

Storytelling Models in Classical Persian Literature

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ABSTRACT

Iran is considered one of the ancient and civilized countries of the world, with a culture and civilization that has persisted for thousands of years without collapse. Written storytelling is one of the defining features of ancient civilizations, with its origins in Iran dating back approximately three thousand years. This article examines storytelling models in classical Persian literature. The common narrative methods in classical Persian literature can be categorized into five models: the repetitive model, the pearl beads on a plate model, the string of pearls (pearl necklace) model, the cluster of grapes model, and the grand narratives containing smaller stories model. It should be noted that the diversity of these methods is closely linked to the customs, traditions, and tastes of ancient Iranian society. Traces of these storytelling techniques can be observed in classical Persian literature until the twentieth century. However, after this period, influenced by contemporary European literature, these models gradually faded and disappeared from contemporary Persian literature.

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1. Introduction

Every nation possesses its own oral tales, such as legends and myths. However, the number of nations with a written storytelling tradition spanning several millennia is not large. Iran can be considered one of the ancient and civilized countries of the world, whose culture and civilization have persisted for thousands of years without collapse. Written storytelling is one of the legacies of ancient civilizations, with its origins in ancient Iran tracing back approximately three thousand years. In the *Avesta*, in addition to the hymns praising the Zoroastrian deity, one can find stories of Aryan Iranian heroes, such as the tales of Arash and Siyavash. The *Avesta* treats these stories rather simply; they were later elaborated and expanded throughout history.

In the inscription of Darius at Bisotun, the story of the suppression of Gaumata the Magus by this Achaemenid king can be observed. As Ibn al-Nadim mentioned in his book *Al-Fihrist*: “The early Persians were the first to compose legends, which they transcribed into books and preserved in their treasuries, often recounting them as tales from the mouths of animals. Later, the Parthian kings, the second dynasty of Iranian kings, exaggerated these stories and added to them” (Ibn al-Nadim, p. 539).¹ From Ibn al-Nadim’s words, it becomes clear that the Iranians during the Achaemenid and Parthian periods engaged in written storytelling, compiling their tales into books and storing them in their treasuries.

After the advent of Islam, written storytelling in Persian literature manifested in both poetry and prose in new ways. The masnavis of great Iranian poets, such as Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, Sana’i’s *Hadiqat al-Haqiqa*, Attar’s *Mantiq al-Tayr*, Nizami Ganjavi’s *Khamsa*, Molavi’s *Masnavi*, Khwaju Kermani’s *Khamsa*, and Jami’s *Haft Awrang*, rose as towering peaks on the plateau of classical world literature. In Persian literature, in addition to these poetic narrative works, there are numerous prose narrative works, including valuable treasures such as *Hezar Afsaneh*, *Karnamak-i Ardashir-i Babakan*, *Ardaviraf Namag*, *Bakhtiyar Nama*, *Taj al-Qisas*, *Khuday Namag*, and *Samak-e Ayyar*, among others. This article will discuss and analyze the different models of storytelling in classical Persian literature.

2. Repetitive Method Model

The Avesta is considered one of the oldest and most valuable sacred texts in the world, serving as the wellspring of narrative literature in the eras following its creation. The primary characteristic of the narrative language of the *Avesta* is its use of repetitive sentences. In this text, the worship of Zoroastrian deities is expressed through similar and repetitive sentences. For instance, in the twelfth chapter of the Hormazd Yasht, it states:

Protector is my name. Creator and Guardian is my name... Healer is my name.
Greatest Healer is my name... Ashavan is my name. Greatest Ashavan is my name.
Glorious is my name. Most Glorious is my name. All-seeing is my name. Most

¹ Ibn al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, Myths, 2002, p. 539.

All-seeing is my name. Far-seeing is my name. Most Far-seeing is my name” (Ariyaboom Research Base, Hormazd Yasht).¹

The repetitive nature of the sentences in this chapter is clearly evident; these repetitions create a sacred atmosphere and a strong force that encourages the faithful to honor and worship the deities.

