Shiraz University
Journal of Poetry Studies
Quarterly, ISSN: 2980-7751
Vol 18, Issue 2, Ser 68, 2026

OPEN ACCESS

Extended Abstract

DOI: 10.22099/JBA.2025.53312.4648

An Investigation of the Extent and Manner of the Narrator's Presence in the Story of "Rostam and Sohrab" in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*

Mohamadreza Salehi Mazandarani* (Corresponding Author)
Zahra Nasiri Shiraz
Ghodrat Ghasemipour
Nasim Maraghi

Introduction

The narrator is one of the oldest elements of literature, with a history as long as human culture itself. In ancient narrative traditions, the narrator was not merely a literary device but also a bearer and transmitter of collective memory, national traditions, and cultural values. Narrative therefore played a central role in preserving earlier poetry, and epic literature became one of the oldest narrative forms among nations. Like modern writers, ancient storytellers used narrators to convey events and organize the story world. The narrator may thus be regarded as the author's representative in the text: the figure who recounts the story and sets it in motion, although he/she is not necessarily its creator. In classical narrative texts, the narrator often occupies a transcendent, almost godlike position; in later periods, especially after the Renaissance and with the rise of the modern novel, this position becomes earthlier and more artistic. Theorists have accordingly classified narrators according to their narrative level, point of view, degree of knowledge, and distance from events. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, as a foundational work of Persian literature, has a strong narrative structure and can be productively examined through modern narratological concepts.

Methodology, Review of Literature and Purpose

Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is a foundational text of Persian literature whose narrative structure combines epic, mythological, and historical elements. For this reason, each of its stories displays different patterns of narrator presence and narrative technique. Among these stories, "Rostam and Sohrab" holds a special place because it joins epic grandeur with tragic intensity. In this story, the narrator moves through several layers, from external narration to the internal narration of characters.

This study is descriptive-analytical and is based on classical narratology and its later developments. Its purpose is to analyze the layers of narration in the story and to determine the type, level, and function of the narrator in selected parts of the text.

* Prof in Persian Language and Literature, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ahvaz, Iran.
mo.salehi@scu.ac.ir

Article Info: Received: 2025-05-30, **Accepted:** 2025-12-06

COPYRIGHTS ©2026 The author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, as long as the Original authors and source are cited. No permission is required from the authors or the publisher.

The research begins with an examination of the story based on Jalal Khaleghi-Motlagh's critical edition of the *Shahnameh*. The sections in which the narrator's presence is more prominent are then selected and analyzed through concepts such as point of view, degree of knowledge, narrative distance, type of report, and the narrator's manner of evaluating characters and events. This method makes it possible to trace changes in the narrator's role from scene to scene and to clarify how narrative authority is distributed throughout the story.

Discussion

The analysis shows that the narrator in "Rostam and Sohrab" can be studied in two main forms: extradiegetic and intradiegetic. Ferdowsi, as the overall organizing voice of the *Shahnameh*, begins the work in the name of God and often narrates through voices that he occasionally mentions, thereby distinguishing his position as author from the position of the narrator. In "Rostam and Sohrab," the dominant narrator stands beyond the story world and possesses an almost godlike awareness. He knows the scenes, time, characters, and their thoughts; therefore, he functions as an omniscient narrator. At the beginning of the story, he uses an apt opening to prepare the audience for the tragic atmosphere and to reveal his superior knowledge of the narrative outcome.

At certain moments, this narrator is interventionist. He judges, advises, interprets causes, and comments on life, death, destiny, and divine will. These interventions show that the narrator is not always a neutral reporter but sometimes guides the reader's understanding of events and frames the tragedy within a broader moral and philosophical horizon. Yet the narration is not limited to this mode. In many scenes, the narrator records actions, dialogues, and inner states with relative impartiality. In such cases, he appears to withdraw from the scene and becomes what may be called an absent narrator. This withdrawal allows the characters' motives and viewpoints to emerge more clearly and gives the narrative a dialogic quality.

The story also includes moments in which narration is entrusted to characters within the story. These intradiegetic narrators temporarily replace the omniscient voice. For example, when Rostam sends Goudarz to Kavus for the healing potion, or when characters report what they have seen, the narrative perspective becomes limited and character-based. In monologues such as Sohrab's words after the death of Zendeh-Razm, the hero reveals his own thoughts and feelings directly. Likewise, in dialogues such as Rostam's exchange with Hojir and Sohrab's encounter with Gordafarid, the narrator reports the scene with minimal intervention, and the dramatic quality of the story becomes stronger. As a result, the narrative moves beyond a single voice and approaches a relatively polyphonic structure. The coexistence of these levels shows that Ferdowsi's narration is not static; rather, it changes according to the emotional, dramatic, and interpretive needs of each episode. This layered movement also explains how the story combines epic distance with personal and tragic immediacy.

