



From the Caravan of Nezami's Imitators: A Study of the Life and Works of Rashha-ye Esfahani

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Abstract

Nezami Ganjavi, the creator of the five epic poems known as the Khamsa of Nezami, was a 12th-century Persian poet and a master of romantic masnavi composition. Imitation of Nezami Ganjavi and the creation of works modeled after his masnavis gained significant traction in Persian literary history following the 6th century AH. Over the course of eight hundred years, nearly one hundred Persian-speaking poets succeeded in composing narrative masnavis inspired by Nezami, with themes ranging from philosophical and ethical to mystical and historical. One such imitator was Rashha-ye Esfahani, a poet of the 13th century AH. In his masnavi Nowruz and Jamshid, composed in imitation of Nezami's Layla and Majnun, Rashha attempted to craft an engaging story while embedding a poetic tazkira (biographical anthology) of his contemporary poets within it. This poetic tazkira, clashing with the conventions of masnavi composition and appearing as an incongruous insertion within a romantic narrative, drew the attention of Ahmad Golchin Ma'ani. Golchin Ma'ani extracted this

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tazkira from the masnavi and published it independently. Written in a descriptive-analytical method, this study aims to critically examine the Nowruz and Jamshid masnavi and, based on scholarly theories, explore the reasons behind the lack of success of Nezami's imitators in general and Rashha-ye Esfahani in particular. Through this research, we also become acquainted with the life and works of Rashha as a capable poet of the 13th century AH.

Keywords: *Rashha-ye Esfahani, Nezami Ganjavi, Nowruz and Jamshid Rashha-ye Esfahani, Poetry of Nezami's imitators.*

1. Introduction

Nezami Ganjavi (1141–1209 CE), a luminary of Persian literature, stands as one of the most influential poets in the history of Iran, celebrated for his creation of the Khamsa—a collection of five narrative masnavis that redefined the art of storytelling in verse. Born in Ganja, in present-day Azerbaijan, Nezami emerged during the 6th century AH (12th century CE), a period often hailed as the zenith of Persian poetic achievement. His Khamsa, comprising Makhzan al-Asrar, Khosrow va Shirin, Layla va Majnun, Haft Peykar, and Eskandarnamēh, blends romantic, philosophical, and historical themes with a lyrical finesse that has captivated readers and poets for over eight hundred years. Nezami's innovation lies not only in his mastery of the masnavi form—a poetic structure of rhymed couplets ideal for extended narratives—but also in his ability to weave intricate tales drawn from Iran's rich cultural tapestry, spanning pre-Islamic legends and Islamic traditions. His works reflect a deep engagement with the Persian storytelling tradition, building on the foundations laid by earlier poets like Ferdowsi, whose Shahnameh chronicled Iran's mythical and historical past, and Fakhraddin As'ad Gurgani, whose Vis va Ramin showcased the power of romantic narrative. Nezami's acknowledgment of these predecessors in his poetry reveals a conscious dialogue with Iran's literary heritage, which he enriched with his own aesthetic sensibility and narrative sophistication.

The 6th century AH was a fertile ground for Persian literature, producing luminaries such as Sa'di, Rumi, and Anvari, yet Nezami's contribution remains singular for its fusion of form and content. Before his time, Persian storytelling thrived in both poetry and prose. Epic

poems like Asadi Tusi's *Garshaspnameh* and Daqiqi's *Shahnameh* laid the groundwork for heroic narratives, while prose works such as *Qisas al-Anbiya* (Stories of the Prophets), *Tarikh-e Bal'ami* (Bal'ami's History), and *Shahnameh-ye Abu Mansuri* offered historical and mythical accounts in accessible language. These texts demonstrate a longstanding Iranian fascination with narrative, whether to preserve history, impart moral lessons, or explore the human condition. Nezami, however, transcended these traditions by integrating pre-Islamic tales—such as those of Sassanid kings like Bahram Gur and Khosrow Anushirvan—with Islamic sensibilities, creating a bridge between Iran's ancient past and its medieval present. His *Haft Peykar*, for instance, draws on the life of Bahram Gur to explore themes of kingship and morality, while *Eskandarnameh* reimagines Alexander the Great as a philosopher-king, reflecting Nezami's ability to adapt universal figures to Persian cultural ideals. This synthesis, paired with his meticulous attention to meter, imagery, and rhetorical flourish, cemented his status as a paragon of masnavi composition.