In the fourth chapter of the Tishtrya Yasht, it states: “We sacrifice unto Tishtrya, the bright and glorious star; who flies, towards the sea ‘Vouru-Kasha,’ as swiftly as the arrow darted through the heavenly space, which Erekhsha, the swift archer, the Arya amongst the Aryas whose arrow was the swiftest, shot from Mount ‘Khshaotha’ to Mount ‘Hvanvant.’”² (Tafazzoli, 1999, pp. 51-52). Almost every verse or chapter about the arrow or Tishtrya contains these similar repetitive sentences. These texts are the oldest existing manuscripts regarding the story of “Arash.” This chapter narrates that Arash was the best archer of the Aryan tribes of Iran and that the arrow he aimed from the top of a mountain fell in distant lands. Over time, this story was elaborated: after the Turanian invasion of Iran, Afrasiab, the king of Turan, arrogantly addressed the Iranian army and said they could retreat the distance of an arrow shot. In response, Arash rose from the Iranian ranks, ascended Alborz, stood atop Damavand, and with all his might, shot an arrow that flew to the banks of the Amu Darya, causing the Turanian army to retreat beyond the river.

This repetitive nature of language is also observed in the inscriptions of Darius. For example, in section 7, it states: “King Darius says: These are the countries that became mine. By the will of Ahura Mazda, they were my subjects. They brought tribute to me.” And in section 9, it states: “King Darius says: Ahura Mazda bestowed this kingdom upon me. Ahura Mazda aided me in obtaining this kingdom. By the grace of Ahura Mazda, I hold this kingdom.”³

Repetitive storytelling was common in the ancient world because stories were mostly conveyed orally at that time. Narrators often repeated sentences to ensure that the themes and narratives remained in the listeners’ memories. Gradually, this method found its way into written storytelling, particularly in ritual hymns.

However, there is another repetitive style in storytelling where the fate of the father is exactly repeated for the son. This type of repetitive storytelling is generally found in folk tales. For instance, the story of *Samak the Ayyar* can be mentioned. *Samak the Ayyar* is probably the oldest Iranian novel. Its stories were passed down orally among Iranians for many years until finally being compiled into a three-volume book by Faramarz Khodadad Arjangi in 1189 AD. The summary of the story of *Samak the Ayyar* is as follows: Khorshid was the prince of the city of Aleppo, who greatly enjoyed hunting. One day, he traveled far for hunting,

¹ AriyaBoom Research Center, Hormazd Yasht

² Avesta: Khorda Avesta (English): Yasht 8 - Hymn to Sirius

³ Cultural Heritage News Agency - Full Text of the Behistun Inscription

eventually reaching the land of China. There, he met Mahpari, the princess of China, and fell deeply in love with her. However, an obstacle stood in his way; Mahpari's uncle was a sorcerer who tested her suitors. Any unfortunate suitor who failed his tests was sent to an unknown place by this sorcerer. Unfortunately, Khorshid also failed the test. But Samak the Ayyar rescued him, and after many challenges, managed to bring Khorshid and Mahpari together. Sadly, Mahpari died after giving birth to a son named Farrokhrooz. Khorshid, feeling weary and broken after Mahpari's death, appointed his son Farrokhrooz as his successor. Later, Farrokhrooz also fell in love with a princess, and once again, Samak the Ayyar faced numerous challenges to unite the lovers, repeating similar stories.

Thus, although *Samak the Ayyar* is a three-volume book with seemingly long stories, there is nothing novel in its storytelling method. It appears that the repetition of the father's fate for the son was considered normal in ancient times. This should be regarded as a form of folklore and tradition.

3. The Model of Pearl Beads on a Plate

The second model posits that each book contains dozens of tales and stories, which seemingly lack logical connection, much like individual pearls. Each story stands as a separate entity. However, the astute author has skillfully gathered these pearls together on a single plate. In this context, the plate represents a unified idea. In other words, although the stories may not appear logically connected on the surface, they inherently convey a unified concept. To better illustrate this, several examples will be examined.

Qisas al-Anbiya is an 11th-century work authored by Abu Ishaq Ibrahim ibn Mansur ibn Khalaf al-Naysaburi. This book recounts 114 tales and stories, all revolving around the Prophet Muhammad, his uncle Abbas, tales of the Caliphate, and more. Each story's subject matter differs, yet they all narrate Islamic ideologies.

Taj al-Qisas, written by Abu Nasr Ahmad ibn Muhammad Bukhari in 1082 AD, contains tales from the beginning of creation to the martyrdom of Imam Hussain in Karbala. Among these, forty stories detail the life of the Prophet Joseph. While the stories in this book each narrate separate accounts, the overarching plate is the ideology of Islam, particularly Shia beliefs.

