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Another Avant-Garde: Rethinking Tondar Kia's Approach to Poetic Expression in a Transnational Context

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the concept of avant-garde artistic expression and argues that it should be regarded as a transcultural phenomenon that surpasses geographical boundaries. It emphasizes the importance of adopting a transnational perspective to fully grasp the intricate interactions between diverse avant-garde movements across cultures and regions. To illustrate this point, the article focuses on the Iranian avant-garde poet Tondar Kia, challenging the perception that his work is merely a replication of Western movements. Instead, it proposes that a transnational lens enables a more comprehensive understanding of the distinctive contributions made by Iranian avant-garde poets to the global avant-garde movement. The article extensively examines Kia's work within the local context of Persian literary evolution while also shedding light on the transnational aspects present in his compositions. It highlights Kia's critique of established aesthetic norms, particularly the notion of organic unity, and explores his innovative approaches to rhythm, tone, and polyphony in Persian poetry.

KEYWORDS: Avant-garde movements, global south modernisms, Persian avant-garde, transnational perspective, Tondar Kia, aesthetic innovation

In the era of great transformation at the turn of the twentieth century, a wave of modern pioneer schools of art emerged, driven by

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the profound societal, economic, and political changes that swept across the globe. It was a time of unprecedented growth in human knowledge, both in the realms of science and in the exploration of diverse cultures. In response to these shifting tides, artists rose to the occasion, offering their creative expressions as a critique of the consequences of modernization and seeking to unveil alternative facets of this new age. The expanding modern city, with its deepening shadows and growing sense of alienation, prompted a profound shift in thinking. The European intelligentsia, in particular, found themselves questioning the very essence of modernity. The rapid advancements in science and technology, while promising great advancements, seemed to have little impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people, especially during the economic crises of the 1890s and the aftermath of the devastating world war.

In the face of these realities, artists sought to unravel the complexities of this changing world through their works. They delved into uncharted territories of creativity, challenging established norms and daring to explore new artistic frontiers. These pioneering schools of art became vehicles for expressing the disillusionment with the prevailing order and for envisioning alternative possibilities for human existence. Thus, within the tumultuous backdrop of societal upheavals and disillusionment, the artists of this era embarked on a profound artistic journey, using their creativity as a medium for questioning and reimagining the very essence of modernity.

This is the historical background that led to the emergence of avant-garde movements in Europe, which later spread to other parts of the world. After the emergence of avant-garde movements in Europe, "other avant-gardes" appeared in different parts of the world, incorporating elements from their respective local cultures. For example, in Iran, the emergence of the avant-garde was deeply influenced by the country's rich literary and artistic traditions, as well as by its complex political and social history. The Iranian avant-garde artists were keenly aware of their country's cultural heritage, and they sought to create a new art that was both modern and rooted in the Iranian experience. In this way, the rise of avant-garde movements in Europe can be seen as a catalyst for the development of new artistic expressions throughout the world. While these

movements were undoubtedly shaped by local cultures, they were also connected by a common desire to break free from traditional artistic conventions and to explore new forms of creative expression.

However, the chronology presented in the first paragraph and the center/margin model proposed for understanding the emergence of other avant-gardes perpetuates a West-centric historiography, which reinforces the idea of European modern artistic influence over the other modernisms in the world, particularly in the Global South. In other words, the background information presented in the opening lines of this article upholds a narrative of European artistic domination that regards European movements as the sole and genuine avant-garde artistic expression.

Many scholars of Persian literary modernism have adopted an ideologically biased historiographic model that seeks to establish the extent of European avant-garde poets' influence on Iranian counterparts. However, such studies often face a dilemma as they either overemphasize the role of the West in shaping Iranian avant-garde literature or entirely negate its existence in Iran. Both approaches are flawed as they fail to recognize that avant-garde artistic expression is a universal cultural phenomenon that transcends geographical boundaries.

Some theoreticians of avant-garde suggest, to avoid overlooking the global aspect of avant-garde, one should see it as a trans-cultural phenomenon as it highlights the global dimensions of the avant-garde. In addition, James M. Harding states that "the term transnationalism is itself contested, signifying both the processes of global hegemony and the practice of counterhegemonic resistance."¹

Ignoring the transnationalism of avant-garde art, scholars of Persian modernism tend to view the oeuvre of Tondar Kia as nothing but a mere imitation of the Dada movement. Such a viewpoint denies the possibility of a genuine avant-garde movement in Iran and reinforces the notion that the movement was entirely a product of Western influence. However, this article aims to illustrate that by adopting a transnational perspective, one can appreciate the complex interactions between various avant-garde movements across different cultures and regions. This perspective acknowledges that the avant-garde was not a monolithic entity but a diverse and

evolving movement shaped by local cultural and social contexts. By embracing this view, scholars of Persian modernism can better understand the unique contributions of Iranian avant-garde poets, like Tondar Kia, to the global avant-garde movement.

Furthermore, the article examines Tondar Kia's work within the local and transnational structures of artistic innovation. It discusses the different groups and subgroups within Persian literary modernism and locates the avant-garde poets within the context of these developments. It further explores Kia's critique of aesthetic norms, including the concept of organic unity, and his innovative approach to rhythm and polyphony in his poetry. The article highlights Kia's aim to challenge established norms and introduce a more flexible and disruptive form of expression.

