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A Stylistic Analysis of Selected Poem by Saib Tabrizi: Foregrounding, Diction, Figurative Language and Symbolism

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ABSTRACT

Safavid Dynasty (1501–1736) marked a vibrant era for Persian poetry, most notably through the rise of Sabk-e Hindi (the Indian Style)—a movement celebrated for its complex symbolism, fresh imagery, and philosophical depth. At the forefront of this shift was Saib Tabrizi, whose unique voice left a lasting mark on Persian literature. While existing scholarship frequently centers on the romantic and mystical dimensions of his work, his specific stylistic techniques remain relatively understudied. To bridge this gap, this study applies Geoffrey Leech's stylistic framework to analyze two of Tabrizi's poems, translated by Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian. Employing a qualitative, descriptive approach rooted in textual analysis, this paper examines how Tabrizi utilizes diction, figurative language, and symbolism to shape thematic meaning. Supplemented by an array of scholarly literature on Persian stylistics, this research aims to enrich the broader field of Persian poetic analysis while offering fresh insights into Tabrizi's literary craftsmanship.

Keywords: Saib Tabrizi, Stylistics, Persian Poetry, Safavid Dynasty, Geoffrey Leech

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INTRODUCTION

The Safavid Dynasty (1501–1736) marked one of the most significant periods in Iranian history, not only politically but also culturally and intellectually. By reunifying the Persian lands under a single rule and establishing Twelver Shi'ism as the official state religion, the Safavid rulers shaped a new cultural identity that stimulated remarkable developments in literature, philosophy, art, and religious thought. Although the Safavid era has sometimes been regarded as a period of decline in comparison with earlier classical Persian literature, recent scholarship argues that it was, in fact, a vibrant age of literary and artistic creativity, during which poets developed innovative forms of expression and expanded the symbolic and imaginative dimensions of Persian poetry (Melville, 2021; Milani, n.d.).

Among the most influential literary developments of the Safavid period was the emergence of *Sabk-e Hindi* (the Indian Style), a poetic movement characterized by intricate metaphors, original imagery, dense symbolism, and philosophical reflection. Rather than relying on direct expression, poets employed complex figurative language to convey emotional, mystical, and intellectual ideas, encouraging readers to interpret multiple layers of meaning. These stylistic innovations became the defining characteristics of seventeenth-century Persian poetry and reached their highest expression in the works of Saeb Tabrizi.

At the heart of this movement stood Saeb Tabrizi (1601–1676), widely celebrated as one of the Safavid era's most brilliant literary figures. As documented in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Saeb was incredibly prolific, writing thousands of ghazals and cementing his role as the definitive voice of the Indian Style. His work stands out for its highly original phrasing, intellectual depth, and inventive allegories, making his portfolio a vital area of study for Persian literary scholars.

While Saeb's work has been explored from multiple angles, existing research heavily favors thematic analysis over linguistic structure. For instance, the study “Love in the Poetry of Saib Tabrizi” explores how he categorizes love into earthly, virtual, spiritual, and mystical realms. While that study successfully highlights how Saeb relies on allegory and comparison to convey spiritual themes, it ultimately leaves the underlying linguistic mechanics unexamined.

Meanwhile, stylistics has proven to be a powerful tool elsewhere. A study in *Prasasti: Journal of Linguistics* successfully applied Geoffrey Leech's stylistic framework to Shakespeare's Sonnets 18 and 29, proving that analyzing phonological, lexical, and semantic choices can uncover how poetic meaning is manufactured. However, that research focused entirely on English Renaissance literature rather than Middle Eastern poetic traditions.

Consequently, a clear gap exists: scholarship on Saeb Tabrizi remains anchored in historical, thematic, and mystical interpretations, while the structural, stylistic application of Leech's theory to his verse remains unexplored. This paper addresses that gap by launching a stylistic investigation into two of Saeb's selected works.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to dissect the specific stylistic mechanisms Saeb Tabrizi uses, using Geoffrey Leech's stylistic theory to reveal how diction, figurative language, and symbolism work together to generate thematic depth.



To achieve this, the paper utilizes a descriptive qualitative design centered on close textual analysis. The primary data are drawn from Saeb Tabrizi's poem, utilizing the English translations by Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian published in Lunch Ticket. Contextual and theoretical support is drawn from a variety of academic journals, books, and reference materials specializing in Persian literary history and linguistic stylistics.