Nezami's legacy is perhaps most vividly illustrated by the legion of poets who sought to emulate his work. Following his death, imitation of the *Khamasa* became a widespread phenomenon in Persian literature, with poets across centuries and regions attempting to replicate his narrative style, thematic depth, and poetic structure. The first notable imitator, Amir Khusrow Dehlavi (1253–1325 CE), a Persian poet of Turkish descent born in India, composed his own *Khamasa* in the 13th century, setting a precedent for subsequent poets. Over the next eight hundred years, estimates suggest that between 86 (per Hassan Zolfaghari) and over 100 (per Vahid Dastgerdi) Persian poets produced masnavis inspired by Nezami, ranging from faithful reproductions to creative reinterpretations. These imitators spanned diverse cultural and historical contexts—from the Delhi Sultanate to the Safavid Empire—yet shared a common ambition: to capture the magic of Nezami's craft. During the Safavid era (16th–18th centuries), this tradition took a notable turn, with poets like Mirza Qasem Gunabadi and Abdi Beg Shirazi repurposing the masnavi for political and historical narratives, such as *Shahnameh-ye Mazi* (on Shah Ismail Safavi) and *Khaza'in al-Muluk*. Others, influenced by Sufism, infused their works with mystical themes, though the imprint of Nezami's romantic style remained pervasive.

Among the last in this long line of imitators was Rashha-ye Esfahani, a 13th-century AH (19th-century CE) poet from central Iran. Active during the Qajar era, Rashha composed *Nowruz* and *Jamshid*, a masnavi modeled after Nezami's *Layla va Majnun*, which narrates the love story of Nowruz, a Bakhtiari tribesman, and Jamshid, a minister's son from Khatai. Unlike Nezami's seamless narratives, Rashha's work is distinguished—and arguably undermined—by the inclusion of a poetic *tazkira* (biographical anthology) of 137 contemporary poets, embedded within the romantic tale. This structural anomaly, which disrupts the narrative flow, drew the attention of scholar Ahmad Golchin Ma'ani, who extracted and published the *tazkira* separately. Rashha's effort reflects both the enduring allure of Nezami's model and the challenges of imitation in an era marked by the Return Movement—a literary revival in Qajar Iran that sought to resurrect classical styles. This study explores the phenomenon of Nezami's imitators across history, with a particular focus on Rashha-ye Esfahani, to understand the dynamics of literary imitation and the reasons behind its varying degrees of success.

Research Questions

- 1- How did Nezami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* establish a paradigm that inspired widespread imitation across eight centuries of Persian literature, and what cultural and historical factors sustained this tradition?
- 2- In what ways does Rashha-ye Esfahani's *Nowruz* and *Jamshid* embody the aspirations and limitations of Nezami's imitators, particularly in its narrative structure and thematic choices?
- 3- Why did many imitators, including Rashha, fail to replicate Nezami's artistic triumph, and what does this reveal about the tension between imitation and innovation in Persian poetry?
- 4- How did the socio-cultural context of the Qajar era, particularly the Return Movement, shape Rashha's approach to imitating Nezami, and to what extent did it influence his departure from Nezami's romantic ideals?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Nezami Ganjavi and the Tradition of Imitation

Nezami Ganjavi's *Khamsa* is a cornerstone of Persian literature, revered for its narrative complexity, linguistic elegance, and emotional resonance. Composed in the 12th century, these five masnavis—each with its distinct meter and thematic focus—set a benchmark for poetic

storytelling that few have rivaled. Makhzan al-Asrar employs the sari' meter to deliver ethical reflections, Khosrow va Shirin uses hazaj maqsur for a romantic tragedy, Layla va Majnun adopts hazaj akhrab for a tale of unrequited love, Haft Peykar utilizes khafif for a blend of romance and allegory, and Eskandarnamēh leverages motaqareb for an epic exploration of wisdom and conquest. Nezami's choice of meters, aligned with the emotional tenor of each story, exemplifies his technical mastery, while his vivid imagery and rhetorical devices—such as metaphor, allegory, and allusion—elevate his poetry beyond mere narrative. Scholars like Edward G. Browne (*A Literary History of Persia*) and Jan Rypka (*History of Iranian Literature*) have lauded Nezami as a poet who harmonized form and content, creating works that resonate with both intellectual and aesthetic appeal.

