Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences

Manuscript 1602

The Symbolic Plane, Embedded Narrative Structure, and Simile Network in the Story of the Bedouin Arab and His Wife in the *Masnavi*

Nihat Değirmenci

Follow this and additional works at: https://kjhss.khazar.org/journal

ORIGINAL STUDY

The Symbolic Plane, Embedded Narrative Structure, and Simile Network in the Story of the Bedouin Arab and His Wife in the *Masnavi*

Nihat Değirmenci

Istanbul University, Persian Language and Literature

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the story of the "Bedouin Arab and His Wife," found in the first book of Celâleddîn-i Rûmî's *Masnavi*, through the dimensions of narrative techniques, symbolic fiction, and simile structure. Utilizing a text-centered qualitative analysis method, the research examines the multilayered structure of the work, which deviates from linear storytelling and employs embedded narrative and frame story techniques within modern narratological concepts. In the context of symbolic fiction, the processes through which the characters transition from the manifest to the allegorical plane are analyzed, identifying the Bedouin as "reason" and his wife as "self." The narrative emphasizes that "the Arab is us, the jug is us, the king is us; all of them are us," establishing that all fictional elements in the *Masnavi* represent an ontological journey reflecting various levels and tendencies of the human soul.

The study also evaluates the thematic and functional integrity of sub-narratives, including the false sheikh, Hz. Salih and his camel, Leyla and Majnun, the shadow hunter, and the grammarian with the sailor. The twenty-eight couplets that form the primary data of this research are classified into five thematic categories: ontological, epistemological, mystical, socio-political, and psychological. The findings demonstrate that the similes in the text are not merely rhetorical embellishments; they create a structural organization that materializes abstract mystical concepts, revealing the dialectic between the manifest and the hidden, and guiding the reader from superficial perception to a deeper understanding of truth. This situation is in harmony with Abdülhüseyin Zerrinkûb's expression of the Masnavi narrator's 'desire to transcend the manifest' (Zerrinkûb, 1377/1998, pp.260–262)

Keywords: Masnavi, Mevlânâ, Frame narrative, Manifest, Hidden, Simile

Received 2 April 2026; revised 25 May 2026; accepted 5 October 2026.
Available online 15 October 2026

E-mail address: nihatdegirmenci@yahoo.com (N. Değirmenci).

https://doi.org/10.5782/2223-2621.1602
2223-2621/© 2026 Published by Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences. This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 Licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Introduction and method

The story of the Bedouin Arab and his wife in the first book of Rûmî's *Masnavi* appears to be a simple tale of a poor desert dweller bringing rainwater to the caliph in Baghdad. However, as the text progresses, it transforms into a multilayered mystical allegory with explicit symbolic directions.

The story begins with a discussion between a husband-and-wife suffering from poverty. The woman expresses their state of destitution with striking imagery; she describes how they live without bread and sustenance, how they drink tears instead of water, and how they are so hungry that they mistake the moon for bread. These depictions establish a symbolic language that reflects a sense of ontological deficiency beyond material poverty. The woman criticizes the reliance on abstract promises by recounting the tale of the "false sheikh" and demands a concrete solution.

The Bedouin, on the other hand, advocates for patience and contentment, emphasizing the transience of worldly pleasures. He depicts sorrow and grief as a sickle that harvests human desires, reminding of the reality of death while pointing to the impermanence of worldly desires. The emphasis on the spiritual value of poverty clarifies the mystical framework. He also illustrates the relativity of perception using the example of blue and red glass, stating that a person perceives truth according to their cognitive color.

The woman's comparison of her husband to a snake and her view of him as a scorpion heighten the dramatic intensity of the conflict between the self and reason within the narrative. However, the argument evolves into a temporary reconciliation, marked by mutual regret and softness. This turning point signifies the transformative nature of inner conflict.

With the idea of traveling to Baghdad, the narrative enters a new phase. It is decided that the only valuable object in their home, the jug filled with rainwater, will be presented as a gift. The jug serves as a symbol of both material poverty and limited human capabilities.