The analytical backbone of this research is Geoffrey Leech's 1969 stylistic framework, which posits that a writer's specific linguistic choices are directly responsible for the text's aesthetic impact and ultimate meaning. By isolating and analyzing Saeb's diction, figurative expressions, and symbolic imagery through this lens, this study aims to expand the boundaries of Persian poetic stylistics and offer a richer appreciation of Saeb Tabrizi's structural mastery.

Stylistic Analysis of the Poem

Translated Poem

*I hear God's promise of forgiveness in the babbling wine.
From the rubab, I hear the clang of Paradise's gate.
This is the difference when we hear:
you hear the door closing, I hear it opening.
Why not lie, like a rug, at the threshold of the tavern?
I hear hearts throb there beneath the dust.
The rose-colored wine running through my winding veins
sounds to me more lucid than the stream's burbling.
I see lucidly the veiled phantoms.
I hear the gazelle's footfalls in my dreams.
Everything I see unveiled sings
a song that dyes the gallows' rope.
I hear Gabriel, archangel of love, fluttering
every moment in the cracks of my restless heart.
Moonlight smells like jasmine.
Has it kissed my beloved's cheeks?
Your garments smell like smoke.
Have you been at the feast of the heated hearts?
Such raw words, Saeb, come from such dark hearts:
the ones who feel protected by that sun.*

Lexical Features

The poem demonstrates Saeb Tabrizi's mastery in selecting lexical items that simultaneously convey aesthetic beauty, spiritual contemplation, and philosophical reflection. According to Geoffrey Leech (1969), lexical features concern the deliberate selection of words that shape readers' interpretation and contribute to the artistic effect of a literary work. Rather than functioning merely as vocabulary, lexical choices become important stylistic devices that reveal the poet's worldview and thematic concerns. In this



poem, Saeb combines religious vocabulary, natural imagery, emotional expressions, and sensory language to construct a mystical atmosphere characteristic of Persian poetry during the Safavid period.

One of the most noticeable lexical characteristics is the predominance of **religious vocabulary**. Words and expressions such as *God*, *Paradise*, *Gabriel*, *forgiveness*, and *archangel of love* immediately establish a spiritual framework for the poem. The opening line,

"I hear God's promise of forgiveness in the babbling wine,"

introduces two lexical fields that appear contradictory at first glance: the sacred and the worldly. The noun *God* evokes divine authority and mercy, while *forgiveness* emphasizes one of the central concepts in Islamic spirituality. However, these religious expressions are unexpectedly associated with *wine*, creating an imaginative combination that immediately attracts readers' attention. From a stylistic perspective, this lexical choice produces a striking aesthetic effect because the poet does not describe divine forgiveness through conventional religious language but through symbolic imagery. This demonstrates Saeb's preference for indirect expression, a defining characteristic of **Sabk-e Hindi**, where abstract spiritual concepts are communicated through imaginative and multilayered language.

The lexical choice of *Paradise* in the second line further strengthens the religious atmosphere:

"From the rubab, I hear the clang of Paradise's gate."

Rather than describing Paradise visually, Saeb connects it with sound by associating it with the music of the *rubab*, a traditional stringed instrument widely known in Persian literary culture. This lexical combination reflects the poet's belief that artistic beauty and spiritual experience are inseparable. The noun *Paradise* no longer functions solely as an Islamic theological concept but also as a poetic destination that can be perceived through artistic inspiration. Such integration of religious imagery and artistic expression reflects the intellectual climate of Safavid Persian literature, in which poetry frequently served as a medium for expressing mystical devotion.

Another significant lexical field in the poem is **nature**. Words such as *moonlight*, *jasmine*, *gazelle*, *stream*, *wine*, and *sun* appear throughout the poem and enrich its descriptive quality. These natural elements are not introduced merely to create beautiful scenery but to communicate spiritual truths. For instance, the expression,

"Moonlight smells like jasmine,"

combines two natural elements to evoke serenity, purity, and beauty. Moonlight traditionally symbolizes illumination and guidance, whereas jasmine is associated with fragrance, purity, and elegance in Persian poetic convention. By combining these lexical items, Saeb creates an atmosphere in which nature becomes a reflection of divine beauty. Such treatment of nature is consistent with the poetic tradition of the Safavid era, where the physical world often functions as a mirror of the spiritual world.

