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Research Article

"Narrative Link" and Its Role in the Structure of Contemporary Persian Poetry

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the "narrative link" as a recurrent structural device in contemporary Persian poetry, particularly in poems shaped by the formal innovations associated with Nima Yushij. By "narrative link," the article means a recurrent line or refrain-like unit that returns at strategically important points and connects otherwise distinct descriptive, emotional, or narrative segments. The study argues that this device can contribute to structural coherence, semantic continuity, tonal unity, emotional concentration, pauses in the movement of the poem, accumulation of meaning, and semantic compression. Through close readings of poems by Nima Yushij, Sohrab Sepehri, and Fereydoun Moshiri, the article analyzes several functions of the narrative link: organizing the poem's structure, strengthening emotional coherence, concentrating or abstracting meaning, and enabling a refrain to acquire a slogan-like social or ethical force. The argument does not suggest that every modern Persian poem depends on such a device, nor that repetition alone guarantees coherence. Rather, the narrative link is proposed as one important technique through which recurrent language can create relations among otherwise dispersed poetic units. The article concludes that, when integrated effectively with imagery and descriptive systems, the narrative link can help turn formal discontinuity into a coherent poetic experience.

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Introduction

Contemporary Persian poetry differs from classical poetry not only in meter and lineation but also in its approach to poetic form, internal organization, and the relation among the parts of a poem. Nima Yushij repeatedly criticized the rigidity of inherited forms and emphasized the need for a structure capable of developing with the poem's content and emotional movement (Yushij, 2006a: 56). Mehdi Akhavan Saless, one of the most important interpreters of Nima's poetics, likewise stresses the internal continuity and proportionality of Nimaic poetry. In Bad'at-ha va badaye'-e Nima Yushij, he contrasts the relative independence of individual couplets in many classical ghazals with the greater interdependence he finds in modern poetic structures (Akhavan Saless, 1997: 202). Although Akhavan does not use the term "narrative link," his discussion of continuity, proportion, and the relation between message, language, and image provides an important background for the concept developed here.

Nima himself returns repeatedly to the problem of structure in theoretical works such as Darbareh-ye she'r va sha'eri [On poetry and poetics] and Arzesh-e ehsasat va panj maqaleh [The value of emotions and five other essays]. He treats dramatic movement, organic form, and the internal relation among poetic units as central to modern poetry (Yushij, 2006a: 66). He also argues that new content requires new artistic organization rather than the mechanical repetition of inherited formal patterns (Yushij, 2006a: 55–56). This conception resonates with Romantic theories of organic form, including those associated with Coleridge, in which form is understood as developing from within the work rather than being imposed upon it from outside (Jones, 2014: 53).

The central question of the present article is therefore: how is structural coherence created in contemporary Persian poetry when traditional formal constraints are loosened, and what techniques help produce continuity among the poem's different descriptive and emotional units? The article proposes that one such technique is the "narrative link": a prominent, recurrent line or verbal unit that appears at strategically important points and functions as a structural support. Through repetition, it can create semantic continuity along the vertical axis of the poem and help readers recognize relations among otherwise dispersed images or descriptive sequences. The argument is not that removing such a link always destroys the entire poem, but that in the examples examined here its removal noticeably weakens the poem's organization, thematic focus, emotional continuity, or rhetorical force.

Research Background

Nima's theoretical writings provide the immediate conceptual background for this study, particularly his emphasis on the structural coherence of modern poetry. Later scholarship has approached the formal organization of Nimaic poetry from several perspectives. Nikoubakht and Beiranvandi (2004), for example, examine the semantic and structural identity of Nima Yushij's poetry and emphasize the role of variable line length and internal organization in the formation of an autonomous poetic structure. Amankhani and Madadi (2016) compare mechanical and organic coherence in pre-Nimaic and modern poetry from a sociological perspective and argue that Nimaic poetry is more appropriately understood in terms of organic coherence. Sabbaghi and Heydari (2013) likewise discuss differences between earlier

and modern conceptions of poetic form in relation to Nima's theoretical innovations.