The acceptance of the Bedouin into the caliph's presence upon reaching Baghdad indicates that the intention is valued more than the material worth of the gift. At this point, the tale of the "grammarian and the sailor" is inserted into the text. The grammarian, who boasts of theoretical knowledge, finds himself helpless because he cannot swim, representing the limitations of human knowledge. The jug symbolizes human knowledge, while the Tigris symbolizes divine knowledge.

The caliph filling the jug with gold and sending the Bedouin back via the Tigris makes apparent the position of limited human understanding in the face of divine expansiveness. The embarrassment of the small jug in the presence of the vast river represents the ontological difference between human knowledge and divine truth.

At the story's conclusion, the symbolic meaning is explicitly revealed: the woman represents the self, while the man represents reason. The jug embodies the body and limited understanding; the water within it symbolizes knowledge acquired through the senses. The caliph and the Tigris symbolize the source of divine knowledge. The tale of the shadow hunter emphasizes the distinction between the manifest and the hidden.

Thus, he story goes beyond just narrating a historical event and takes on an educational structure that guides the audience's inner world. The story is positioned as a universal mystical allegory representing the ongoing struggle between reason and the self within humanity.

This study is characterized by a text-centered qualitative analysis based on an interpretive research design. The object of examination is the story of the Bedouin Arab and his wife as found in the Masnavi. The primary data source of the text is based on the

publications of the Turkish Manuscripts Institute, and the couplet numbering has been determined according to the relevant edition.

In the research, two primary theoretical frameworks have been employed together: narratological analysis and rhetorical-semantic examination. In examining the narrative structure, the narrative layers and embedded story structures have been evaluated within the framework of modern narrative theory concepts. In this context, the narrative levels, transitions between the main narrative and sub-narratives, and textual interventions have been addressed using narratological analysis methods.

In the examination of similes, couplets containing explicit simile elements have been scanned, and a total of twenty-eight couplets have been identified. The criteria for determining these couplets include containing explicit simile markers or elements, contributing directly to the production of symbolic meaning, and playing a functional role in the flow of the narrative.

The identified similes have been thematically classified according to content and meaning areas. During the classification process, the categories have been created based on the semantic density of the text rather than a pre-prepared schema. Accordingly, the similes have been grouped under five categories: ontological similes, similes related to knowledge and understanding, similes connected to mystical relationships, similes with social and political contexts, and emotional and psychological similes. This categorical structure aims to demonstrate that similes are not merely rhetorical elements but are structural components that construct the meaning network of the narrative.

Symbolic narrative

The use of figurative language is not exclusive to literary texts; everyday spoken language is also infused with metaphors. As Andrew Bennet emphasizes (Bennet & Royle, 2004, 77–78), what is at stake here is the ordinary language practice we are familiar with. However, when it comes to literature, we encounter a specialized form of language, as language serves as a specialized mode of communication (Frye, 1973, 74). In the Masnavi, narratives often transcend the direct representational plane to produce a symbolic structure. In the examined story, this symbolic construction is established through the narrator's explicit intervention. Mevlânâ states, "We have narrated the adventure of the man and the woman; consider it an example of yourself and your reason," thereby subjecting the narrative characters to an allegorical equivalence, transforming the figures in the dramatic plane into mystical-psychological concepts. This intervention shows that the characters are not merely individual types but are constructed as elements representing the inner structure of humanity. The Bedouin embodies the organizing principle of reason, while the woman represents the guiding yet conflicting nature of the self.

Thus, the narrative acquires an allegorical structure that stages the inner tensions of humanity at an ontological level. As Wilfred L. Guerin indicates, images transcend their objective existence (Guerin., 2005, 106) to become symbols. One of the pathways to symbolization in the *Masnavi* occurs through the frequent repetition of metaphors and similes, as defined by Celena Kusch (Kusch, 2016, 49). As Rene Wellek states, "an image" can be used once as a metaphor, but if it recurs, functioning as both presentation and representation, it transforms into a symbol (Wellek & Warren, 1955, 178) becoming part of a symbolic system. According to Ricœur, symbolic/metaphorical language liberates the poet from the limitations of literal meaning (Ricoeur, 1977, 79), providing a broad and free epistemological space for the movement of meaning within infinite possibilities. The narrative in question should not be viewed merely as a sequence of manifest events; rather,

as Umberto Eco states, it is a symbolic structure that opens the door to "countless possible readings" (Eco, 1992, 41–42), generating new layers of meaning with each reading. Thus, the text transcends being a historical tale, acquiring the identity of an "open work" that accompanies the reader on their inner journey.

