

A Critique of Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani's Definitions of Poetry

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Article Info (۲۶۷–۲۹۲)

ABSTRACT

Article type: Research Article

Article history: Received: ۲۸/۰۵/۲۰۲۴
Accepted: ۱۱/۱۰/۲۰۲۴

Keywords: Criticism
Definition of poetry
Shafi'i
Kadkani

A group opposes the definition of poetry and believes that due to the breadth and breadth of poetry, its definition is difficult or impossible, but some experts have given various definitions for poetry, which are often contradictory or contradictory, and each is criticized and needs to be examined in its own place. Mohammad Reza Shafiei Kadkani is one of those who has given various definitions for poetry, some of which are incomplete or contradictory to other definitions and are due to different perceptions and his tendencies towards certain schools. The author's goal in comparing the definitions of poetry from the perspective of Shafi'i Kadkani is to reach a single definition. The background of this research, which was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method, indicates the differences in the definitions of poetry from one perspective. The theoretical foundations of this research show that these definitions contain contradictions and shortcomings, which indicate his view of poetry from two opposing perspectives: imagism and formalism. The conclusion drawn from this research is that any definition of poetry depends on the temporal and spatial conditions of a specific period. Given that the definition must be comprehensive and restrictive, it is not possible to provide a complete and single definition of poetry in a period and time in order to determine the boundary between poetry and prose, especially since it is not possible to simultaneously consider two opposing and contradictory definitions for poetry in a specific period, with two different perspectives.

Citation: Moslemi, Nader (2024). A Critique of Mohammad-Reza Shafiei-Kadkani's Definitions of Poetry. *Modern Literary Studies*, 4(1), 267–292.



Publisher: Association for the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature
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DOI: [20.1001.1.28211413.1404.4.1.12.0](https://doi.org/10.28211/413.1404.4.1.12.0)

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Introduction

Defining poetry has perpetually challenged literary theorists and critics throughout history. While classical Persian and Islamic poetics predominantly categorized poetry as measured and rhymed speech (*kalam-e mowzun va moqaffa*) or emphasized its imaginative essence (*kalam-e khial-angiz*), modern literary developments have complicated the boundary demarcating poetic expression from prose. Among contemporary Iranian literary scholars, Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani holds a preeminent position; however, across his extensive corpus, he has proposed multiple, evolving, and at times contradictory definitions of poetry.

This study critically addresses the epistemological and theoretical shifts in Shafiei Kadkani's definitions. Specifically, it investigates the tension between his earlier imagist orientation and his subsequent adherence to Russian Formalism. The central problem is whether a unified, comprehensive, and exclusive (*Jame' va Mane'*) definition of poetry can be derived from Shafiei Kadkani's shifting critical frameworks, or whether his theoretical trajectory demonstrates an irreconcilable divide in modern Persian literary theory.

Method

This research utilizes a qualitative, descriptive-analytical, and critical methodology based on library research and textual analysis. The investigation critically evaluates Shafiei Kadkani's principal theoretical treatises—primarily *Imagery in Persian Poetry* (*Sovar-e Khial dar She'r-e Farsi*), *The Eras of Persian Poetry* (*Advār-e She'r-e Farsi*), *The Music of Poetry* (*Musiqi-ye She'r*), and *The Resurrection of Words* (*Rastakhiz-e Kalamat*).

The analytical procedure comprises:

۱. Identifying and categorizing Shafiei Kadkani's definitions across distinct chronological and theoretical phases.
۲. Deconstructing the foundational components of his widely cited definition—imagination (*khial/tasvir*), emotion (*atefeh*), language (*zaban*), rhythm/music (*ahang/musiqi*), and form (*shekl*).
۳. Comparing these definitions against the philosophical and critical tenets of Imagism, New Criticism, and Russian Formalism (e.g., defamiliarization, foregrounding, device, and verbal resurrection).

Results

The critical analysis reveals several fundamental contradictions and theoretical shifts in Shafiei Kadkani's poetic definitions:

- **Theoretical Shift from Imagism to Formalism:** In his early works, notably *Sovar-e Khial*, Shafiei Kadkani conceptualized poetry through an imagist and aesthetic framework, defining it as the unconscious mental experience of the poet and prioritizing the primacy of imagery and emotion over linguistic architecture. In contrast, in *Rastakhiz-e Kalamat*, he explicitly aligned with Russian Formalism (Shklovsky, Jakobson), redefining poetry not as an art of images, but as an art of words rooted in linguistic defamiliarization, the breaking of normative communicative codes, and “verbal resurrection.”
- **Contradictions in Constituent Elements:**
 - *Emotion vs. Form:* While his earlier work elevated emotion (*atefeh*) as the supreme governing component of genuine poetry, his formalist phase marginalized emotional subjectivity in favor of autonomous linguistic devices and structural mechanics.
 - *Music and Metric Constraints:* In *Musiqi-ye She'r*, he initially posited music and rhythm as intrinsic, indispensable dimensions of poetic identity. However, by adopting the formalist notion of dynamic system (*nezam*) over strict meter (*nazm*), he praised modern blank verse (*she'r-e sepid*, particularly Ahmad Shamlou's prose poetry) and historical mystical treatises (e.g., Sufi *shathiyat*),

thereby contradicting the necessity of external metric rhythm.

- *Linguistic Foregrounding vs. Organic System*: His definition oscillates between identifying poetry as pure linguistic deviance (*hanjar-gorizi*) and requiring it to maintain strict systemic coherence (*nezam*), creating theoretical ambiguity between artistic rupture and classical order.

Conclusion

The study concludes that Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani's corpus does not offer a single, unified, or universally applicable definition of poetry. Rather, his formulations mirror the evolving paradigms of 20th-century Western literary theory as refracted through classical Persian rhetoric. His poetic definitions reflect two incompatible theoretical poles: an early Imagist-Romantic approach centering on subjective emotion and mental imagery, and a later Russian Formalist approach viewing poetry as autonomous linguistic foregrounding. Consequently, attempting to synthesize a singular, definitive boundary between poetry and prose from his writings yields conceptual incongruities, reaffirming that poetic definitions remain historically and theoretically contingent rather than absolute.