Tondar Kia was born in 1909 in Tehran. In 1932, he went to France to pursue his higher education and completed his Ph.D. in Law in 1939. In 1938, Kia wrote a manifesto called *Nahib-ī Junbish-ī Adabī-i Shāhīn* (the Roar of the Literary Movement: Falcon), where he shared his ideas about starting a new literary movement. His thoughts aligned with the popular global avant-garde movements of the time. However, the attacks by Iranian classicists and modernists isolated him, and his publishing activity was limited. He completed the Falcon's collection intermittently from 1964 to 1975, but he refrained from appearing in literary circles or giving interviews. His final years, particularly those following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, are a mystery after his death in 1987.

Locating Tondar Kia's Avant-Garde Poetry within the Local and Transnational Structure of Artistic Innovation

First, one should locate Tondar Kia's work within the local structure of literary change in the first half of the twentieth century. During this period, Persian literary traditions were subject to reconstruction by two major groups, whose contributions and strategies varied significantly. Among these groups were the modernists, who can be further categorized into two subgroups: the neoclassical poets, who advocated for a gradual modernization of literary forms; and the Nimaic poets, who sought more radical amendments to classical poetics. The neoclassical poets were influenced by Nima Yushij's

(1897–1960) early attempts at incorporating neoromantic themes into Persian poetry and endeavored to adapt older templates to accommodate such themes. The Nimaic poets, in contrast, followed Nima's later works and espoused literary modernism as an alternative version of both classical and neoromantic poetry. These two subgroups are commonly referred to as *Chārpārah-Surāyān* (Four-liners) and Nimaic poets, respectively, by conventional literary historians.

The moderate branch of this movement was most notably championed by the poets associated with the literary magazine *Sokhan*, including Parviz Natel Khanlari (1914–1990), the magazine's chief editor, and Fereyduṅ Tavallali (1919–1985), who was among the earliest poets to experiment with less common classical templates, such as *dubayti-hā-yī payvastah* or *Chārpārah* (four-line). Conversely, the Nimaic poets, such as Mahdi Akhavan Sales (1929–1990), Ahmad Shamlu (1925–2000), and Forugh Farokhzad (1934–1967), embraced Nima's more radical suggestions for Persian poetry, in terms of both form and content.

Another group, the avant-garde poets, called for the destruction of all dominant, institutionalized literary traditions and the introduction of radical changes in poetic structures and aesthetics to achieve new forms of creativity. The most influential figures of this trend were Tondar Kia (1909–1987) and Hushang Irani (1925–1973). In addition, some moderate experimentalists, with less radical approach toward the literary change, recognized the need for change in the structure of poetic forms and sought to achieve a new understanding of poetic form and style, as suitable for a new age. Prominent experimentalist poets of this era include Mohammad Moqaddam (1909–1996), Zabih Behruz (1890–1972), and Shin Partow (1906–1997).

Common to all of these groups is their emphasis on the significance of exploration and experimentation in poetry, seeing literature as a tool for cultural revolution and transformation. However, not all of them pursue their desired cultural revolution and transformation through a forward-looking movement. For example, *Chārpārah-Surāyān* and Nimaic poets stressed the importance of compliance with classical aesthetics and preserving traditional roots, positioning their works as legitimate continuations of premodern

literature. They believed that by upholding these classical ideals, they could revitalize Iranian poetry and inject new life into its reformulated traditional forms. Despite their differing approaches, all of these groups shared a deep passion for the power of poetry to incite change and create cultural renewal.

The other two forward-looking avant-garde groups in Persian poetry emphasized on experimentation and innovation, aiming to challenge traditional forms and boundaries to create new possibilities for communication and meaning-making. Tondar Kia, among others, challenged the dominant cultural norms and values in a way that was not even bearable by the high modernists of his time. This avant-garde approach aimed to push the boundaries of acceptability in Persian poetry, seeking to create new forms of expression that could reshape the way Persian poets understood themselves. By breaking from the traditional forms and challenging societal norms, these poets paved the way for a new generation of poets who could explore new literary terrain with more creative freedom. In this sense, the avant-garde poets represented a cultural revolution and transformation that could potentially open up new possibilities for Persian poetry and helped to redefine the role of the poet in Persian society.

It also seems necessary to locate the Persian avant-garde poets, in this case Tondar Kia, at the transnational structure of avant-garde. In doing so, one needs to differentiate between different types of avant-garde. Scholars have challenged the categorization of avant-garde art movements due to their multifaceted nature, particularly after the 1990s. However, authorities in the field often refer to five commonly used types of avant-garde. These five avant-gardes, as Richard Schechner states, are (1) historical avant-garde, (2) current avant-garde, (3) forward-looking avant-garde, (4) tradition-seeking avant-garde, and (5) intercultural avant-garde.²

The historical avant-garde refers to a period of artistic and cultural innovation that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Artists associated with the historical avant-garde sought to break with traditional artistic conventions and to create new forms of creative expression. Examples of the historical avant-garde include movements such as Futurism, Dada, and

Surrealism. The current avant-garde refers to contemporary artists who continue to push the boundaries of traditional artistic conventions and to explore new forms of creative expression. Examples of the current avant-garde might include artists working in the fields of performance art, experimental theater, and digital media.