Conclusion

This study examined the tragic story of "Rostam and Sohrab" from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* in terms of the narrator's position and participation in narration. The results show that the story begins with an omniscient narrator who speaks from a metanarrative position. He is aware of all events, sometimes anticipates or recalls them, and in some cases intervenes by taking a clear stance. In descriptive and purely narrative sections, however, he mainly represents the speech, thought, and action of the characters, a technique that helps preserve the documentary and epic character of the story. In other sections, the characters themselves become narrators of parts of the event, and the narration shifts from omniscient reporting to direct character-based speech. This shift reveals the interaction between external and internal narration in the *Shahnameh*. Therefore, although the dominant narrative mode in "Rostam and Sohrab" is extradiegetic, omniscient, and often interventionist, the story also contains clear signs of intradiegetic narration. The narrator's presence is thus flexible, layered, and central to the tragic effect of the narrative, because it both organizes the events and deepens the reader's emotional response to the inevitable catastrophe. Overall, the narrator functions as a structural, interpretive, and emotional mediator between the poet, the characters, and the audience.

Keywords: narrative, narrator, Rostam and Sohrab, *Shahnameh*.

References

Abbott, H. P. (2018). *Narrative literacy* (R. Pourazar & N. Ashrafi, Trans.). Atraf. [In Persian]

Abbott, H. P. (2021). *The Cambridge introduction to narrative* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Alber, J., & Richardson, B. (Eds.). (2020). *Unnatural narratology: Extensions, revisions, and challenges*. The Ohio State University Press.

Bal, M. (2009). *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative* (3rd ed.). University of Toronto Press.

Bameshki, S. (2014). *Narratology of the stories of the Masnavi* (2nd ed.). Hermes. [In Persian]

Bi-Niyaz, F. (2009). *An introduction to fiction writing and narratology, with a brief note on the pathology of the Iranian novel and short story* (2nd ed.). Afraz. [In Persian]

Fallah, G. A. (2008). Dialogue in the *Shahnameh*. *Journal of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities*, 16(60), 83–105. [In Persian]

Ghafouri, F. (2010). A comparative study of narrative focalization in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and Molana's *Masnavi*. *Literary Aesthetics*, 2(3), 1–32. [In Persian]

Haji Aghababaei, M. R. (2023). *Narratology: Theory and application* (2nd ed.). Mehrandish. [In Persian]

Herman, D. (2009). *Basic elements of narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Herman, D., Jahn, M., & Ryan, M.-L. (Eds.). (2005). *Routledge encyclopedia of narrative theory*. Routledge.

Herman, D., Phelan, J., Rabinowitz, P. J., Richardson, B., & Warhol, R. (2012). *Narrative theory: Core concepts and critical debates*. The Ohio State University Press.

Hühn, P., Meister, J. C., Pier, J., & Schmid, W. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of narratology* (2nd ed.). De Gruyter.

Jahn, M. (2018). Narratology. In *Principles of narrative theory* (M. Ragheb, Trans.; 1st ed.). Qoqnoos. [In Persian]

Khaleghi-Motlagh, J. (1993). *Ancient flower-wounds* (A. Dehbashi, Ed.). Markaz. [In Persian]

Khaleghi-Motlagh, J. (Ed.). (2015). *A critical edition of the Shahnameh* (4 vols.). Sokhan. [In Persian]

Khodadadi, F., Abdollahiyan, H., & Ashourlou, S. (2014). Features and cognitive aspects of omniscient narrator in fiction. *Contemporary Persian Literature*, 4(4), 117–142. [In Persian]

Mohammadi Fesharaki, M., & Khodadadi, F. (2018). *A descriptive dictionary of narratological terms* (1st ed.). Soureh Mehr. [In Persian]

Okhovat, A. (1992). *The grammar of story*. Farda. [In Persian]

Payandeh, H. (2022). *Literary criticism with a narratological approach* (2nd ed.). Niloofar. [In Persian]

Radmanesh, S., Ghavam, A., & Ashrafzadeh, R. (2022). A descriptive comparison of ancient narratives based on contemporary narratology. *Quarterly Journal of Persian Language and Literature*, 14(51), 117–152. [In Persian]

Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2022). *Narrative fiction: Contemporary poetics* (A. Hari, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Niloofar. [In Persian]

Ryan, M.-L., & Thon, J.-N. (Eds.). (2014). *Storyworlds across media: Toward a media-conscious narratology*. University of Nebraska Press.

Sadeghi Mohsenabad, H. (2020). The interventionist narrator in the first Persian novels: The challenge of realism. *Literary Criticism*, 13(52), 169–204. [In Persian]

Safa, Z. (2013). *History of Iranian literature* (Vol. 1). Qoqnoos. [In Persian]

Safa, Z. (2019). *Epic writing in Iran*. Amir Kabir. [In Persian]

Shokri, Y., & Shakouri, S. (2022). Narratology of the Seven Trials of Esfandiar based on Genette's theory. *Research Journal of Fictional Literature*, 1(38), 1–27. [In Persian]

Thon, J.-N. (2016). *Transmedial narratology and contemporary media culture*. University of Nebraska Press.