The present article develops this discussion by isolating a specific recurrent device that has not, to the best of the author's knowledge, been systematically theorized under the term "narrative link." The aim is not to replace broader accounts of poetic structure, but to identify one concrete mechanism through which modern Persian poems can achieve coherence despite formal discontinuity. In this sense, the article moves from a general theory of organic structure toward the close analysis of a recurring textual feature.

Method and Corpus

The study uses a descriptive-analytical method based on close reading. Its corpus consists of representative poems by Nima Yushij, Sohrab Sepehri, and Fereydoun Moshiri in which a recurrent line performs a demonstrable structural or semantic function. The analysis focuses on the relation between the repeated line and the surrounding descriptive systems, shifts of image, emotional movement, and the poem's overall semantic organization. "Narrative link" is used here as an analytical term for a recurrent line or compact verbal unit whose repetition binds separate parts of a poem into a recognizable whole. It is therefore distinguished from repetition in general: not every repeated phrase is a narrative link. For the term to be useful, the recurrent unit must participate in organizing the poem's larger movement by connecting segments, concentrating meaning, sustaining tone, or marking a recurring center of emphasis. The term "tale link" may also be used, but "narrative link" is retained here because it better captures the structural function of the device beyond strictly story-like poems.

The choice of examples also reflects the article's principal concern with poems in which repetition is not decorative but architectonic. The emphasis is therefore on functional recurrence. In practical terms, the analysis asks four questions of each example: What material appears between two occurrences of the repeated line? What changes when the line returns? Which semantic or emotional features are carried across the intervening material? And what would be weakened if the recurrence disappeared? These questions make it possible to distinguish a narrative link from simple verbal repetition. A repeated phrase may be memorable without structuring a poem, whereas a narrative link participates in the arrangement of the poem's parts. The approach is consequently formal without being narrowly formalist: it attends to textual relations, but it also considers the affective, ethical, and social meanings that those relations make possible. This is particularly important in modern Persian poetry, where formal innovation often accompanies a new conception of poetic voice and public address.

Discussion and Analysis

Narrative Link

A narrative link is a recurrent and semantically charged line whose deliberate repetition functions as a structural technique. In the poems examined here, it links separate poetic fragments and helps create continuity between images, descriptions, and emotional states. Rather than treating it as an invention that can be mechanically attributed to every poem by Nima or his followers, this article regards the device as a recurrent possibility made especially visible within Nimaic poetics. Its effect depends on the relation it establishes among the parts of a poem.

The word "narrative" in the proposed term should also be understood in a broad structural sense. The poems examined below are not necessarily narratives in the strict narratological meaning of a sequence of events with characters and plot. The link may operate in a lyric poem whose movement is descriptive, meditative, or rhetorical. It is called "narrative" because it assists the poem's progression: it creates a relation between before and after, between one descriptive field and another, and between successive stages of the reader's encounter with the poem. In that sense, the link has a temporal function even when the poem does not tell a conventional story. Its recurrence produces memory inside the poem. Every return is both repetition and difference, because the same line is encountered after new images have altered the semantic field in which it is read.

This point is essential to the article's hypothesis. A recurrent line is not valuable merely because it repeats a message. Its structural force lies in the fact that it gathers what precedes it and prepares what follows it. The first occurrence may establish a proposition; the second may confirm or modify it; later occurrences may intensify, generalize, or even complicate it. The narrative link therefore participates in the poem's vertical organization. It can make separate descriptive sequences feel cumulative rather than accidental and can turn apparent fragmentation into a deliberate pattern.

The concept can be situated within a broader structural understanding of textual organization. Chatman's account of narrative emphasizes that meaning emerges from relations among units rather than from isolated verbal fragments (Chatman, 1975: 295–318). Gestalt-oriented approaches similarly foreground the tendency to perceive organized wholes rather than unrelated stimuli (Latner, 2000: 13–56; Nevis, 2000: 3–12). Applied cautiously to poetry, these perspectives help explain why a repeated line can do more than simply recur: it can reorganize the reader's perception of adjacent images by placing them within a shared semantic and emotional frame.