The impact of Nezami's *Khamsa* is most evident in the tradition of imitation it inspired. Amir Khusrow Dehlavi, born in 1253 CE in India to a Turkish father and an Indian mother, was the first to compose a *Khamsa* in direct response to Nezami, completed between 1298 and 1302 CE. His works—*Matla' al-Anwar*, *Shirin va Khosrow*, *Majnun va Layla*, *A'ina-ye Eskandari*, and *Hasht Behesht*—mirror Nezami's structure while infusing Indian and mystical elements, reflecting his multicultural context. This set a precedent for later poets, such as Abd al-Rahman Jami (1414–1492 CE), whose *Haft Awrang* expanded on Nezami's model with a pronounced Sufi flavor, and Maktabi Shirazi, whose *Layla va Majnun* adhered closely to Nezami's romantic framework. Vahid Dastgerdi, in *Ganjineh-ye Ganjavi* (1997), estimates that over 100 poets followed this path, a figure echoed by Zabihollah Safa in *Tarikh-e Adabiyat dar Iran* (Vol. 3/2), which details Nezami's imitators across centuries. Hassan Zolfaghari's article (*Textual Studies in Persian Literature*, 2009) compares four versions of *Layla va Majnun*, arguing that imitation stemmed from a mix of admiration, competition, and a desire to bask in Nezami's reflected glory. However, these works often prioritized technical replication—meter, rhyme, and structure—over the imaginative depth that defined Nezami's originals. The Safavid era (1501–1736 CE) marked a shift in this tradition, as poets began adapting the *masnavi* for purposes beyond romance. Works like *Shahrokhnameh* by an anonymous poet, *Shahnameh-ye Mazi* by Mirza Qasem Gunabadi (chronicling Shah Ismail Safavi), and *Akbarnamēh* by Fayzi Fayyazi reflect a politicized use of the form, celebrating contemporary rulers rather than mythical or romantic figures. This departure, while innovative, often sacrificed the emotional resonance of Nezami's narratives for historical documentation.

Conversely, mystical poets like Khwaju Kermani (*Rawdat al-Anwar*) and Jami infused their *masnavis* with Sufi allegory, yet their reliance on Nezami's stylistic conventions underscores his pervasive influence. Safa notes that no other Persian poet inspired such extensive imitation, suggesting that Nezami's *Khamsa* became a cultural archetype, a template for poetic legitimacy. However, this abundance of imitators raises questions about the balance between reverence and originality, a tension that permeates the works of even the most capable followers.

2.2. *Rashha-ye Esfahani* and *Nowruz* and *Jamshid*

Rashha-ye Esfahani, a 19th-century poet of the Qajar era, represents a late chapter in the saga of Nezami's imitators. Born Mirza Mohammad Baqer in Isfahan in 1203 AH (1788 CE) to a Shirazi family, *Rashha* later settled in Yazd, where he died in 1266 AH (1849 CE). His life unfolded during the Return Movement, a literary revival that sought to emulate classical Persian poets like Nezami, Sa'di, and Hafez, reacting against the ornate "Indian style" of the Safavid period. *Rashha's* *Nowruz* and *Jamshid*, composed in the *hazaj musaddas akhrab maqbud* meter of *Layla va Majnun*, tells the tale of *Nowruz*, a *Bakhtiari* tribesman, who falls in love with *Jamshid*, a minister's son from *Khatai*. This same-sex love story, set against a backdrop of tribal and urban contrasts, diverges from Nezami's heterosexual romances, reflecting Qajar-era social currents where such themes occasionally surfaced in literature. What sets *Rashha's* work apart, however, is its inclusion of a poetic *tazkira*—a biographical anthology of 137 contemporary poets—interwoven into the narrative. This hybrid structure, blending romance with literary history, disrupts the *masnavi's* flow, a flaw that prompted Ahmad Golchin Ma'ani to extract and publish the *tazkira* independently in the 20th century.

3. Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology to examine the phenomenon of Nezami Ganjavi's imitators across Persian literary history, with a specific focus on *Rashha-ye Esfahani's* *Nowruz* and *Jamshid* as a case study. The approach combines historical contextualization, textual analysis, and theoretical critique to unravel the dynamics of literary imitation and its outcomes. The research unfolds in several interconnected steps. First, it establishes a historical framework by tracing the evolution of Nezami's influence from the 12th century AH to the 19th century AH, drawing on primary sources such as Nezami's *Khamsa* (editions like those edited by Vahid

Dastgerdi) and the works of key imitators (e.g., Amir Khusrow's *Khamsa*, Jami's *Haft Awrang*, and Rashha's *Nowruz* and *Jamshid*). Secondary sources, including Zabihollah Safa's *Tarikh-e Adabiyat dar Iran*, Hassan Zolfaghari's comparative studies, and Azadeh Fazeli et al.'s analysis of Rashha, provide scholarly grounding and critical perspectives. This historical survey maps the scope and diversity of imitation, identifying patterns in style, theme, and intent across different periods, such as the Delhi Sultanate, the Timurid era, and the Safavid and Qajar dynasties.

Second, the study narrows its lens to a detailed textual analysis of *Nowruz* and *Jamshid*, comparing it directly with Nezami's *Layla va Majnun*—the model Rashha explicitly emulated. This comparison focuses on multiple dimensions: narrative structure (e.g., the integration of the *tazkira* versus Nezami's seamless storytelling), linguistic features (e.g., Rashha's conventional vocabulary versus Nezami's innovative imagery), metrical consistency (e.g., disruptions caused by Rashha's quotations versus Nezami's harmonious *hazaj* meter), and thematic coherence (e.g., Rashha's same-sex love story versus Nezami's heterosexual romance). Manuscript evidence, where available, and Golchin Ma'ani's extracted *tazkira* supplement this analysis, offering insights into Rashha's compositional choices. The textual critique is enriched by close readings of selected passages—such as Rashha's praise of Nezami and his descriptions of *Nowruz*'s love—to assess how closely he adhered to or deviated from his exemplar.

Third, the research applies philosophical and literary theories of imitation to interpret the findings. Plato's concept of *mimesis*, as articulated in *The Republic* (Book X), frames imitation as a copy of a copy, inherently distanced from truth, while Aristotle's *Poetics* redefines it as a creative act that refines nature through form and evokes *catharsis*. These contrasting views anchor the analysis of why Nezami's imitators, including Rashha, often fell short: Did they produce mere replicas (Plato) or fail to achieve artistic transformation (Aristotle)? Additionally, modern perspectives, such as Gilles Deleuze's critique of imitation as a mechanical act of conformity (*Difference and Repetition*), deepen the discussion, particularly regarding Rashha's subordination to Nezami's style. The methodology also considers socio-historical factors, examining how the Qajar-era *Return Movement*—a revivalist trend emphasizing classical models—influenced Rashha's approach, using sources like Ahmad Divanbeygi's *Hadiqat al-Shu'ara* to contextualize his life and milieu.

The descriptive component synthesizes these elements into a narrative that chronicles the imitation tradition and Rashha's place within it, while the analytical component evaluates the artistic and cultural implications of his work. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the broader phenomenon and the specific case, addressing the research questions through evidence-based reasoning and interdisciplinary insights. The methodology avoids subjective judgments about moral content (e.g., Rashha's same-sex theme), focusing instead on literary merit and historical significance, in line with the study's objective stance.

4. Results

The analysis reveals that Nezami Ganjavi's *Khamasa* exerted an unparalleled influence on Persian literature, establishing a paradigm that inspired imitation for over eight centuries due to its narrative mastery, linguistic brilliance, and universal appeal. This enduring legacy stems from Nezami's ability to fuse pre-Islamic and Islamic traditions into stories that resonate with ethical, emotional, and aesthetic depth—qualities that proved difficult to replicate. Across history, imitators like Amir Khusrow Dehlavi, Jami, and countless others produced works that mirrored Nezami's structure and meter, yet their success varied widely. Amir Khusrow's *Khamasa* achieved prominence by blending Nezami's form with Indian and mystical flavors, while Jami's *Haft Awrang* gained acclaim for its Sufi reinterpretation. However, many lesser-known poets, particularly in the Safavid and Qajar periods, veered into technical mimicry or politicized narratives, diluting the romantic essence that defined Nezami's genius. This pattern suggests that while Nezami's *Khamasa* offered a versatile template, its imitators often struggled to balance form with original substance, a challenge epitomized by Rashha-ye Esfahani's *Nowruz* and *Jamshid*.