The forward-looking avant-garde refers to artists who are focused on imagining and creating a better future. These artists often draw on the latest philosophical, scientific, and technological developments to envision new possibilities for human society. The tradition-seeking avant-garde, on the other hand, refers to artists who are interested in reviving and reinterpreting traditional forms of artistic expression. These artists may seek to reclaim forgotten or marginalized cultural practices and bring them into dialogue with contemporary artistic movements. Finally, the intercultural avant-garde refers to artists who draw on multiple cultural traditions to create new forms of artistic expression. These artists may seek to transcend cultural boundaries and create a shared artistic language that reflects the diversity of human experience.

It is important to note that an avant-garde work or movement, especially a non-Western one, can fall under more than one of the above categories. In other words, when it comes to Persian avant-garde, the works or movements cannot be classified as historical avant-garde. However, they may possess certain qualities that align with the forward-looking and intercultural types. The historical avant-garde refers to a European art movement that emerged in the 1890s. As such, the Persian avant-garde cannot be considered a historical avant-garde as it did not share the same time period as its European counterparts. On the other hand, there are instances where breaking away from the modernist traditions and engaging in dialogue with non-Persian cultures can be observed.

The main group of Persian modernist poets, especially Nimaic poets, may share a few features with the abovementioned different groups of the avant-garde. That is to say, Persian modern poetry sought to break with traditional artistic conventions and to create new forms of creative expression. Some of these modernists were also interested in reviving and reinterpreting traditional forms of artistic expression. However, one may argue that the term

avant-garde can be applied to the poets who challenged the tenets of both traditional and modernist establishments.

While the Nimaic poets shared some features with other groups of the avant-garde, their distinct approach to modernization warrants the label of “high modernists.” M. H. Abrams defines such a designation as being “marked by an unexampled range and rapidity of change”—and this stands true as pertains to them. Abrams locates the beginnings of the literary modernism movement in the 1890s and says high modernism had its onslaught after the first World War.³ Similarly, in modern Persian poetry, high modernism represents the second wave of literary modernization, where poets of “creed” implemented fast and radical changes within an old and rigid system.

The Nimaic poets occupy a unique space between gradualist four-liners and avant-garde/experimentalists, standing at the forefront of Persian poetry’s modernization. Their innovative approach to language, form, and content has transformed the genre and paved the way for future generations of poets while there is a clear line between Nimaic high modernism and literary avant-garde movements. According to Sheppard, high modernism is the apex of a movement that has its origins in Schiller and Kant’s aesthetics, which distinguishes art from life and beauty from sensuality. On the other hand, the historical avant-gardes, specifically Dada and Surrealism, aim to reconcile art and life by reuniting them. They define “life” as the ordinary, mass culture, the physical world, and the body’s vitality.⁴ It could be argued that Nima’s contemporary avant-garde poets, particularly Tondar Kia, also emphasized “life” as the everyday, mass culture, the material world, and the vitality of the body. This will be discussed further in the following sections of this article.

The following section reassesses Tondar Kia’s avant-garde poetry by examining how he integrates various features of different avant-garde categories to create a unique and original body of work. The following sections delve into how he uses forward-looking methods to revolutionize Persian poetry in comparison with other major groups involved in literary change during his time. Additionally, we explore how Kia reintegrates his art and life to create intercultural forms of artistic expression.

Radical Synthesis: An Experiment in Cross-Category Integration

When considering the five types of avant-garde, it can be argued that a forward-looking approach toward the process of literary change is also a common characteristic of most historical and current avant-garde movements. Looking at the early twentieth-century modern art manifestos, one may realize that almost all the pioneer artists of this period have focused on different aspects of social and cultural modernization and the necessity of adapting the art to the new era. Indeed, on the one hand, artists spent most of their careers on criticizing modernity, and on the other hand, portrayed themselves as the dignitaries of this modern society. However, the forward-looking avant-gardes did not deny the necessity of modernization. In other words, they fight against the official and conventional concept of modernity proposed by the political and cultural hegemony, while devising other forms of modernity in their works in order to weaponize their efforts toward activating their emancipatory potential.

Tondar Kia's chauvinist and pseudo-fascist leanings and his admiration for the ideology of cultural purification, a direct result of the trendy Iranian nationalist ideology of the time, can be seen as an attempt to relate the emancipatory potentials of avant-garde art. In other words, Kia's pseudo-fascist inclination was not just a personal preference; it was also reflective of his ideas about the "right" path of modernization. Kia, in his writings about the *Farā bashar* (superhuman) and some of his poems, attempts to indicate that the aesthetic innovations were integral to this transformation and that the role of the artist, from the very first steps of Persian literature, was to create a new national culture that would facilitate this process.⁵ However, these pseudo-fascist leanings also had darker implications, as his idea of the "superhuman" involved purging Iranian society of those deemed unfit or undesirable.