Nima's poetics repeatedly insists on the interaction of intellectual, emotional, and formal properties. A recurrent line can therefore become a point at which these properties converge. It may summarize what precedes it, anticipate what follows, interrupt the flow so that the reader reassesses the poem, or carry an emotional value from one section to another. The following analyses identify four major functions of this device: structural organization, emotional coherence, semantic abstraction and compression, and a slogan-like or declarative function in socially oriented poetry.

Narrative Link and Structural Organization

The first function of the narrative link is organizational. Instead of assuming that the human mind simply submits to "law" or that poetic understanding can be made scientifically predictable, it is more accurate to say that repeated patterns help readers perceive relations among dispersed units. In modern poetry, where line length, syntax, imagery, and descriptive sequence may vary considerably, recurrence can provide one form of orientation. A narrative link can mark boundaries between sections while simultaneously connecting them. It therefore creates both pause and continuity: the poem momentarily stops, but the repeated line recalls what has come before and establishes a recognizable point from which the next movement begins.

This function is especially visible in Sohrab Sepehri's "Ab ra gel nakonim" ("Let's Not Muddy the Water"). The poem moves through a sequence of images involving water, village life, nature, human conduct, and an imagined upstream community. The recurrent line "Let's not muddy the water" gives these images a shared ethical and structural center. The refrain does not eliminate the independence of individual images, but it repeatedly returns the reader to the governing proposition of the poem.

Let's not muddy the water
Downstream, perhaps a dove is drinking water
Or in a distant grove, a cistern is filling
Or in a village, a jar is filling
Let's not muddy the water
Perhaps this flowing water
Will go beneath a poplar tree, to wash away someone's sorrow
Perhaps a dervish's hand will dip dry bread into the water
A beautiful woman may come to the river's edge
Let's not muddy the water
Her beautiful face is doubled in the water
How delightful this water is!
How clear this river is!
How pure the people upstream are!
May their springs be bubbling, their cows full of milk!
I have not seen their village
Surely the footprints there bear something of God
Let's not muddy the water
Moonlight there illuminates the breadth of words
Surely in the upstream village the walls are low
Its people know what a flower is, what a poppy is
Surely it is blue there
A bud blooms, and the people of the village know
What a village it must be!
May its garden lanes be filled with music!
The people by the river understand that water should not be muddied
Let's not muddy the water. (Sepehri, 2005: 345–346)

Sepehri's poem is often read in relation to his ecological sensitivity, spiritual view of nature, and resistance to an instrumental treatment of the natural world. The poem treats natural elements not as inert objects but as participants in a shared field of life and meaning. Within this context, "Let's not muddy the water" works simultaneously as an ethical injunction and as a structural device. Its recurrence divides the poem into recognizable movements while preserving their connection to a single semantic center.

The structural importance of the refrain becomes clearer when we consider the poem's sequence more carefully. Each return of "Let's not muddy the water" follows a slightly altered imaginative field. At first, the line appears as a simple prohibition. Later, after the speaker imagines a dove, a village, a dervish, and a woman at the river, the same injunction becomes ethically enlarged: muddying the water would mean interfering with lives and relations that remain unseen downstream. The refrain thus accumulates implications. Its lexical form remains stable, but its semantic reach expands as the poem proceeds.

This cumulative effect is one reason the term "narrative link" is useful. The poem does not advance through plot in the conventional sense; it advances through the widening consequences of a repeated sentence. The refrain creates a sequence of ethical

realizations. It also mediates between observation and imagination. The speaker begins from water as a physical element but gradually moves toward an imagined community whose purity is projected through nature. The recurrent line allows this transition without requiring an explicit argumentative bridge at every stage. It is simultaneously concrete enough to remain tied to water and general enough to support the poem's movement toward a broader vision of human conduct.