Asrar al-Tawhid, authored by Muhammad ibn Munawwar in 1174 AD, details the life and times of the enlightened Sufi Sheikh Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khair. Each story presents distinct concepts unrelated to the others, yet they all revolve around the mystical thoughts of Sheikh Abu Sa'id Abu'l-Khair. This book is noted for its literary elegance and fluidity.

Tazkirat al-Awliya, a prominent work by the great Iranian mystic Attar of Nishapur, comprises a preface and 72 chapters written by Attar himself, with later additions recounting the lives of 25 eminent Sufi figures. Overall, this work narrates the stories of 96 eminent Sufi figures. While these stories lack thematic connections, they are all embedded within the plate of mystical concepts.

This narrative style was also prevalent in ancient times. It appears that this method, much like the “repetitive” model, was employed by authors to further elaborate on the ideas they aimed to explain. The repetitive method enhanced memory retention, allowing authors to easily cultivate their intended ideas in the reader's deeper mind.

4. The Pearl Necklace Model

The third model can be described as the author creating a beautiful necklace by stringing together various stories like pearls on a thread (chain). *One Thousand Tales* is perhaps the most famous work written in this manner. *One Thousand Tales* is undoubtedly one of the primary sources of *One Thousand and One Nights*. This work was likely compiled in book form in the late 4th century BCE. Ibn al-Nadim, in *Al-Fihrist*, states: “The first book written in this manner was ‘One Thousand Tales’ – meaning one thousand stories... The correct account is that the first person to engage in nocturnal storytelling was Alexander, who had a group that entertained him with stories to keep him awake, not for pleasure but for protection. After him, other kings adopted this practice. The book *One Thousand Tales* comprises one thousand nights and less than two hundred stories” (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002, p. 540). From Ibn al-Nadim's statements, it can be inferred that at least during Alexander the Great's invasion, the book “One Thousand Tales” existed, and he would listen to its stories every night for edification. Ibn al-Nadim further explains the reason for the book's creation: “One of the kings, if he took a wife, would kill her after spending a night with her. He married a princess named Scheherazade, who was very wise and intelligent. As soon as he obtained her, she began telling stories and continued until dawn to make the king keep her for another night to hear the rest of the story. A thousand nights passed this way, during which the king cohabited with her. When God granted them a son, she revealed the child to the king, making him aware of her cunning” (Ibn al-Nadim, 2002, p. 540). Ibn al-Nadim thus recounts the general story of “One Thousand Tales,” in which a princess told the king a story every night to prevent him from killing her, saving her life with this strategy. This main story serves as the thread (chain) connecting the two hundred stories the princess narrated to the king, like pearls.

In the history of classical Persian literature, especially in Sassanian Pahlavi literature, many storybooks were written in this manner. These works were later translated into Persian Dari. Among them are *Bakhtiyar-nama* and *Tuti-nama*.

Here, we provide a brief explanation of *Bakhtiyar-nama*. The original version of *Bakhtiyar-nama* was written in Pahlavi. It was translated into Arabic in the 9th or 10th century CE and finally into Persian Dari during the Samanid period. The main story of *Bakhtiyar-nama* is as follows: Azadbakht, the king of Sistan, fell in love with the wife of one of his army officers and took her by force. As a result, her husband became furious, rebelled, and revolted. Azadbakht had to flee with his pregnant wife. Along the way, the woman gave birth to a son. The king and his wife left their child by the roadside and continued their escape. A group of thieves found and raised the baby, naming him Bakhtiyar. One day, the thieves attacked a

caravan but were defeated, and Bakhtiyar was captured by the caravaners. Meanwhile, Azadbakht defeated the rebellious officer's army and reclaimed his throne. Bakhtiyar excelled in the royal gymnasium, catching the king's attention. The jealous ministers conspired with the queen against him, and the queen falsely accused Bakhtiyar of assaulting her. Enraged, Azadbakht intended to kill Bakhtiyar, but Bakhtiyar sought to prove his innocence through storytelling. He narrated stories to the king daily, but at the climax, he would stop and demand the king execute one of his ministers before continuing. The king, enthralled by the stories, complied. Bakhtiyar continued this for nine days until he ran out of stories. On the tenth day, as he was about to be executed, the leader of the thieves revealed Bakhtiyar's identity. The king and queen confirmed Bakhtiyar's identity, and he succeeded his father. The story ended happily.