In addition, like many historical avant-gardes, Tondar Kia emphasizes psychological investigations in this period that led artists and intelligentsia to see art as a means of mental resistance against the corrupted trend of modernity of the real world. In his analysis of the rise of Surrealism, Kia explores the exploration of the unconscious mind, which ultimately resulted in a new perspective of the world

among intellectuals and artists. Additionally, he briefly touches on how this understanding of the unconscious mind influenced significant changes in the formal aspects of poetry.⁶

The freedom of the unconscious to realize its suppressed ideas was the shared motto among the majority of the artists in this period. An artist of this era sees releasing the unconscious mind as a way to reconstruct world's power relations. Jean Arp (1886–1966) gives precedence to art over the world's events and sees it as the cure for the madness of the age. He claims that art was born as a new vehicle for resistance or a peaceful weapon against reality:

Revolted by the butchery of the 1914 World War, we in Zurich devoted ourselves to the arts. While the guns rumbled in the distance, we sang, painted, made collages and wrote poems with all our might. We were seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would restore the balance between heaven and hell.⁷

Likewise, in the introductory manifesto of Vorticism titled *Long Live the Vortex!*, writers emphasize on developing their works of art into apt productions of their era by giving priority to the unconscious mind. They believe the only aspect of being a human that the artist can utilize to create works of art is the unconscious: “we need the unconsciousness of humanity—their stupidity, animalism and dreams.”⁸

Tondar Kia, in his discussions about the unconscious, however, deviates from the Freudian ideas that were popular among his peers. He even went so far as to translate and ridicule one of Sigmund Freud's essays. Instead, he loosely refers to a combination of chauvinistic ideas and Islamic mysticism as a doctrine, offering it as an alternative to the Western responses to the problems of modern humanity. According to Kia, Western civilization's focus on advancements in mechanism and technology has brought about unprecedented comfort and welfare for humans. However, he argues that these advancements have reached a point where they may now be causing discomfort and becoming increasingly unnecessary.⁹

One can see the divide in the behavior of Western avant-gardes toward new discoveries in science and technology during this era.

For instance, while British and German artists were criticizing the dark side of modernity, technological modernization, and its impact on ordinary people's quality of life, the enthusiasm of northern Italian artists about technology revealed itself in Futurism, which glorified the "urban life, technology, and speed."¹⁰ On the other hand, Kia as an avant-garde in the context of Global South modernisms, while expressing excitement about new scientific advancements, has a pessimistic point of view to what the West has to offer to "the others." Kia holds the belief that any aspect of modernization adopted from the West that may result in alterations in the forms of aesthetic innovation must take into account the compatibility of the end product with Persian culture. In his writings, Kia emphasizes the need to reevaluate theories and ideas, regardless of their global recognition, to meet the demands of the modernization process in Persian literature.

One may argue, by not adhering to the globally recognized principles of the modernist movements of his time, Kia attempts to maintain the anti-institutional nature of his works. Peter Bürger proposes a twofold definition of the avant-garde. He states that an avant-garde work should be seen as (1) "An attack on art as an institution"; and (2) "the coming into existence of a nonorganic work of art." Tondar Kia attacked institutionalized literature on two fronts. The first was traditional aesthetics that forces the artist to create works based on the established principles of classical art. The second was the new-born modern and high-modern movements that rapidly populated the literary mainstream and marginalized experimentalists and avant-gardes.

Nimaic modernism, although aiming to make fundamental changes to the aesthetic regime of Persian poetry, has shown a tradition-seeking approach toward its aesthetic innovations. In many instances, Nima roots his works in the dramatic poems of Nizāmī Ganjavī (1140–1202) to showcase the close connection of his innovations with the classical literary canon. Unlike Nima, Tondar Kia does not seek to position himself within the classical literary canon, but rather to break free from it and forge his own path. Tondar Kia's poetry is focused on radical innovation and creating something entirely new. He seeks to push the boundaries of what is possible in Persian poetry and to create a new form of aesthetic innovation that is uniquely his own.

An example that could clarify the difference mentioned earlier is the difference between the innovations in poetic forms in Nima and Tondar Kia. In traditional Persian poetry, meter is a highly structured system of rhythmic patterns that are based on the length and placement of syllables. Each line of poetry is composed of a specific number of syllables, and these syllables are arranged in patterns of long and short sounds that create a specific rhythm.

Nima, however, believed that traditional meter restricted the expressive potential of poetry, and that it created a monotony that prevented poets from fully exploring the possibilities of language. He challenged this traditional approach to meter by rearranging the rhythmic patterns and freeing the lines from the obligation of containing a particular number of syllables or prosodic feet so that the music of the poem is more in line with the natural rhythms of spoken language.

On the other hand, Tondar Kia seeks to create a more fluid and dynamic form of poetry where various characters, objects, and concepts have their unique voices and perspectives. In doing so, Tondar Kia not only attempts to break free from the monotonic and solidified structure of traditional prosody by challenging the length and placement of syllables in each line, he employs various strategies to create fresh poetic forms. For examples, Tondar Kia in many instances alternates colloquial light rhythms, approximated metric lines, traditional prosodic lines, and prose to achieve a more vibrant rhythm. Indeed, Tondar Kia continuously experiments with various poetic forms in order to dismantle any predetermined structures for poetic creation, including those suggested by high modernists who promote progressive ideas.

Challenging Organic Unity: Kia's Critique of Aesthetic Norms

Kia aims to challenge the established aesthetic norms in Persian literature also by questioning the concept of organic unity. This is yet another criterion elitist modernists employed to differentiate between high- and low-quality art. David Granger cites Samuel Taylor Coleridge's notes (1772–1834) as the most influential and categorical comments in shaping modernists' understanding of organic unity. Coleridge believes that a legitimate poem should have

components that mutually support and explain each other, harmonizing in proportion to create a larger whole.¹¹ However, Bürger argues that in avant-garde art, it is the contradictory relationship of heterogeneous elements that creates the whole, not the harmony and interdependence of different parts.¹² Kia rebels against the concept of organic unity on two levels: nonorganic poetic forms and the structure of books as collections of miscellaneous artworks.