Similarly, the image of the *gazelle* in

"I hear the gazelle's footfalls in my dreams,"

extends beyond its literal meaning. In classical Persian poetry, the gazelle frequently symbolizes beauty, grace, and the elusive beloved. Saeb employs this familiar image while transforming it into an auditory experience rather than a visual one. This innovative use of imagery reflects one of Saeb Tabrizi's defining stylistic characteristics. Rather than abandoning traditional Persian poetic conventions, he revitalizes familiar images by assigning them fresh and unexpected meanings, a feature widely recognized in studies of his Indian Style poetry (Özyurt, 2023).



The repeated lexical item *hear* indicates the poet's preference for auditory perception over visual perception. As a lexical choice, the verb reinforces the poem's emphasis on inward spiritual awareness rather than physical observation.

The combination of religious and natural lexical fields throughout the poem demonstrates Saeb Tabrizi's distinctive poetic style. By integrating spiritual concepts with images drawn from nature, he constructs original thematic expressions that encourage symbolic interpretation. This tendency has also been identified as one of the defining characteristics of Saeb's poetry (Adli & Amani, 2021).

Foregrounding

One of the most noticeable stylistic features in the poem is **foregrounding**, especially through repetition and contrast. According to Leech (1969), foregrounding refers to language that stands out because it is repeated or presented in an unusual way. Contemporary stylistic studies further explain that foregrounding is achieved through repetition and linguistic deviation, allowing certain expressions to become more prominent and encouraging readers to explore deeper layers of meaning within a poem (Alhaqbani, 2024). In this poem, foregrounding helps readers focus on the speaker's spiritual experience and understand the deeper meaning behind the poem.

The most obvious example of foregrounding is the repeated expression "**I hear.**" This phrase appears several times throughout the poem:

"I hear God's promise of forgiveness in the babbling wine."

"From the rubab, I hear the clang of Paradise's gate."

"I hear hearts throb there beneath the dust."

"I hear the gazelle's footfalls in my dreams."

"I hear Gabriel, archangel of love, fluttering every moment in the cracks of my restless heart."

The repetition of "**I hear**" creates rhythm and unity throughout the poem. More importantly, it emphasizes that the speaker experiences the world through spiritual awareness rather than ordinary observation. Instead of describing what he sees, the speaker repeatedly focuses on what he hears, suggesting that inner understanding is more important than physical sight.

The repeated pattern also increases the salience of the expression "*I hear*," making it the central stylistic feature of the poem. By drawing readers' attention to this recurring structure, the repetition reinforces the speaker's spiritual perception and guides readers toward the poem's deeper symbolic meaning (Nørgaard et al., 2018).

Another example of foregrounding appears in the line:

"You hear the door closing, I hear it opening."

This sentence presents two opposite ways of seeing the same situation. While other people hear a door closing, the speaker hears it opening. The contrast attracts the reader's attention because it shows that the speaker interprets life differently. Instead of seeing an ending, he sees a new beginning. This optimistic perspective reflects spiritual faith and trust in God's guidance.

Foregrounding is also created through unusual expressions. For example,

"Moonlight smells like jasmine."

Normally, moonlight can only be seen, not smelled. By combining sight and smell, Saeb creates a unique poetic expression that makes readers imagine the beauty of nature in a different way. This unusual



combination encourages readers to think beyond the literal meaning and appreciate the symbolic quality of the poem.

Another example is:

"Everything I see unveiled sings."

Objects or ideas cannot literally sing. However, by giving this human ability to everything around him, the poet suggests that all creation praises God. This expression strengthens the spiritual atmosphere of the poem and shows that nature is closely connected with the Divine.

These foregrounding devices are also characteristic of **Sabk-e Hindi**, the dominant literary style during the Safavid period. This style is known for its creative imagery, unexpected expressions, and symbolic language. Rather than explaining ideas directly, poets encouraged readers to think deeply about the meanings behind their words. Saeb Tabrizi demonstrates this style by using repetition, contrast, and unusual language to express spiritual experiences.

Overall, the foregrounding in this poem not only makes the language more artistic but also helps communicate the poem's main message. Through repetition, contrast, and deviation from ordinary language, Saeb invites readers to reflect on divine love, spiritual awareness, and the difference between physical perception and inner understanding. These stylistic features show how language can become an effective medium for expressing the religious and philosophical ideas that were central to Safavid Persian literature.