The refrain also regulates rhythm. Even in translation, its recurrence is experienced as a return to a known verbal shape after a series of new images. That return produces expectation: once the pattern is established, the reader anticipates another recurrence. The poem therefore generates structural memory. The reader does not merely process each image separately but measures new images against the repeated line. In this way the narrative link can be said to coordinate both retrospective and prospective reading: it recalls earlier sections while preparing the next. This dual function is central to the poem's coherence.

The repeated line also creates pauses. Each return invites the reader to reconsider the preceding cluster of images before moving into the next. These pauses do not make the poem divisible into arbitrary units, nor do they allow the reader to begin anywhere without loss. Rather, they create recurrent points of orientation within a formally open structure. The poem's coherence therefore depends not on a rigid sequence comparable to a fixed classical form, but on a dynamic interplay between variation and recurrence.

A structuralist reading can clarify this point. Barthes's work on narrative repeatedly emphasizes that textual meaning depends on relations among units and codes rather than on isolated elements (Barthes, 1977). In Sepehri's poem, the refrain helps maintain such relations across changing images. If one descriptive passage were removed, the poem would still retain its central ethical proposition, although its imagery and semantic density would be diminished. By contrast, removing the recurrent line from all its positions would weaken the organizing principle through which the separate descriptive units are repeatedly brought into relation. The narrative link thus does not function as a substitute for the poem's imagery; it is the recurrent structural support that allows those images to accumulate around a common center.

Narrative Link and Emotional Coherence

A second function of the narrative link concerns emotional coherence. Nima often constructs poems from discontinuous or rapidly changing images drawn from external nature. The success of such poems depends not on making every image logically identical to the next, but on sustaining an affective relation among them. A repeated line can carry the same emotion through changing descriptive environments and thereby prevent formal discontinuity from becoming emotional fragmentation.

This function can be observed in Nima Yushij's well-known poem commonly translated here through the recurrent line "My eyes are on the road for you." The poem presents two descriptive systems framed by the same expectation. The first evokes darkness, shadow, and sorrow; the second moves toward valleys, plants, and the persistence of remembrance. The images are not identical, but the repeated line gives them a shared emotional horizon.

My eyes are on the road for you

At night,
when the shadows in the talisman's horn turn black,
and your weary heart is touched by sorrow.
My eyes are on the road for you
At night, when the valleys sleep like dead snakes,
when the lotus hand is tied to the foot of the cypress tree,
whether you remember or not, I will not forget you.
My eyes are on the road for you. (Yushij, 2005: 563)

Without the recurrent line, the descriptive systems would still retain imagistic value, but their emotional relation would be less explicit. Night provides one shared temporal frame, yet the repeated statement of waiting is more decisive because it converts the external landscape into an affective landscape. The darkness, the valley, the lotus, and the cypress are read through the emotion of expectation. In this sense, the narrative link does not merely join two blocks of description; it carries an emotional proposition across them.

The emotional function of the repeated line is particularly significant because the surrounding images do not themselves form a straightforward logical argument. The poem moves through darkness, landscape, vegetal imagery, and remembrance. What unifies these elements is not propositional reasoning but a sustained disposition of waiting. The recurring line names that disposition and gives the reader a stable affective point from which the changing images can be interpreted. The landscape thereby becomes more than setting: it becomes a medium through which expectation is experienced.

This is also why the repetition cannot be reduced to emphasis alone. If its only function were emphatic, one occurrence near the beginning and another at the end might be sufficient. Instead, its repeated placement distributes the emotion throughout the poem. Each return renews the affective center before the poem moves into another descriptive cluster. The link therefore prevents the imagery from becoming merely episodic. It creates continuity without erasing difference.

The distinction between surface discontinuity and deep emotional continuity is useful here. Modern poetry frequently depends on juxtaposition, ellipsis, and shifts of image that would appear fragmented if judged by the standards of linear exposition. A recurrent emotional statement can provide a different principle of organization. Nima's poem demonstrates that a poem may be structurally coherent even when its descriptive sequences are not connected by explicit causal relations. What matters is that the poem establishes a perceptible pattern by which the reader can relate them. The narrative link is one such pattern.