Kia endeavors to merge various rhythms, tones, and voices in order to illustrate the fragmentation of narratives within his poetry. To accomplish this, he sought to establish a novel hybrid rhythmic system that combined elements of both prosody and prose, granting him the liberty to freely manipulate the rhythm and tone. In his explanation of this innovative system, he articulates the following:

Falcon is neither prose, nor verse, nor prose-poem, but it is all these three together at once. So, what is Falcon? Falcon is rhythmical, and the Falcon-writer has a rhythmical saying that starts off from the most rigid kinds of poetry and moves along prose-poems and finally arrives at the swiftest prose and thus forms the discourse in agreement with signification; the discourse of the living tongue.¹³

Kia proposes rhythmic systems that strive to dismantle the monotony inherent in traditional Persian poetry's standardized forms. These forms typically adhere to a fixed prosodic arrangement throughout the entire poem, thereby limiting the poet's ability to align the rhythm with the varying tones of different voices and settings within the composition. Kia's aim is to break free from these constraints and introduce a more flexible rhythmic structure that allows for greater adaptation to the diverse tonalities found within the poem. By doing so, he seeks to expand the expressive possibilities of Persian poetry, enabling a more nuanced and dynamic exploration of voice, settings, and narrative within his works.

Kia employs tonal fluctuations in a disruptive manner, giving rise to polyphonic forms within his poetry. These polyphonic forms serve to disturb the cohesive unity of the text by allowing multiple voices to interrupt and intrude upon one another. While Kia's poems indeed encompass various voices, it can be argued that the concept

of Bakhtinian polyphony is not directly applicable to the polyphonic mood found in his work. Bakhtin's notion typically refers to works where distinct voices or points of view interact on relatively equal terms. In Kia's poetry, however, there is minimal interaction or dialogue between the voices. Instead, the voices tend to compete for attention, pushing each other out of the scene and disrupting one another's narratives.

This irreconcilable inner struggle within Kia's poetry sets it apart from the Coleridgean concept of reconciling opposites. In Coleridge's conception, two opposing but interconnected elements of equal force come together to create a unity that manifests as a third force. In contrast, Kia's nonorganic form embraces a chaotic quality where various elements actively attack and disrupt one another, thereby undermining the interrelation among the elements and ultimately shattering the unity of the form. The dissonance and conflict within Kia's polyphonic compositions reflect a deliberate departure from harmonious resolution, showcasing a tumultuous and fragmented portrayal of conflicting voices and narratives. In other words, in Kia's nonorganic form, various elements attack each other to disrupt the interrelation among elements and consequently the unity of the form.

In Kia's poems, voices emerge in a simultaneous and disorderly manner, lacking organization or unity. Each voice relentlessly contends for its presence within the scene, which is predominantly occupied by the dominant voice of the poet or narrator. From the perspective of deconstructionists, such as Granger, the notion of "organicism" tends to sideline certain elements of the text in order to uphold its perceived "integrity and wholeness."¹⁴ Challenging the constrictive nature of organic unity, Kia endeavors to liberate aesthetically devalued aspects of Persian poetry, specifically the vulgar and unrefined voices. By giving prominence to these marginalized voices, he disrupts traditional hierarchies and defies conventional notions of poetic integrity. Kia's intention is to break free from the constraints imposed by a rigid structure that favors select elements and voices while suppressing others. In his pursuit of emancipation, Kia embraces the diversity of voices, allowing them to emerge and assert themselves in their raw and unfiltered form. By including the vulgar and unrefined, he challenges established norms and expands

the boundaries of poetic expression. This rebellious approach aims to destabilize the conventional expectations of poetic unity and disrupt the prevailing hierarchies within Persian poetry.

The second level of Kia's antagonism toward organic unity can be observed in the way that he juxtaposes literary and unliterary segments in his collections. His unconventional approach to presenting literature through miscellaneous collections challenges the traditional practices of Persian poets. By doing so, Kia disrupts the prevailing image of the refined poet who holds the poetic practice in high regard, instead embodying the persona of an irrational and rebellious avant-garde artist who fearlessly experiments with various genres. In other words, Kia's deliberate mixing of literary and unliterary elements in his collections serves as an assault on established norms and expectations. It undermines the hierarchical distinctions placed on different forms of literature and blurs the boundaries between high and low culture. This unconventional approach expands the possibilities of artistic expression and challenges the notion of a unified and cohesive literary work. This act of defiance, as noted by Prita Meier, is a common characteristic shared by many avant-gardes of the twentieth century:

Artists utilised artistic techniques, including montage, performance, found-object assemblage, pictorial abstraction, and the appropriation of vernacular (including non-Western) and mass media forms, to shock the viewer and reject perceived traditions in both art and life.¹⁵

Kia's books can be seen as compilations of various texts and visual arts that often have little relevance to the preceding texts or other images within the collection (see Figure 1–3). This deliberate approach challenges the notion of organicity, which demands a cohesive and harmonious arrangement of components with consistent structural integrity. By disregarding these imperatives, Kia opens up new possibilities for the Persian poet, providing them with the freedom to explore and experiment with different genres without being bound by their traditional boundaries.