Bakhtiyar-nama is a fascinating book, rewritten in the 15th and 16th centuries, although the newer versions never matched the original's quality. In *Bakhtiyar-nama*, Bakhtiyar's fate is the main story, and the tales he tells the king over nine days are the pearls, connected by the main story. In other words, the main story showcases the side stories like a chain of shining pearls to the readers.

This narrative technique was influenced by Indian storytelling literature. In this method, there is no logical connection or unified theme among the side stories, but they are usually very intriguing and arouse the curiosity and interest of the readers and listeners, compelling them to follow the story to its conclusion.

5. The Grape Cluster Model

In this model, both primary and secondary narratives are present; however, the distinguishing feature between the third and fourth models is that in the fourth model, the side stories repeatedly convey the same idea as the main story. In other words, the side stories have a logical connection to the main story.

Mantiq al-Tayr, by Attar is one of the most renowned works written in this manner. The main story of *Mantiq al-Tayr*, narrates an extremely mystical tale where a group of birds, led by the Hoopoe, embarks on a journey to find the king of birds, the Simorgh. They traverse seven valleys, facing numerous hardships and dangers. Some birds lose their lives during this perilous journey, while others abandon the quest out of fear. Ultimately, only thirty birds reach Mount Qaf, where they do not find the Simorgh. Eventually, they realize that they themselves, the thirty birds who reached the destination, are the true Simorgh. This story beautifully illustrates the path and truth of mysticism. Besides the main story, throughout the narrative, each bird expresses its view on the journey through storytelling. Although each bird tells a separate story, all stories revolve around the journey—the main plot—and interpret mystical ideas. One of the most famous side stories in this work is the tale of Sheikh San'an's love for a Christian girl, which exquisitely depicts the truth of sacred love.

Some poets have employed this storytelling technique in crafting poetic mystical narratives. For instance, in Nizami Ganjavi's *Layla and Majnun* and Jami's *Yusuf and Zulaiikha*, although the main stories are built with utmost strength and grandeur, the creators have inserted numerous anecdotes within the main narrative. These anecdotes usually consist of moral lessons related to the main story's theme. With this storytelling method, the authors create their work akin to a cluster of grapes, thereby enhancing its magnificence and grandeur to present it as impressively as possible to the readers.

However, the credit for the most prominent work in this narrative style undoubtedly belongs to Ferdowsi's the *Shahnameh* or the *Book of Kings*. As the epic of the Iranian nation, the *Shahnameh* is a grand structure that Ferdowsi has left in the history of Persian literature. The main story of the *Shahnameh* concerns the reign of Iranian kings, beginning with the rise of the Iranian civilization and the ascension of Keyumars, the first Iranian king, and continuing until the end of the Sassanian dynasty. Ferdowsi beautifully adorns this main story with authentic Iranian legends—stories that have been passed down orally through generations. The tales of Rostam are among the most famous side stories in the *Shahnameh*, stories that hold as much significance as the main narrative. In these tales, Rostam, the most brilliant national hero in Iranian history, is depicted. “The Seven Labors of Rostam” and “Rostam and Sohrab” are among the most notable side stories of the *Shahnameh*. Besides Rostam's stories, the tales of “Bizhan and Manizheh” and “The Twelve Rooks” are also considered some of the finest and best grains in this grape cluster. Through this storytelling method, Ferdowsi has transformed the *Shahnameh* into a magnificent and grand cluster that not only immortalizes the ancient Iranian civilization in the minds and hearts of its people but also engraves it as a splendid inscription on the page of world literature, ensuring the radiant and enduring image of the Iranian nation remains alive in the annals of history forever.

6. A Grand Narrative Containing Smaller Stories

Works composed in this style usually encompass multiple layers. The initial layer includes several main stories. In the second layer, each main story contains several side stories, and in the third layer, each side story is further divided into even smaller stories, thus continuing the narrative. This storytelling method was influenced by the literary traditions of India.

Kalila and Dimna is one of the most famous prose works written in this narrative style and is renowned worldwide. The original *Kalila and Dimna* was written in Sanskrit. During the reign of Anushirwan, a Sassanid king, a physician named Borzūya brought it from India to Iran and translated it into Pahlavi. In the mid-8th century AD, Ibn al-Muqaffa translated it from Pahlavi into Arabic, and finally, in the 10th century AD, it was translated from Arabic into Persian Dari.