Rashha's *masnavi* encapsulates both the aspirations and limitations of Nezami's imitators. Structurally, it adheres to the *hazaj musaddas akhrab maqbud* meter of *Layla va Majnun*, reflecting Rashha's intent to align with Nezami's technical framework. The story of *Nowruz* and *Jamshid*—a same-sex romance between a tribesman and a nobleman's son—demonstrates an attempt at narrative innovation, diverging from Nezami's heterosexual tales. However, the insertion of a 137-poet *tazkira* within the *masnavi* disrupts its flow, creating a hybrid text that oscillates between romance and literary catalog. This structural anomaly, as noted by Golchin Ma'ani, introduces metrical

inconsistencies—quotations in divergent meters clash with the primary rhythm—and undermines the narrative’s emotional momentum. Linguistically, Rashha relies on conventional vocabulary and rhetorical tropes typical of the Return Movement, lacking the inventive imagery and lexical richness that distinguish Nezami’s poetry. For instance, where Nezami’s descriptions of Layla’s beauty evoke a transcendent ideal, Rashha’s portrayal of Jamshid’s allure remains grounded in formulaic praise, limiting its poetic impact.

Thematically, *Nowruz and Jamshid* reflects Qajar-era social currents, where same-sex love occasionally appeared in literature as a provocative motif, yet it departs from Nezami’s morally grounded romances. Nezami’s *Layla va Majnun* portrays love as a universal, fated struggle, imbued with purity and spiritual undertones, whereas Rashha’s tale, with its homoerotic focus, aligns more with anecdotal Qajar sensibilities than Nezami’s ethical vision. This shift, while culturally significant, lacks the depth and universality of Nezami’s narratives, suggesting a failure to elevate imitation into art. Philosophically, Rashha’s work exemplifies a “mimesis of mimesis”—a second-order imitation that, per Plato, produces a diluted reflection of Nezami’s original, and per Aristotle, fails to refine its subject into a transformative experience. Deleuze’s critique further illuminates this shortfall: Rashha’s mechanical adherence to Nezami’s form prioritizes conformity over distinction, resulting in a work that lacks the vitality of its model.

The Qajar context, particularly the Return Movement, explains Rashha’s approach. This revivalist trend, reacting against the ornate “Indian style,” encouraged poets to emulate classical masters like Nezami, fostering a climate of imitation rather than innovation. Rashha’s training under calligrapher Mohammad Kazem Valeh and his ties to literary circles in Isfahan and Yazd (per *Divanbeygi*) situate him within this milieu, yet his personal eccentricities—described as a mix of erudition and social discord—may have shaped his unconventional choices, such as the *tazkira* insertion. The results indicate that Rashha’s ambition to honor Nezami and document his contemporaries was undermined by structural flaws, linguistic conservatism, and thematic divergence, rendering *Nowruz and Jamshid* a unique but flawed artifact. Broadly, the study highlights why many imitators failed to match Nezami’s success: their works often became exercises in form rather than expressions of creativity, trapped between reverence for the original and the inability to transcend it. Rashha’s case underscores this tension, as his *masnavi* offers historical value—preserving names of

137 poets, many recorded nowhere else—but falters as a literary achievement. The findings suggest that imitation, while a testament to Nezami's towering influence, rarely recaptured his synthesis of artistry and imagination, revealing the inherent limits of replicating genius within a tradition bound by its own conventions.

Scholarship on Rashha remains limited, but recent studies shed light on his contribution. Azadeh Fazeli et al.'s article (*Textual Studies in Persian Literature*, 2022) examines the methodology behind Nowruz and Jamshid, arguing that the tazkira reflects Rashha's intent to document his literary milieu, though it compromises the narrative's coherence. The study provides biographical details—Rashha's training under calligrapher Mohammad Kazem Valeh, his commercial travels, and his complex personality—drawing from sources like Mirza Ahmad Divanbeygi's *Hadiqat al-Shu'ara*. Earlier references, such as Sheikh Aqa Bozorg Tehrani's *Al-Dhari'a*, confuse Rashha with a Shirazi namesake, highlighting the scarcity of reliable data. Rashha's poetry, while rooted in the Return Movement's classical revival, lacks the linguistic innovation of Nezami, relying on conventional vocabulary and rhetorical tropes. His tazkira, though a valuable historical record, introduces metrical inconsistencies—quoting poets in divergent meters—that clash with the masnavi's rhythm, underscoring the challenges of his imitative endeavor. This review situates Rashha within the broader tradition of Nezami's imitators, setting the stage for a deeper analysis of his work's merits and shortcomings.

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