In Kia's works, the fusion of unrelated texts and visuals disrupts the conventional expectations of a unified and coherent artistic

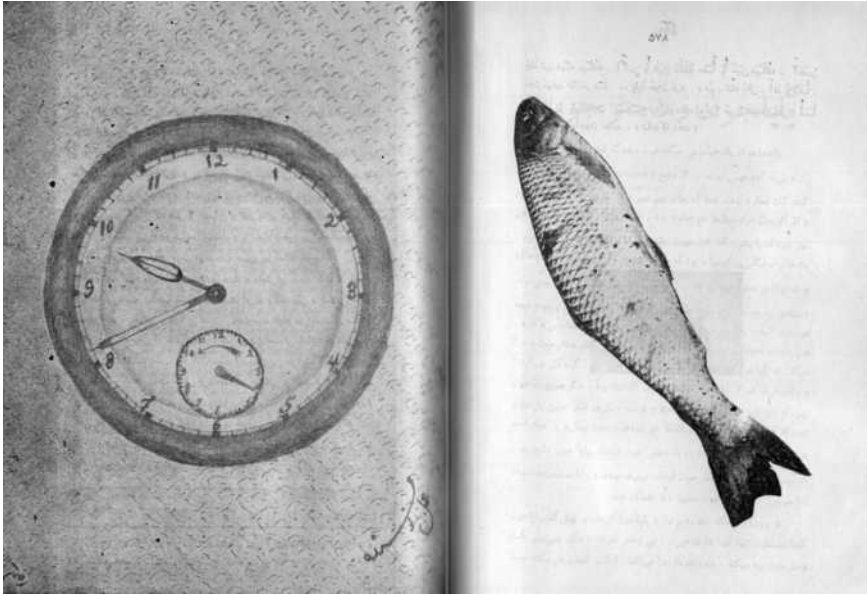


Figure 1 • Shāhīn 1970, a concrete poem and image of a fish.



Figure 2 • Shāhīn 1970, a collage (at the end of an essay).



Figure 3 • Shāhīn 1970, a collage (at the beginning of a short story).

composition. This disruption serves as a rejection of the strict adherence to homogeneity and structural consistency. Instead, Kia embraces a more eclectic and unconventional approach, where disparate elements coexist and interact within the same collection.

By breaking away from the constraints of organicity, Kia redefines the role of the Persian poet. The poet is no longer confined to a single genre or restricted by established distinctions. Instead, they are encouraged to push the boundaries and explore the intersections of different artistic forms. This new posture allows for a greater sense of artistic freedom and innovation, creating a space where experimentation and boundary-crossing become integral to the creative process.

Cosmopolitanism and Transcending Cultural Norms

As André Breton (1896–1966) articulated in a 1923 poem, “And since words have become over-life / Rather life,”¹⁶ pioneer postwar movements can be seen more as lifestyles than artistic schools. This concept resonates with Tondar Kia’s perspective that the influence of

his life experiences on his work is more significant than the impact of Western art. Avant-gardes believed that the mental state of the artist, their education and interests, as well as the socio-political climate of the time, together shaped the strategies they implemented for aesthetic innovations. So, their aim was to integrate themselves into the everyday routine and extend their presence beyond the confines of the art gallery.

In addition, avant-gardes transcend the boundaries of a singular society and its cultural norms. The inherent cosmopolitanism found in both historical and current avant-garde figures leads them to incorporate diverse elements from various cultural and artistic environments into their works. These elements are deeply ingrained within their lives and careers. Therefore, rejecting the simplistic notion of European influence on Persian avant-garde movements, Tondar Kia's avant-garde poetry extends beyond a single national or cultural context. Instead, it is shaped by his experiences of everyday life as a cosmopolitan artist. Kia's artistic experiments embody intricate transnational histories and cultural exchanges, serving as a locus of resistance against prevailing cultural norms. Schechner states:

Artists of the avant-garde are producing works on or across various borders: political, geographical, personal, generic, and conceptual. In a world where so-called universal values each day run up against deeply held local values and experiences, the result is clash, disturbance, turbulence, unease about the future, and hot argument about what the past was.¹⁷

In essence, the intercultural avant-garde does not imply that the artist is ignorant of their local art or cultural values. Rather, it signifies a state of belonging to multiple cultures, embracing contradictory values, and engaging with conflicting aesthetic canons. This characteristic can also be observed in the works of Nimaic high modernists, particularly those who have lived or traveled abroad. It is important to note that a literary work can possess intercultural elements without being avant-garde. The distinction lies in the fact that modernists or high modernists, as discussed in the section on organic unity,

strive to diminish differences and create unity, seeking universality and sameness. However, Tondar Kia deliberately incorporates contradictory cultural elements in his work, purposefully dismantling any form of unity and coherence.

An exemplary illustration of incorporating contradictory cultural elements can be seen in Tondar Kia's endeavor to establish a connection between Tehran's urban life and culture and that of Paris. Although this fusion involves two distinct urban cultures, Kia's intention is not to appropriate Persian urban high culture and assimilate it into the renowned French culture. Instead, he draws parallels between his lived experiences in Parisian cafes and the vibrant atmosphere of bars, theaters, and dance clubs in *Lālahzār*, Tehran.

