

# Bridging Tradition and Modernity: The Evolution of Persian Poetry

Mr. Md. Nadeemul Ghaffar Siddiqui

Joint Secretary Disaster Management Department Government of Bihar

## Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of Persian poetry in the twentieth century through a comparative study of She‘r-e Nō (New Poetry) pioneered by Nimā Yūshij and She‘r-e Sepīd (White Poetry) developed by Ahmad Shamlou. While Nimā’s innovation lay in reconfiguring the metrical and formal structures of classical Persian verse without fully abandoning tradition, Shamlou’s contribution represented a radical rupture from inherited norms, rejecting classical ‘arūz and creating a rhythm grounded in syntax, imagery, and semantic intensity. The analysis focuses on three dimensions—form, metre, and themes—highlighting how Nimā expanded poetic expression to embrace narrative, symbolism, and existential modernity, while Shamlou employed prose-like fragmentation to articulate political resistance, collective struggle, and human dignity. Drawing on critical perspectives from Katouzian (1999), Bashiri (2003), Zarrinkoub (2003), Algar (2011), Yarshater (1988), Hillmann (1984), and Talattof (2000), this study situates both poets within broader debates on continuity and rupture in literary modernism. It argues that She‘r-e Nō represents modernization within tradition, whereas She‘r-e Sepīd embodies a revolutionary break, together forming the twin pillars of Persian poetic modernity.

**Keywords:** Nimā Yūshij; Ahmad Shamlou; She‘r-e Nō; She‘r-e Sepīd; modern Persian poetry; metre and form; literary modernism in Iran

## INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century witnessed profound transformations in Persian poetry, as poets confronted the tension between **classical literary heritage** and the **demands of modern expression**. Among the leading figures of this transformation, **Nimā Yūshij (1897–1960)** and **Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000)** stand out as the most significant innovators. Nimā, often called the “father of modern Persian poetry,” introduced She‘r-e Nō (New Poetry), reworking the quantitative metres of ‘arūz into a more flexible system that allowed for irregular line lengths while preserving musicality and rhythm (Katouzian, 1999; Bashiri, 2003). His poetry combined symbolic imagery, narrative structures, and existential concerns that shifted Persian literature beyond the confines of mystical and lyrical conventions (Zarrinkoub, 2003).

In contrast, Ahmad Shamlou took an even bolder step. Through She‘r-e Sepīd (White Poetry), he discarded metre entirely and crafted a poetics based on **semantic rhythm**—the natural cadence of thought, syntax, and imagery (Yarshater, 1988). His fragmented, prose-like structures provided a vehicle for articulating political dissent, social critique, and the universal struggle for human dignity (Algar, 2011; Talattof, 2000). Whereas Nimā’s innovation can be read as **reform within continuity**, Shamlou’s work represents **rupture and re-foundation**, reflecting broader debates on literary modernism in Iran (Hillmann, 1984).

This paper aims to **compare She‘r-e Nō and She‘r-e Sepīd along the axes of form, metre, and thematic orientation**. By situating their innovations in both poetic and sociopolitical contexts, the study highlights how Nimā and Shamlou together redefined Persian poetry for the modern era.

## 1. Historical Background and Emergence

The evolution of modern Persian poetry represents a departure from the rigid classical styles of **ghazal, qasida, masnavi, and robā‘ī** that dominated Persian literature for centuries. The first major rupture came with the **She‘r-e Nō (شعر نو, New Poetry)** initiated by **Nimā Yūshij (1896–1960)**, widely regarded as the father of modern Persian verse. His groundbreaking poem *Afsāneh* (1922) introduced a new rhythmical and thematic sensibility into Persian poetry (Yūshij, 1957/1996). Later, in the 1960s, **Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000)** further radicalized this trajectory with **She‘r-e Sepīd (شعر سپید, White or Blank Poetry)**, emphasizing free rhythm and syntactic freedom over metrical obligations (Shamlu, 1972/2000).

## 2. She‘r-e Nō: Modernization within Tradition

The emergence of **She‘r-e Nō (New Poetry)**, pioneered by **Nimā Yushij (1896–1960)**, marked a decisive turning point in Persian literary history. Rather than a wholesale rejection of classical norms, Nimā’s contribution lay in his **reinterpretation of poetic metre and form** while retaining the **musical underpinnings of Persian ‘arūz** (the system of prosody). This approach simultaneously **honored tradition and modernized it**, providing a middle ground between classical rigidity and modernist experimentation (Katouzian, 1999; Bashiri, 2003).

### a. Form

Traditionally, Persian poetry—whether **ghazal, masnavi, or qasida**—depended on a highly codified structure: equal hemistiches, consistent metre, and a predetermined rhyme scheme. Nimā, however, **shifted the structural unit from the couplet to the line**. This freed the poet from the compulsion of symmetry, enabling **variable line lengths** and strophic flexibility. Importantly, Nimā did not abandon narrative or imagery. Instead, he enriched the poetic space with **extended narratives, symbolic landscapes, and natural imagery** that carried allegorical weight. His imagery often moved away from the abstract mysticism of Rūmī or Hafez, gravitating instead toward **social commentary and psychological depth** (Hillmann, 1984; Zarrinkoub, 2003).