The function attributed to symbolic and metaphorical narratives by Mevlânâ, as clearly evidenced in various passages of the *Masnavi*, emerges as a fundamental determining factor in the story we are examining. Rumi himself emphasizes this situation:

> *"We narrated the adventure of the man and the woman; consider it an example of yourself and your reason." "The self and reason, represented by this woman and man, require a beautiful guide for both good and evil." "These two must be engaged in a continuous struggle and adventure in this earthly abode." (Rumi, 2015, 126)*

In the subsequent sections of the story, Rumi further clarifies this representation, particularly emphasizing that the narrative is not merely a tale:

> *"I seek refuge in Allah; this is not a tale, beware! Look closely; it mirrors your and our current state." (Rumi, 2015, 136)*

With this couplet, the narrative ceases to be a historical or fictional event; it acquires the function of a didactic mirror directed towards the inner world of the recipient. Thus, the depicted conflict between reason and the self is directly related to the individual's existential experience. The narrative strengthens its pedagogical effect by transporting the opposition it establishes in the symbolic plane to the reader's subjective experience.

Mevlânâ, in the advancing sections of the narrative, further expands the symbolic structure he establishes, emphasizing that all these representations showcase human-related aspects. Therefore, the figures in the narrative - the Arab, the jug, and the king - transcend being external and historical figures; they transform into symbolic counterparts reflecting various inclinations and degrees within the human inner world.

"The Arab is us, the jug is us, the king is us; all of them are us: 'Those who turn away are turned back by this.'" (Rumi, 2015, 138) With this expression, the narrative gathers its multilayered symbolism within the existential integrity of humanity. This discourse eliminates the distinction between subject and object, shifting the narrative from a story about the external world to a representational plane reflecting human's inner conflict.

Thus, the text presents a mystical perspective that comprehends the self, rational, and volitional aspects of humanity within a single whole, transcending the manifest plot. The Arab is us, the jug is us, the king is us; all of them are us: "Those who turn away are turned back by this."

Embedded narratives

As is well known, the work of Mevlânâ Celâleddîn-i Rûmî, the *Masnavi*, largely consists of stories. In some of these stories, the embedded narrative structure stands out in terms of narrative technique. While the main story is sustained, the flow is sometimes interrupted, leading to a new story; then it returns to the frame narrative.

One of the most typical and classic examples of sub-narratives within a frame narrative is found in One Thousand and One Nights. This structure, referred to in narrative theory as "embedded narrative," can lead to the primary narrative being pushed to the background or even temporarily forgotten when the sub-narrative is strong and cohesive, as noted by Mieke Bal (Bal, 2017, 50–58). In such a construction, while the upper narrative serves as a structural frame, the weight of meaning production shifts to the sub-narratives. Bal

also emphasizes the distinction between the narrator and the focalizer, demonstrating that perspective shifts in embedded narratives are crucial for meaning production (Bal, 2017, 133–140). The embedded story does not merely present a new chain of events; it also transforms the framework through which the main narrative is perceived.

This situation is clearly observable in One Thousand and One Nights. The frame story is relatively short and functional; in contrast, the sub-narratives are numerous, rich in content, and often comprehensive enough to present an independent integrity. Therefore, the reader or listener may forget the frame story during the narrative process. Indeed, in the tradition of storytelling, this state of forgetting is not a structural flaw but rather a conscious choice. The continuity and diversity of the sub-narratives sustain curiosity while deferring the dramatic tension of the frame narrative, ensuring the continuity of the overall narrative. In this context, the frame serves as a tool that initiates and sustains the narrative, while the actual aesthetic and narrative intensity is concentrated in the sub-stories.

Genette delineates narrative levels as extradiegetic, intradiegetic, and metadiegetic, clarifying the hierarchical positioning of narratives within a narrative and explaining the functions of a sub-narrative within a frame narrative under three main headings (Genette, 1983, 232). In the first case, there is a causal connection between the two narratives; the sub-narrative serves the function of explaining the emergence of a situation or event that occurs in the main narrative.