Lālahzār Street, situated in Tehran, Iran, holds historical significance as a vibrant thoroughfare renowned for its nightlife, clubs, and theaters. During the 1950s and 1960s, it emerged as a thriving center of Iranian culture and entertainment. The street played host to numerous clubs and theaters that showcased live music, dance, and theater performances, captivating audiences with their artistic endeavors. Among the city's youth, *Lālahzār* Street garnered immense popularity, serving as a social hotspot where individuals congregated to mingle, enjoy the latest music, and immerse themselves in the world of entertainment.

During the 1950s, *Lālahzār* Street in Tehran and the streets of Paris were characterized by distinctive cultural and social contexts. Paris, being a global epicenter of arts and entertainment, boasted of glamorous and sophisticated establishments like the *Moulin Rouge* and *Folies Bergère*, which attracted affluent locals and international visitors. In contrast, the clubs and theaters on *Lālahzār* Street, often named after renowned European cabarets like the *Mūlan-Rūzh*, had a grassroots essence, focusing on local cultural expressions. They showcased performances by Iranian artists, resonating particularly with the city's young population who eagerly embraced and celebrated the shaping urban culture and identity of different communities and social classes.

However, what made certain cultural hubs in *Lālahzār* Street akin to Parisian cafes was the emergence of a new generation of intellectuals who had profound connections to their society and

actively engaged with it. These establishments became spaces where discussions, debates, and intellectual exchanges flourished. Similar to the Parisian cafe culture, individuals gathered in these venues to exchange ideas, challenge societal norms, and contribute to the cultural and intellectual fabric of their communities. Jane Lwisohn states:

Many of the young Iranian intellectuals and artists of this period were members of the Tudeh Party (Communist Party of Iran) that had its headquarters on Sa'di street, parallel to Lālahzār street, and would commonly hang out in the cafés and attend plays in its theatres there. These leftist writers translated a lot of Soviet Russian plays, which were then performed in the theatres on Lālahzār Street. In literature, translations of the writings of Hemingway were very popular, and translations from other languages that particularly highlighted the plight of the working class, were all the rage.¹⁸

In both *Lālahzār* Street and Paris, these cultural hubs acted as meeting points for like-minded individuals who sought to explore and redefine social, political, and artistic landscapes. They provided a platform for intellectual discourse and the sharing of diverse perspectives, fostering a sense of community among those who frequented these spaces. In this way, the spirit of intellectual camaraderie and the pursuit of societal transformation found common ground between *Lālahzār*'s cultural hubs and the vibrant atmosphere of Parisian cafes.

Tondar Kia denies the impact of European literature on his works. Instead, he highlights the role of his lived experience in Tehran and Paris. He highlights an inspiring aspect of his lived experience that he has utilized in his work as a primary resource, which he calls "dancing and musical upbringing."¹⁹ Referring to dance and music can be congruent to performance poetics and dances that were performed first in Cabaret Voltaire and then in other places by avant-gardes, particularly Dadaist artists.²⁰ However, Tondar Kia's incorporation of dance and music as a source of inspiration extends beyond his intention of performing his poems. In fact, Kia's exploration of an anti-belletrist language

primarily stems from Tehran's popular commercial songs, specifically the *Lālahzāri* lyrics from the first Pahlavi period.

Kia's engagement with the popular songs of Tehran serves as a gateway to accessing a language that resists the confines of traditional literary aesthetics. The *Lālahzāri* lyrics, known for their vibrant and colloquial expressions as well as their light rhythms, offer Kia an avenue to break free from the conventional boundaries of poetic forms and embrace a more accessible and relatable form of artistic expression. In doing so, he incorporates a diverse selection of urban songs, including those with roots in folklore and those specifically crafted for *Lālahzāri* performances.

According to Sasan Fatemi, post-eighteenth-century Iranian songs can be classified into two categories: "musicians' songs" and "street songs." Musicians' songs encompass satirical or lyrical verses that follow the style of classical poetry. On the other hand, street songs are predominantly sociopolitically charged compositions characterized by a looser style. Fatemi describes street songs as lyrics that incorporate one or more musical themes and lack strict literary standards. These songs are primarily created by members of the general population.²¹ Mahmud Khoshnam further categorizes these street or urban popular songs into four subgroups. The first subgroup consists of "national songs" like "*Hājī Fīruz āmadah*" (*Hājī Fīruz has arrived*), which are traditionally sung by street performers before the Persian New Year. The second subgroup includes sentimental songs such as lullabies and love songs. The third subgroup, prevalent during the 1940s, comprises *pīshpardah-khānī* (curtain-raisers), which are independent rhythmic monologues performed before or between two scenes of a play. Lastly, there are *nutribī* and *ru-huwzī* songs, which were performed by musicians and actors during private ceremonies and parties.²²

At the time of Kia's return to Iran, stage songs that drew inspiration from urban songs were prevalent in Tehran, particularly in the theaters and cabarets of *Lālahzār* Street. These popular songs, performed by renowned singers, were also printed as small pamphlets and made available to the general public. Furthermore, *pīshpardah-khāns*, who performed rhythmic monologues in playhouses, sometimes distributed their satirical songs among the audience. These printed or presented songs served as the primary source

of inspiration for Kia in terms of rhythm, themes, and language in his works. While some may argue that this influence occasionally led to mere imitation, overall it guided the poet toward the exploration of new artistic forms. In fact, this genre of popular music in Tehran became one of Kia's distinct and original sources for developing his avant-garde aesthetic system.