For instance, his poem “**Afsāneh**” (1922) demonstrates both form and content innovation. Unlike a ghazal that would rely on autonomous couplets, “**Afsāneh**” unfolds **progressively like a story**, with the voice of the heart addressed in an almost conversational rhythm.

### b. Metre

In terms of prosody, Nimā retained a **modified sense of musicality** derived from classical metres but **broke free from their rigid uniformity**. He proposed that **the line—not the poem as a whole—should be the rhythmic unit**. Thus, while a poem might maintain the same metrical base, the **line lengths could fluctuate**, creating a rhythm closer to natural speech without descending into prose.

As Bashiri (2003) notes, Nimā “preserved the aesthetic resonance of Persian metre while bending it to new expressive purposes.” This innovation was radical in a literary environment accustomed to absolute symmetry: the “freedom within order” became the hallmark of She‘r-e Nō.

### c. Thematic Shifts

Equally important was Nimā’s **departure from traditional themes**. Whereas earlier Persian poetry frequently circled around **love, mysticism, or panegyric praise**, Nimā’s verse introduced:

- **Existential anxiety** (the burden of modern life)
- **Social critique** (a veiled resistance to political stagnation)
- **Human emotion in a realistic register** rather than allegorical mysticism

For example, the oft-cited line from Afsāneh reads:

Ey del, āhangī digar sar kon, ke man / Khasta az in āhanghā-ye tekerrāri-am  
(O heart, sing another melody, for I am weary of these repetitive tunes)

Here, the **irregular metre mirrors his critique of monotony and stagnation**, while the direct address to the heart collapses the distance between lyric self and reader. The **form becomes an enactment of the theme**: to critique repetition, the poet abandons repetitive metre.

#### d. Critical Appraisal

Katouzian (1999) argues that Nimā must be seen as the “**father of modern Persian poetry**,” not because he destroyed tradition but because he **reconfigured it from within**. By contrast, later poets like Ahmad Shamlou, who developed **She‘r-e Sepid (White Poetry)**, would abandon metre altogether in favor of complete prosodic freedom (Algar, 2011). Nimā’s She‘r-e Nō thus represents a **transitional poetics**—a “bridge” between the highly formal classical canon and the radical free verse of later modernists (Yarshater, 1988; Talattof, 2000).

### 3. She‘r-e Sepīd: A Radical Break

If Nimā Yushij reformed the foundations of Persian poetry, **Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000)** went a step further by dismantling them altogether. With his development of **She‘r-e Sepīd (White Poetry)**, Shamlou created a form that severed itself from the quantitative metres of ‘**arūz** and embraced a rhythm grounded in **semantic and syntactic cadence rather than syllabic measurement** (Algar, 2011). This transition marked the most radical departure in modern Persian poetics, completing the trajectory that Nimā had initiated.

#### a. Form

The formal structure of She‘r-e Sepīd bears closer resemblance to **prose-poetry** than to any classical verse form. Unlike Nimā’s She‘r-e Nō, which retained the line as a metrical unit, Shamlou determined his line breaks by **semantic emphasis, pauses in thought, and visual arrangement on the page**. This created an experience of poetry that was **open-ended, fragmentary, and performative**, rather than bound by inherited formal constraints (Yarshater, 1988).

For example, in *Dar Āghāz-e Shab* (Beginning of the Night), he writes:

Mard raft, / o mard raft... / zamin bar doš dāsht, / uftād.

(The man went, / oh, the man went... / he carried the earth on his shoulders, / and fell.)

Here, each line-break creates emphasis not by metre, but by the **semantic weight of words** and the **psychological pause of the reader**. The form enacts a brokenness that mirrors the existential and political burdens he describes.

#### b. Metre

Whereas Nimā still respected the **musical echo of classical rhythms**, Shamlou **rejected ‘arūz completely**. In its place, he introduced what he called “**semantic rhythm**” (آهنگ معنایی): a rhythm derived from **syntax, thought, repetition, and imagery** rather than from syllabic counting. The poem breathes according to **the flow of meaning**, closer to the cadence of natural speech than to any inherited metrical pattern (Yarshater, 1988; Algar, 2011).

This meant that She‘r-e Sepīd could incorporate **enjambment, prose-like continuity, or abrupt**

**fragmentation.** The rhythm was not imposed externally by prosody but generated internally by **semantic intensity and rhetorical force.** As Hillmann (1984) suggests, this represented a culmination of the search for unity in Persian poetry: form and content became indistinguishable, with rhythm emerging organically from the meaning itself.