Figurative Language

Figurative language is one of the most important stylistic elements in Saeb Tabrizi's poetry. Rather than expressing ideas directly, Saeb uses figurative language to convey spiritual, philosophical, and emotional meanings. Through metaphors, personification, paradox, imagery, and simile, he transforms ordinary experiences into symbolic expressions that invite readers to think beyond the literal meaning of the poem. This creative use of language is one of the defining characteristics of **Sabk-e Hindi**, a literary style that flourished during the Safavid period and is known for its imaginative imagery and complex symbolism.

Recent studies on Persian poetry also show that symbolic imagery is one of the most distinctive features of the Persian poetic tradition. Images such as roses, gardens, wine, the night, and light rarely function as literal descriptions but instead represent spiritual, philosophical, and emotional concepts. This symbolic system became increasingly sophisticated during the Safavid period, particularly in the development of Sabk-e Hindi, where poets emphasized dense figurative associations and imaginative expression (Shahnazari et al., 2025).

The dominant figurative device in the poem is **metaphor**. One of the clearest examples appears in the opening line:

"I hear God's promise of forgiveness in the babbling wine."

The word **wine** should not be understood literally. In the tradition of Persian mystical poetry, wine often symbolizes divine love, spiritual joy, or closeness to God. Therefore, the speaker does not suggest drinking wine in a physical sense but uses it as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment and God's mercy. By combining the concepts of *wine* and *forgiveness*, Saeb presents an image in which spiritual experience becomes more meaningful than material pleasure. This metaphor reflects the influence of Sufi thought,



which frequently uses symbolic language to describe the relationship between human beings and the Divine. This interpretation is consistent with studies of Persian symbolism, which identify wine imagery as one of the dominant symbolic fields in later Persian lyric poetry. Rather than referring merely to intoxication, wine frequently represents mystical experience, spiritual ecstasy, and divine love (Shahnazari et al., 2025).

Saeb Tabrizi's metaphors are not merely decorative but function as cognitive and rhetorical devices that transform ordinary images into complex philosophical meanings. This characteristic can be observed in the symbolic use of wine, which conveys spiritual enlightenment and divine love rather than its literal meaning (Losensky, 2024).

Another important metaphor appears in the following lines:

"I hear Gabriel, archangel of love, fluttering every moment in the cracks of my restless heart."

In this expression, the **heart** functions as a metaphor for the center of human emotions and spiritual awareness. It is not simply a physical organ but represents the place where faith, love, and inner reflection exist. Likewise, **Gabriel** symbolizes divine inspiration and God's guidance. The image of Gabriel moving within the speaker's heart suggests that spiritual wisdom comes from within and that divine messages are constantly present for those who are willing to receive them.

The poem also contains several examples of **personification**, in which human qualities are given to non-human objects or abstract ideas. One example can be found in the line:

"Everything I see unveiled sings."

Here, everything around the speaker is described as being able to **sing**, although in reality objects cannot perform human actions. This personification suggests that all creation praises God and participates in expressing divine beauty. Instead of describing nature as silent, Saeb presents it as alive and spiritually connected with the Creator. This idea reflects the mystical belief that the universe itself reveals God's presence.

Another example appears in the line:

"Moonlight smells like jasmine."

Although this expression is often identified as imagery, it also contains an unusual combination of senses known as **synesthetic imagery**. Moonlight is normally associated with sight, while jasmine is associated with smell. By combining these two senses, Saeb creates a beautiful and imaginative expression that allows readers to experience nature in a more emotional and spiritual way. This type of figurative language is frequently found in Safavid Persian poetry, where poets sought to create fresh and surprising images.

Furthermore, Persian poetry often associates natural imagery with symbolic meanings rather than literal description. Floral imagery, gardens, and other natural elements function as recurring symbolic motifs that express beauty, spirituality, and emotional experience, allowing poets to communicate abstract ideas through concrete sensory images (Shahnazari et al., 2025).

The poem is also rich in **imagery**, which appeals to the reader's senses and makes the spiritual experience more vivid. Auditory imagery is particularly dominant because the speaker repeatedly emphasizes sounds rather than visual images. Expressions such as:

"I hear God's promise of forgiveness..."

"I hear the clang of Paradise's gate."

"I hear hearts throb beneath the dust."



allow readers to imagine sounds that are connected not only with the physical world but also with spiritual experience.