The Persian version of *Kalila and Dimna* consists of approximately sixteen main stories. Among them, “The Lion and the Bull,” “The Friendship of the Dove, Crow, Mouse, Tortoise, and Deer,” and “The Owl and the Crow” have gained the most attention from

readers. The chapter “The Lion and the Bull” includes twelve side stories, and the chapter “The Owl and the Crow” has seven side stories, with each side story further divided into smaller stories.

The story of “The Owl and the Crow” is as follows: In the heart of the mountains, there was a large tree that served as a refuge for many animals. Its dense branches were home to thousands of crows, and a cave at its base sheltered thousands of owls. The owls attacked the crows, resulting in a severe defeat for the crows, with many of them killed. To recover from this defeat, the crows held a meeting to devise a strategy. They decided to gather dry branches, pile them at the entrance of the cave, set them on fire, and burn the owls. This is the main story, but during the crows’ meeting, they narrated stories to challenge each other’s opinions. The book is constructed with this narrative framework, where the author conveys the philosophy of life through animal stories and their dialogues.

Molavi’s *Masnavi* can be considered the greatest poetic work composed using this narrative style. This monumental work interprets profound mystical thoughts through various stories. This is why it holds a high place in the history of Persian literature and is often referred to as the ‘Persian Quran.’ Molavi’s *Masnavi* consists of six books, each containing several main stories, with each main story further comprising diverse tales. An example from the sixth book is provided here.

This book contains nearly twenty main stories, with the last main story titled “The Enchanting Fortress.” The summary of this story is as follows: Once upon a time, there was a king with three sons, each possessing great intelligence and wisdom. One day, the princes decided to travel and see the kingdom’s sights. The old king advised his sons to go wherever they wished, except to the Enchanting Fortress. However, the prohibition only increased their desire to uncover its secret.¹ The young princes went to the forbidden fortress, forgetting their father’s advice. There, they saw a picture of the Chinese emperor’s daughter, whose beauty captivated them, leading them to fall in love with her and set out to find her. The princes endured many hardships along the way, with the two older brothers dying from the trials, but the youngest eventually succeeded.

Within this main story, there are side stories such as “The Vizier of Bukhara and the Jurist,” “The Two Brothers, One Bearded and One Shaven,” “The King Who Forced a Scholar to His Court,” “The Story of Imru’ al-Qays, the Arab King,” “The Man Who Dreamt of Treasure in a Certain House,” “The Story of Juha and the Judge,” “The Story of Nimrod,” and so on. In these side stories, such as “The Man Who Dreamt of Treasure in a Certain House” and “The Story of Nimrod,” even smaller stories are embedded, often revolving around the main story’s central idea.

This narrative style was prevalent and widely accepted in ancient times, attracting many poets and writers. It seems that the emergence of this storytelling method is closely

¹ Rumi’s *Masnavi*, Book Six, Verse 3658

related to the tastes and preferences of the Indian and Iranian peoples. These two nations highly value embellishing and adorning objects, believing that anything unadorned is bare and lacks beauty. Therefore, whenever they narrated a story, they embellished the main story with other tales and anecdotes to enhance its grandeur and appeal to readers and listeners.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the evolution of storytelling models in classical Persian literature, identifying five distinct narrative frameworks: the repetitive model, the pearl beads on a plate model, the string of pearls model, the cluster of grapes model, and the grand narratives containing smaller stories model. Each model was analyzed for its structural characteristics and thematic significance within the broader context of Persian literary traditions. The repetitive model emphasized the reinforcement of core themes through recurring variations, enhancing memorability and audience engagement. The pearl beads on a plate model allowed for a diverse collection of loosely connected stories, each contributing to a broader thematic understanding. The string of pearls model linked self-contained side stories into a cohesive main narrative, maintaining continuity and audience interest. The cluster of grapes model integrated primary and secondary narratives, ensuring a logical and reflective relationship between the main story and its side stories. Lastly, the grand narratives model incorporated multiple smaller tales within a comprehensive framework, enriching the overarching narrative's depth and complexity.

The persistence of these storytelling methods until the early twentieth century underscores their cultural and literary significance. However, the influence of contemporary European literature led to a gradual decline in their use, as contemporary Persian literature shifted towards more emphasis on the main story itself. Contemporary writers enhance the beauty of their stories through astonishing sentence structures, intelligent atmosphere creation, and detailed depiction of the main story elements.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of classical Persian narrative techniques and their impact on the evolution of literary forms. Future studies could further investigate the interplay between traditional and contemporary influences in Persian literature, offering insights into the ongoing adaptation and transformation of storytelling practices.

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