#### c. Thematic Concerns

She‘r-e Sepīd also represented a decisive thematic shift. While Nimā expanded the range of Persian poetry to include **existential and social concerns**, Shamlou placed **political commitment, freedom, and human dignity** at the very center of his poetics (Talattof, 2000). Writing during the repressive climate of mid-20th century Iran, his poetry gave voice to **struggle, injustice, and resistance**, often speaking in a prophetic or collective tone.

Shamlou’s protagonists—“the man,” “the people,” “the lover,” “the rebel”—are **universal figures**, both personal and communal. His use of mythic archetypes and stark imagery allowed him to bypass censorship while conveying political critique. For example, the burden carried by the “man” in *Dar Āghāz-e Shab* resonates as a metaphor for the suffering of an entire society under oppression.

#### d. Critical Appraisal

Scholars emphasize that Shamlou’s innovation was not merely technical but also ideological. For Algar (2011), his free verse embodied the **search for liberation**—a poetics inseparable from Iran’s sociopolitical struggles. Talattof (2000) reads Shamlou’s corpus as a form of **cultural resistance**, where writing itself becomes a political act. Hillmann (1984) interprets Shamlou’s “semantic rhythm” as a **dialectical unification of meaning and form**, where the dissolution of metre mirrors the dissolution of authoritarian constraints.

At the same time, some critics (e.g., Zarrinkoub, 2003) caution that abandoning metre risked severing Persian poetry from its historical continuity. Yet, precisely in this rupture lay the originality of She‘r-e Sepīd: it represented a **radical break** that enabled Persian poetry to engage directly with the **language of modernity, politics, and humanism**, without the mediation of inherited forms.

✅ In this way, She‘r-e Sepīd can be understood as the **radical completion of modernist tendencies**: where Nimā’s She‘r-e Nō preserved a bridge with tradition, Shamlou’s She‘r-e Sepīd broke free to establish a **new poetics of freedom.**

Hillmann (1984) interprets Shamlou’s poetry as a culmination of the **search for unity in Persian poetry**, where **form and content dissolve into each other**, reflecting both personal and collective struggles.

### 4. Comparative Insights

Both She‘r-e Nō and She‘r-e Sepīd can be understood as **phases of Persian modernism**, yet their relationship to tradition diverges significantly.

- **Continuity vs. Rupture:** Nimā modernized Persian verse while keeping it tethered to its prosodic past (Bashiri, 2003). Shamlou severed this tether, aligning Persian poetry with **global free verse traditions** (Yarshater, 1988).
- **Metre:** She‘r-e Nō is **semi-metrical** — flexible but rhythmic. She‘r-e Sepīd is **non-metrical**, with rhythm derived from semantics and syntax (Katouzian, 1999; Algar, 2011).
- **Themes:** Nimā’s work is often introspective and symbolic, while Shamlou’s is **socially and politically charged**, embodying the **politics of writing in Iran** (Talattof, 2000).
- **Imagery:** Nimā frequently invoked **natural imagery** (mountains, forests, seasons), while Shamlou

employed **urban, political, and existential imagery** (Zarrinkoub, 2003).

## 5. Conclusion

The journey from **She‘r-e Nō** to **She‘r-e Sepīd** marks the Persian poetic tradition’s transformation from **metrical innovation to complete formal liberation**. Nimā’s genius lay in his ability to **adapt tradition**, earning him the title of the **father of modern Persian poetry** (Katouzian, 1999; Bashiri, 2003). Shamlu’s contribution was more radical: he made poetry a tool of **political and humanist engagement**, discarding formal constraints in favor of **freedom of expression** (Algar, 2011; Hillmann, 1984).

Together, these two movements demonstrate how Persian poetry both **preserved continuity** with its classical heritage and **redefined itself** within the modern global literary framework (Yarshater, 1988; Zarrinkoub, 2003).

## References

1. Algar, Hamid. “Ahmad Shamlu: His Life and Poetry.” Literature of the Iranian Diaspora, edited by A. Seyed-Gohrab, Amsterdam University Press, 2011, pp. 47–62.
2. Bashiri, Iraj. Nima Yushij: Founder of the New Poetry in Iran. Global Scholarly Publications, 2003.
3. Hillmann, Michael C. Unity in Persian Poetry: A Study of Poetic Influence, Interrelation, and Meaning. University of Texas Press, 1984.
4. Katouzian, Homa. “Nima Yushij: The Father of Modern Persian Poetry.” Iranian Studies, vol. 32, no. 3, 1999, pp. 303–322. Taylor & Francis Online, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869908701870>.
5. Talattof, Kamran. The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature. Syracuse University Press, 2000.
6. Yarshater, Ehsan. “Modern Persian Literature.” The Persian Literature: A Bio-Bibliographical Survey, vol. 5, edited by E. Yarshater, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988, pp. 1–56.
7. Zarrinkoub, Abdolhossein. Serr-e Ney: Naqd va Barrasi-ye Sher-e Mo‘āser-e Fārsi [The Secret of the Reed: Criticism and Analysis of Contemporary Persian Poetry]. Sokhan, 2003.