to reason ethically, understand consequences, negotiate perspectives, and make morally informed decisions within marital contexts.

c. Behavioural and Emotional Regulation: This domain focuses on habits, emotional intelligence, behavioural reinforcement, and self-regulation strategies that shape observable actions in marriage. Behaviours such as communication style, empathy, conflict management, and cooperation are influenced by emotional processes and learned patterns reinforced over time.

d. Socio-Cultural and Environmental Influences: This domain recognises that character is shaped within a broader relational context, including family background, cultural norms, educational exposure, religious socialisation, and community expectations. These factors provide the structural environment within which character is nurtured, challenged, and reinforced.

Collectively, these four domains interact to shape the moral, psychological, and relational character of husbands and wives. The framework thus offers a comprehensive theoretical lens for understanding how character is formed and sustained within marital life, and it provides a foundation for empirical research in family studies, psychology, and Islamic ethics.
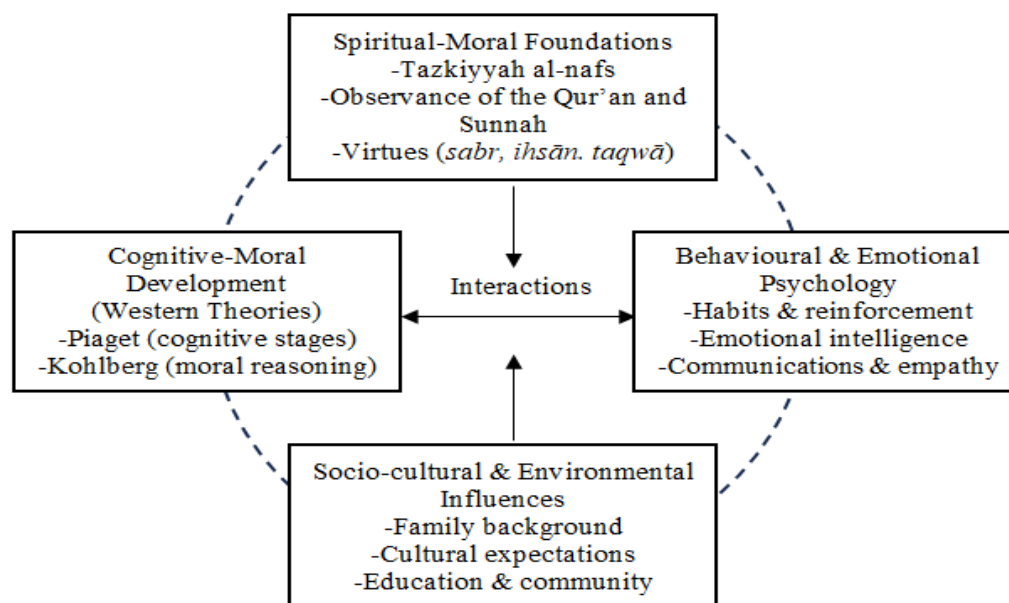

Figure 1: Integrated Character Formation Framework for Spouses

CONCLUSION

The Islamic ethical thought and Western developmental theory presented in this paper demonstrate that character formation in marital life is a multi-dimensional process shaped by spiritual orientation, cognitive maturation, behavioural regulation, and socio-cultural context. By integrating these traditions, this study offers a reconceptualised framework that recognises both divine guidance and empirically grounded psychological processes as essential to the development of virtuous marital conduct. This synthesis not only bridges a longstanding conceptual divide between religious ethics and social science theory but also provides a more holistic understanding of the moral dispositions that influence communication patterns, conflict resolution, emotional intimacy, and collaborative decision-making within marriage.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary framework proposed here contributes to contemporary social science discourse by expanding theoretical understandings of moral development and demonstrating the value of culturally embedded ethical constructs in shaping family well-being. The emphasis on both spiritual and psychological dimensions underscores the relevance of this model for diverse cultural and religious settings, particularly in societies where marriage remains a central institution for social continuity and moral transmission. Beyond its theoretical contributions, the framework also opens new avenues for empirical research on marital dynamics, including studies on character-based interventions, premarital education, and family-strengthening programmes informed by both Islamic and psychological principles. In this way, the study lays a foundation for future scholarship that seeks to integrate ethical, developmental, and relational perspectives in understanding the complexities of marital character formation.

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