In the second case, the narratives unite around a common theme. The narrator interrupts the frame narrative to reinforce their proposed view and proceeds to tell another story that carries the same thread.

In the third and final case, there is no direct connection between the two narratives; the sub-narrative serves to delay the progression of the main story, effectively suspending it. One of the most well-known examples of this type is found in One Thousand and One Nights. In this work, the main character Scheherazade, in order to postpone her death, continuously tells new stories, thereby interrupting the narrative and ensuring the continuity of the frame story. Monika Fludernik emphasizes the cognitive foundations of the narrative through the concept of experientiality (Fludernik, 1996, 26). Embedded narratives require the reader to make mental transitions between narrative levels, thereby enhancing cognitive engagement.

In Mevlânâ's Masnavi, the use of embedded narratives (frame narratives) is not merely a technical choice; it directly reflects his understanding of existence, time, and truth. In traditional narratives (e.g., One Thousand and One Nights or Kalila and Dimna), the secondary story (metadiegetic) tends to temporarily make the frame story (extradiegetic) forgettable. However, in Mevlânâ's narration, there is minimal care shown to the boundaries of embedded narratives. The narrator frequently interrupts the secondary story to return to the main narrative, intentionally making the hierarchy between narrative levels permeable.

As Tavakoli states, this structural feature is a dynamic meaning production strategy, a product of associative mental movement. By avoiding didactic bridges, such as "this is like that," which traditional narrators often use, Mevlânâ presents the listener/reader with sudden transitions between narrative levels (Tavakoli, 1389/2010, 489–490). This situation, as Fludernik explains with her concept of "experientiality," maximizes the cognitive engagement of the reader. The narrator's associative mind breaks the linear perception of time, transforming the text from a historical tale into an eternal-representational space.

Genette's interpretive function, which he defines as "thematic harmony," is utilized in these narratives to deepen or concretize the main narrative. For example, the transition to the tale of the "false sheikh" in the section that discusses the Bedouin's poverty serves as a thematic bridge that strengthens the connection between manifest poverty and spiritual

deprivation. In this process, while the main narrative focuses on human characters, the embedded stories can suddenly evolve into a fable structure. This type of generic diversity and allegorical shifts create various spaces and psychoanalytic grounds within the narrative, facilitating the layering of meaning.

In Mevlânâ's work, the embedded narrative sometimes replaces the main narrative, freeing it from temporal dependence and endowing it with a universal quality. This situation aligns perfectly with the understanding of saints that truth is one but manifests in various forms across different historical periods. Consequently, the embedded narratives in the Masnavi constitute an aesthetic integrity that connects meaning in a cyclical manner rather than representing a structural break. The narrator invites the reader on a continuous journey of discovery by creatively referencing previous stories and evoking associations.

The story of the Bedouin Arab who brings rainwater to the caliph in Baghdad also applies the technique of embedded narration. In this narrative, the first interruption is established through dialogue. At the very beginning of the main story, the Bedouin's wife complains about their poverty; while expressing the futility of trying to hide this poverty, she interrupts the narrative and begins to recount another story about the "false sheikh." Thus, the flow of the frame narrative is temporarily suspended, and the reader is confronted with a sub-narrative that thematically serves to interpret the main story.

This sub-narrative can be classified within the second type of embedded narrative based on Gérard Genette's categorization, which is based on thematic relationships. The story being told serves to clarify or deepen the issues raised in the main narrative, such as poverty, contentment, and the concealment of truth. The narrator temporarily halts the progression of the frame story, making visible a similar narrative through a different example; thus, he guides the reader's evaluation of the main narrative and expands their interpretive horizon.