Gestalt psychology is useful here only as an analogy rather than as a complete explanation of poetic reception. Its emphasis on organized wholes helps illuminate how repeated features can guide the perception of otherwise separate elements (Schultz & Schultz, 2005: 402). In Nima's poem, the recurrent line helps the reader perceive the different descriptive systems as parts of one affective configuration. The result is a form of emotional coherence that survives surface-level variation. The poem can change image, syntax, and descriptive focus without losing the dominant feeling of waiting because the narrative link periodically restores that feeling to the foreground.

Narrative Link, Semantic Abstraction, and Compression

A third function of the narrative link is semantic compression. A long or dispersed movement of images may be gathered into a short recurrent statement that gives the reader a provisional summary of the poem's dominant meaning. This form of abstraction does not replace narration or description. Instead, it alternates with them: descriptive passages expand experience, while the recurrent line condenses that experience into a compact verbal center.

Nima's narrative poems often delay meaning through description and the gradual unfolding of events. In the poem examined above, however, the narrative link "My eyes are on the road for you" makes the principal affective orientation available from the beginning and reactivates it later. Repetition thus produces both interruption and concentration. The poem temporarily leaves the refrain in order to develop images, then returns to it so that the accumulated images can be re-read through the same emotional proposition.

This process is closely related to what Michael Riffaterre calls a "descriptive system": a network of associated words and images organized around a semantic nucleus. In the poem, the recurrent line can function as such a nucleus at the level of the whole structure, while the surrounding images operate as descriptive satellites whose force is clarified by their relation to that center. The following experiment—removing the narrative link—makes this function more visible.

If the narrative link is removed, the poem can be represented as follows:

At night,
when the shadows in the talisman's horn turn black,
and your weary heart is touched by sorrow.
At night, when the valleys sleep like dead snakes,
when the lotus hand is tied to the foot of the cypress tree,
whether you remember or not, I will not forget you.
(Yushij, 2005: 563)

The remaining descriptive passages retain poetic imagery, but their relation becomes noticeably weaker. They evoke night, shadow, sorrow, valleys, vegetation, and memory, yet the reader no longer receives the same explicit emotional principle that organizes them. It would be excessive to call the passages meaningless; they remain meaningful as images. What is lost is the poem's most immediately recognizable semantic and emotional center. The experiment therefore clarifies the structural role of the recurrent line without reducing the poem to that line alone.

This distinction is important. A narrative link is not the whole meaning of a poem, and understanding it does not by itself amount to understanding every poem by Nima. Rather, in a poem where such a link is structurally active, it offers an especially efficient point of access to the relation among otherwise dispersed descriptive units. Its repetition produces semantic emphasis while preserving the complexity of the images that surround it.

Narrative Link and the Slogan-like Function

A fourth function appears when a narrative link acquires a slogan-like or declarative force. In socially oriented contemporary poetry, a recurrent line can become sufficiently self-contained to be remembered independently while still organizing the poem from within. Sepehri's "Let's not muddy the water," for example, can be heard as an ethical statement

about relation to nature and other human beings. Its force comes partly from repetition: each return transforms a local line into a general injunction.

The slogan-like function also requires qualification. In literary discourse, "slogan" can suggest simplification, propaganda, or the reduction of poetic complexity. That is not necessarily the meaning intended here. The point is that a recurrent line may become aphoristic and publicly memorable because repetition separates it from its immediate local context and gives it a degree of autonomy. In successful poems, however, this autonomy remains connected to the imagery and emotional development of the text.