Kia's approach to incorporating popular urban music as a source for developing innovative poetic forms shares similarities with the experimentation conducted by Mina Loy (1882–1966). Loy, whose poems showcased influences from Futurism and American Dadaism, drew inspiration from various public art forms in American society, particularly jazz music. Motivated by jazz, Loy aimed to create new rhythmic structures that captured the pulse of modern everyday life in her poetry. Similarly, Kia utilizes the rhythm and language of street songs, particularly those performed in Tehran's theaters and cabarets, to establish what he considers a completely new musical system for Persian poetry. Loy's belief that "Poetic rhythm... is the chart of temperament" resonates with Kia's exploration of the desired relationship between poetic rhythms and the poet's sensibilities. Loy's colorful rhythms and innovative musical arrangements are explained by Jon Cook in accordance with this statement, emphasizing the poet's need for freedom to experiment with the formal aspects of a poem in order to convey their sentiments through rhythm. This freedom, which allows poetry to express a range of temperaments, can only be achieved through a rebellion against tradition.²³

Conclusion

This article argues that avant-garde artistic expression should be viewed as a transcultural phenomenon that transcends geographical boundaries. It emphasizes the need for a transnational perspective to understand the complex interactions between different avant-garde movements across cultures and regions. The Iranian avant-garde poet Tondar Kia is discussed as an example, challenging the notion that his work was merely an imitation of Western movements. Instead, it suggests that a transnational perspective allows for a better understanding of the contributions of Iranian avant-garde poets to the global avant-garde movement.

The article also examines Tondar Kia's work within the local and transnational structures of artistic innovation. It discusses the different groups and subgroups within Persian literary modernism and locates the avant-garde poets within the context of these developments. It further explores Kia's critique of aesthetic norms, including the concept of organic unity, and his innovative approach to rhythm and polyphony in his poetry. Kia's aim to challenge established norms and introduce a more flexible and disruptive form of expression is highlighted.

Let us remember the paramount importance of recognizing the ever-changing and diverse nature of avant-garde movements. We must strive to grasp their transnational scope and wholeheartedly appreciate the unique contributions made by artists like Tondar Kia to the Persian avant-garde. By doing so, we not only mark their artistic endeavors but also deepen our understanding of the rich tapestry of human creativity that spans across cultures and time.

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NOTES

1. James M. Harding, "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James M. Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 20.

2. Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 6.

3. M. H. Abrams, and Geoffrey G. Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth, 1999), 167.

4. Richard Sheppard, *Modernism, Dada, Postmodernism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 6.

5. In *Nahīb-i Junbish-i Adabī-i Shāhīn* (1963), 939–1214; *Nahīb-i Junbish-i Adabī-i Shāhīn* (1975), 1317–39, Tondar Kia writes an extensive essay titled *Anjām-i bashar va āghāz-i farābashaar* (The end of human and the beginning of superhuman).

6. Kia, *Nahīb-i Junbish-i Adabī-i Shāhīn*, 950–51.

7. Alan Young, *Dada and After: Extremist Modernism and English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), 14.

8. BLAST: Review of the Great English Vortex, No. 1 (June 20, 1914), 7–8.

9. Kia, *Nahīb-i Junbish-i Adabī-i Shāhīn*, 1156.

10. Caroline Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1977), 17–18.

11. David Granger, 'Expression, Imagination, and Organic Unity: John Dewey's Aesthetics and Romanticism,' *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 2 (2003): 46–60, 54–55.

12. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 82.

13. Tondar Kia, *Nahīb-i Junbish-i Adabī-i Shāhīn* (Tehran: n.p., 1940), 10.

14. Granger, Expression, Imagination, and Organic Unity.

15. Prita Meier, 'Authenticity and its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History,' *Arab Studies Journal* 1 (2010): 12–45, 22.

16. David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 30.

17. Schechner, *The Future of Ritual*, 17.

18. Jane Lewisohn, *The Rise and Fall of Lalehzar, Cultural Centre of Tehran in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (2014): 24. UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture, Retrieved July 2022.

19. Kia, *Nahīb-i Junbish-i Adabī-i Shāhīn*, 11.

20. In 1916, Hogue Ball developed "a form of phonetic poetry in which made-up words jostled rudimentary linguistic fragments." For instance, he performed a poem entitled "Karawana" in 1917, which portrayed the trumpeting and slow movements of a caravan of elephants. Other Dada poets and performers also experienced a type of performance called "simultaneous poems," reading their texts aloud or chanting simultaneously. Hogue Ball, cited in Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 132.

21. Sasan Fatemi, *Piydāyish-i Mūsīqī-i Mardum Pasand dar Irān* (Tehran: Mahūr, 2013), 22–30.

22. Mahmud Khoshnam, *Az Najvā-yi Sunnat ta Ghughā-yi Pāp* (Tehran: Farhang-e Jāvīd, 2018), 515–29.

23. Cook, *Poetry in Theory*, 132.

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