Visual imagery appears in descriptions such as:

"The rose-colored wine..."

and

"the veiled phantoms."

These expressions create clear mental pictures while also suggesting symbolic meanings related to beauty, mystery, and spiritual revelation.

Olfactory imagery can be found in:

"Moonlight smells like jasmine."

and

"Your garments smell like smoke."

These descriptions engage the reader's sense of smell and contribute to the poem's emotional atmosphere. The combination of auditory, visual, and olfactory imagery creates a rich sensory experience that reflects the speaker's mystical perception of the world.

Another important figure of speech is **paradox**. The line,

"You hear the door closing, I hear it opening."

contains two opposite ideas presented at the same time. Literally, a door cannot be both closing and opening from the same perspective. However, the paradox emphasizes the difference between ordinary perception and spiritual understanding. While others may see disappointment or the end of a journey, the speaker sees hope and new opportunities. This contrast encourages readers to think about how faith can change the way people interpret life's experiences.

The poem also includes **simile**, although it appears less frequently than metaphor. For example:

"Why not lie, like a rug, at the threshold of the tavern?"

The comparison **"like a rug"** suggests humility and complete surrender. A rug lies quietly beneath those who walk over it, and the speaker uses this image to express the importance of humility before entering the tavern. In Persian mystical poetry, the **tavern** often symbolizes a place of spiritual awakening rather than a place for drinking. Therefore, the simile reinforces the idea that spiritual growth begins with humility and selflessness.

Overall, the figurative language in this poem plays a crucial role in expressing Saeb Tabrizi's spiritual vision. Instead of explaining religious ideas directly, he communicates them through symbols, metaphors, personification, paradoxes, and sensory imagery. These stylistic choices make the poem more imaginative while encouraging readers to interpret its deeper meanings. Moreover, the extensive use of figurative language reflects the characteristics of **Sabk-e Hindi**, which emphasizes originality, symbolic expression, and intellectual reflection. As one of the leading poets of the Safavid period, Saeb Tabrizi demonstrates how figurative language can transform simple words into profound reflections on divine love, human spirituality, and the relationship between humanity and God.

Interpretation of Meaning

The analysis of lexical features, foregrounding, and figurative language shows that the first poem primarily explores the themes of **divine love, spiritual awareness, and the relationship between**



humanity and God. Through religious vocabulary, symbolic natural imagery, and repeated expressions such as “*I hear*,” Saeb Tabrizi portrays spirituality as an inner experience rather than something perceived only through physical senses. The poem encourages readers to develop spiritual insight in order to recognize God’s presence in everyday life.

Therefore, the poem demonstrates how stylistic elements not only enhance its aesthetic quality but also communicate the spiritual and intellectual values that characterize Persian mystical poetry, where symbolism functions as a bridge between human experience and the Divine (Ashraf, 2021).

Furthermore, the poem reflects the characteristics of **Safavid Persian literature**, particularly the **Sabk-e Hindi** style, which is known for its imaginative imagery, symbolic language, and philosophical depth. Instead of presenting religious ideas directly, Saeb conveys them through metaphors, paradoxes, and sensory imagery, allowing readers to interpret multiple layers of meaning. Therefore, the poem demonstrates how stylistic elements not only enhance its aesthetic quality but also communicate the spiritual and intellectual values that became prominent in Persian poetry during the Safavid period.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed poem by Saeb Tabrizi using Geoffrey Leech’s stylistic theory, focusing on lexical features, foregrounding, figurative language, and the interpretation of meaning. The findings show that Saeb Tabrizi uses carefully chosen words, repetition, and figurative expressions to convey spiritual, philosophical, and moral ideas. His stylistic choices not only create aesthetic beauty but also help readers understand the deeper meanings of the poems.

The poem mainly explores the themes of divine love and spiritual enlightenment through religious vocabulary, symbolic imagery, and the repeated expression “*I hear*,” which emphasizes inner spiritual awareness. These findings show that language plays an important role in shaping the themes and messages of the poem.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Saeb Tabrizi poem reflect the characteristics of **Safavid Persian literature**, especially the **Sabk-e Hindi** style, which is known for its symbolic language, imaginative imagery, and philosophical ideas. Geoffrey Leech’s stylistic theory helps explain how linguistic features contribute to the meaning of the poems. It is hoped that this study will encourage further research on Persian poetry and other literary works from the Safavid period using stylistic approaches.

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