Sepehri and Moshiri illustrate two different possibilities. Sepehri's refrain is ethical but indirect. Its public implication emerges through an apparently simple act involving water, and its force expands through images of unseen others who may depend on the same stream. Moshiri's refrain is more explicitly declarative. It names a historical and moral condition and is reinforced by images of a sick child, a caged bird, violence, and the destruction of nature. In both cases, repetition makes the line memorable, but the surrounding material determines what kind of memory is produced.

The narrative link can therefore mediate between lyric inwardness and public address. A modern poet may begin with an individual perception or emotion and, through recurrence, transform it into a statement with collective resonance. Conversely, a socially charged statement may avoid becoming merely rhetorical when each repetition is re-grounded in concrete imagery. The structural device thus offers one way of balancing message and poetic texture, a concern that is especially important in discussions of socially committed modern Persian poetry.

A comparable process occurs in Fereydoun Moshiri's poem "Ashki dar gozar-gah-e tarikh," where the recurrent declaration "This is the age of the death of humanity" gathers a sequence of images of suffering, violence, and moral indifference into a single emphatic center. The refrain's rhetoric is more explicitly social and political than Sepehri's, and its repetition gives the poem a public, addressive quality. The line works as both a structural hinge and a condensed ethical judgment. In such cases, the narrative link approaches the form of a slogan without necessarily ceasing to function poetically; its literary value depends on the extent to which the surrounding images continually renew and complicate the repeated statement.

This is the age of the death of humanity
I speak of the withering of a flower branch,
of the silent gaze of a sick child,
of the cry of a canary in a cage...
This is the age of the death of humanity
It is not merely the withering of a leaf;
they are turning the forest into a desert...
This is the age of the death of humanity
They hide their bloody hands before the people;
no animal does to another animal
what these cowards do to human life.
It is not merely the withering of a leaf;
it is the death of humanity...
Among people who endure these calamities,
to speak of the death of affection
is to speak of the death of humanity. (Moshiri, 2006: 125)

The recurrent line in Moshiri's poem supports the poem's semantic structure while also intensifying its public voice. Each

repetition gathers the preceding examples of suffering into a broader judgment about humanity. The device therefore links poetic organization with social commitment: the refrain becomes memorable not merely because it is repeated, but because each recurrence receives additional weight from the images that precede it. This reciprocal relation is crucial. A slogan repeated without imagistic development would risk becoming rhetorically flat; here, by contrast, the descriptive material supplies the refrain with accumulating emotional and ethical force.

Conclusion

The "narrative link" can be understood as a recurring structural device within significant examples of contemporary Persian poetry. It is not a universal law of modern poetry, nor should every refrain automatically be placed in this category. Its analytical value lies in identifying cases where a repeated line actively organizes the vertical movement of a poem and creates relations among separate descriptive, semantic, or emotional units.

The analyses above show four principal functions. First, the narrative link can provide structural orientation by marking pauses and reconnecting separate sections to a recognizable center. Second, it can sustain emotional coherence across changes in imagery and descriptive setting. Third, it can compress dispersed meanings into a recurrent verbal nucleus while allowing the surrounding images to expand and qualify that nucleus. Finally, it can acquire a slogan-like force in socially committed poetry, turning repetition into a vehicle of ethical or political emphasis.

These functions are related rather than mutually exclusive. In Sepehri, the recurrent line is at once structural, semantic, and ethical. In Nima, it binds descriptive systems through the affective continuity of expectation. In Moshiri, the repeated statement organizes the poem while intensifying its public and moral address. The narrative link therefore helps explain how a modern Persian poem can preserve coherence without depending on the pre-established architecture of classical forms. Its recurrence does not eliminate plurality or discontinuity; instead, it provides a flexible means of holding those features together.

The concept may also contribute to future comparative work on refrains, leitmotifs, recurrent clauses, and other forms of textual return in modern Persian poetry. Such research could test the limits of the term across a larger corpus and distinguish more precisely between narrative links, ordinary repetition, refrain, and thematic recurrence. The present study should therefore be regarded as a proposal for a useful descriptive category: one that draws attention to the structural work performed by recurrence in poems whose coherence emerges from within their own unfolding form.

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