226 He is deprived of the bread of the sky, and of its table. God has not even thrown a bone before him. 2277 He, however, calls out: I have set the table; I am God's deputy, the son of the caliph. 2278 Come, ye pure-hearted ones who struggle in [misery], eat of my table until you are filled. 2279 People gather around [the table] for years with the promise of tomorrow, yet that tomorrow never comes. (Rumi, 2015, 114)

The second sub-narrative within the main narrative is also established through dialogue; however, this time the narrative is conveyed through the speech of the main character, the Arab. While expressing the idea that everyone interprets facts from their own perspective and according to their own means, the Bedouin Arab refers to a hadith narration to substantiate this view. Thus, the sub-narrative becomes a functional element that exemplifies the idea presented in the main narrative and supports it with a new discourse.

2365 Abu Jahl saw Ahmad and said: A hideous form appeared from among the Hashim clan. 2366 Ahmad said to him: You are right; though you have overstepped, you have spoken the truth. 2367 Siddiq, seeing him, said: O sun! You are neither from the east nor from the west. Shine a beautiful light. 2368 Ahmad: You have spoken rightly, O noble one; O one who has escaped from this worthless world. 2369 Those present said: "O leader of the people! You said both to the two [people] who spoke contradictory things that they spoke rightly; why?" 2370 [The Prophet]: I am a mirror polished by Allah's hand. Turks and Hindus see in me what they have in themselves. 2371 [The man]: O Woman! If you see me as greedy, go beyond this womanly pursuit. (Rumi, 2015, 117)

One of the most prominent features of the narrative structure in the Masnavi is the technique of transitioning to embedded stories by deviating from the main narrative. This situation is also observed in the story of the Arab man and his wife. The narrator, while

telling this story, deviates from the main narrative to turn to different stories, fables, and symbolic narratives.

Before the story of the Arab man and his wife, the narrator refers to the tale of Moses and Pharaoh. He also conveys the conversations of philosophers in the form of a fable. After these references, the narrator does not immediately return to the story of the Arab man and his wife; he adds another new narrative in between. He recounts another story by referring to the she-camel of Prophet Salih, thereby indicating the symbolic meanings of the camel and Prophet Salih. The story of Prophet Salih and his she-camel is shaped around the theme of the she-camel sent as a miracle from God being killed by the tribe.

These narrative digressions exemplify the multifaceted structure of the Masnavi. The reference to the tale of Moses and Pharaoh, the narration of the philosophers' conversations, and the transition to a new story through the she-camel of Prophet Salih are typical examples of the narrative digression technique in the Masnavi.

2516 The soul is like Salih, while the body is like the she-camel. The soul is in union, while the body is in need. 2517 Salih's soul does not suffer calamities. The wound is on the she-camel, not in the essence. 2518 Salih's soul cannot be harmed; Allah's light does not succumb to or defeat the disbelievers. (Rumi, 2015, 123)

In this intervening sub-narrative, attention is drawn to the contrast between the manifest and the hidden, emphasizing the deception of judging based on appearances. In other words, it critiques superficial perception and implies that truth cannot be limited to appearances.

One of the narratives referenced in this tale is the story of Layla and Majnun. The Bedouin Arab tells his wife, who insists on going to Baghdad to present herself to the Caliph, that he cannot go without having something to offer or a valid excuse, comparing his situation to that of Majnun:

2691 Like Majnun, when he heard that Layla was a bit ill: 2692 Oh no, he said, how can I go without a reason? If I miss the visit, what will become of me? 2693 I wish I were a skilled physician, so I could go to Layla before anyone else. (Rumi, 2015, 129)

An example given of the contrast between the manifest and the hidden, as well as the truth and metaphor, is the fable of the hunter who, believing he has caught a bird, is only trying to grasp its shadow that has fallen to the ground.

2808 Just like the hunter chasing shadows; can a shadow ever be capital? 2809 The man has tightly grasped the shadow of the bird, while the bird sits bewildered on a tree branch.

In this representation, the hunter believes he has captured the truth (the bird) rather than its reflection (the shadow). Thus, the text reveals the deceptive nature of making judgments based on surface appearances. The shadow represents the metaphorical and transient; the bird represents the truth and the essence. The narrative clarifies the difference between form and meaning, inviting the reader to move beyond superficial perception.

Another embedded narrative within the main story is the tale of the grammarian (linguist) and the sailor. In this tale, which also appears in Ubeyd Zakani's Risāle-i Dilgüşā (Leṭâʾif) (Gölpınarlı, 1965, 510), Mevlânâ emphasizes the limitations of the knowledge possessed and how absolute trust in this knowledge cannot save a person from existential dangers:

2835 A grammarian boarded a ship. He, self-satisfied, turned to the sailor and said: 2836 "Have you ever studied grammar?" The sailor replied: "No." The grammarian said: "Your whole life has been wasted." 2837 The sailor's heart was hurt by his anger. But at that moment, he did not respond and remained silent. 2838 The wind threw the ship into a whirlpool. The

sailor called out loudly to that grammarian: 2839 "Do you know how to swim? Tell me." The grammarian replied: "No, oh beautiful one, with a beautiful face." 2840 "Your whole life has been wasted, oh grammarian, because this ship will sink in these whirlpools," he said. 2841 "Know that here it is necessary to know how to perish, not grammar; if you are to perish, dive into the water safely." (Gölpınarlı, 1965, 134)

In this tale, grammar represents theoretical and formal knowledge, while swimming represents practical, existential knowledge. Mevlânâ makes visible the inadequacy of a person who relies solely on surface and theoretical knowledge in the face of truth through a dramatic contrast. Thus, the distinction between the manifest and the hidden, as well as between truth and metaphor, is materialized through a pedagogical representation. The narrative clarifies the difference between the ontological value of knowledge and its vital function.

The transition to the story of the grammarian occurs as an associative continuation of the atmosphere of knowledge and teaching established in the frame narrative. The area of meaning opened through the student-teacher relationship in the main narrative suddenly expands into the story of the grammarian and the sailor. This transition occurs based on conceptual continuity rather than the plot. Therefore, the embedded story takes on a role that deepens the thematic axis of the main narrative rather than interrupting it; the technique of embedded narration here functions as a strategy that layers meaning rather than as a structural break.

Simile

The story of the Bedouin Arab and his wife is not merely a superficial tale; it is a symbolic representation woven with a dense figurative network. In Rumi's work, the story serves as a vehicle for representation. This section examines similes categorized by their ontological, epistemological, and mystical dimensions, analyzing the ways in which concrete images replace abstract truths. The main finding identified in the study is that the similes function not only as rhetorical embellishments in the text but also as structural components that define epistemological boundaries and establish the relationship between the macrocosm and microcosm. Below, this network of analogies is explored under thematic categories, accompanied by textual evidence.

As William C. Chittick states, the central theme of the Masnavi is love (Chittick, 1983, 194). In this context, the journey of the jug and the water within it toward the Tigris River in Baghdad, along with the Bedouin Arab's approach to the caliph, can be read as a representation of the mystical journey of the lover towards the beloved. Both movements imply an ontological quest from the part to the whole, from the limited to the absolute, like a droplet heading towards the sea. As Annemarie Schimmel notes, the Masnavi is a text that establishes the relationship between word and meaning in the most intense way; it is like a nest where the bird of meaning settles (Schimmel, 1993, 49). In this regard, the work is not just a collection of surface-level narratives but a text that guides the reader towards internal understanding, functioning as a narrative of spiritual journey. Rumi aimed to present esoteric truths in a form that everyone could understand; thus, as Zarrinkoub states, he also used analogies as bridges (Zarrinkoub, 1366/1987, 251). Therefore, the Masnavi can be viewed as an inner journey towards esoteric truth through words. Metaphors naturally lead us to establish relationships of similarity, and, as Lakoff points out, they also play a role in the emergence of new metaphors.

According to George Lakoff, metaphors produce a similarity-based transfer of meaning and allow abstract concepts to be understood through concrete images. However, a

metaphor does not merely reflect an existing similarity; it also functions as a productive mechanism that shapes thought processes. Metaphor is not just a linguistic ornament but one of the fundamental tools of human conceptualization and plays a crucial role in the emergence of new metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981, 147–152). In this light, the similes in the Masnavi can be considered cognitive bridges that guide meaning production and structure abstract mystical content, rather than merely rhetorical examples.

This story is built on a network of similes that exhibits a high level of figurative density. Similes function not only as rhetorical embellishments but also as fundamental semantic tools that structure the symbolic depth of the narrative. In the study, the identified analogies have been classified according to their thematic axes; each simile has been analyzed based on the relationship between the comparer and the compared and evaluated with contextual and mystical references. In this analysis process, the function of simile within the narrative—intensifying meaning, conceptual abstraction, and producing symbolic layers—has been considered; the relevant couplet numbers have been provided based on the publications of the Turkish Manuscripts Institute.

As a result of the analyses, it has been observed that the simile elements in the couplets exhibit a hierarchical structure. Objects central to everyday life, such as 'water', 'jug', and 'bread', are reinterpreted to represent different stages of mystical experience (seyr ü sülûk). For example, the depiction of material poverty as a 'sword of poverty' or 'provisions of grief' demonstrates that physical reality gives way to a sensory and spiritual shift in perception. In this context, similes are positioned as semantic bridges that facilitate the transition from the 'manifest' to the 'hidden' in the reader's mind.

Findings: Thematic classification and functional analysis of the simile network

The 26 couplets identified in the narrative have been classified under five main categories as structural components reflecting ontological, epistemological, and mystical depth. (The original texts and translations of the twenty-six couplets identified in the examined story are presented in Appendix 1; the structural components of the similes in these couplets and their thematic classification are provided in Appendix 2.)

Ontological similes

Mevlânâ constructs poverty (fakr) and the phenomenon of worldly existence as "purification tools" that lead a person back to their essence. The depiction of poverty as a "sword" (تیغ) in couplet 2261 and life as a "battle" (غزا) proves that poverty is not merely a material deprivation but an active force that cuts through the ego. Similarly, the comparison of a baseless life to a "spider's web" (بنت العنبوت) (2319) and worldly conditions to a temporary "flood" (2289) emphasizes the ontological fragility of the visible world. The similes in this category depict the characters (the Bedouin and his wife) as having a necessary bond with the material world, which must be overcome for the liberation of the soul.

- Caliph / Source of divine knowledge → Sea
- Divine favor, truth → Sea
- Divine Knowledge → Tigris
- Caliph (ruler) → Sun
- City of Baghdad → Spring
- All living beings → God's family (iyal)
- God → Head of the family (el-Muîl)

Similes related to knowledge and understanding

In the story, the source and nature of knowledge are presented through a symbolism constructed on oppositions. Human knowledge and data obtained through the senses are embodied in the metaphor of a "jug" (سبو) and "bitter water" (2708), while divine knowledge is represented by an infinite "sea" (بحری) (2711) and "Tigris" (دجل) (2848). The description of the five senses as "the five mouths of the jug" in couplet 2710 critiques the limitations of the channels through which humans perceive truth. As Seyyid Hussein Nasr has also emphasized, Mevlânâ shares the belief with other mystics that human reason is 'a sword with two sharp sides' (Nasr, 2002, 63). This network of similes provides structural continuity to the thesis of the article, which posits "the inadequacy of limited human understanding in the face of absolute truth."

- Water jug → Human knowledge
- Water in the jug (human knowledge) → Pearl
- Body → Jug
- Emotions, sensory data → Water
- Five senses → The five mouths of the jug
- Meaning (mana) → Water
- Form (suret) → Tree
- Mind → Husband/Candle
- Self → Woman/Darkness

Similes related to mystical relationships

Figures that carry divine truth are defined through their reflective and nourishing qualities. The simile of the Prophet as "a polished mirror" (آئن ام مصقول) (2370) indicates that he is a medium reflecting absolute truth without any subjective contribution. The comparison of the word (divine speech) to "milk at the breast" (2378) suggests that spiritual knowledge can only come to life with a heart that seeks (emen). Additionally, the guiding quality of the friends of God is explained through the metaphor of "eye" (2345), emphasizing their enlightening roles in societal darkness. In couplet 2407, the relationship between the Bedouin and his wife is defined through the similes of 'idol' (صنم) and 'shaman' (شمن). Here, the woman's comparison to an idol and the man to a shaman dedicated to her symbolizes not only a human love but also the temporary submission of reason (the Bedouin) to the self/world (the Woman) and the sacredness/passion contained in this relationship. This simile is functional in concretizing the depth of the bond between the characters before their allegorical transformation.

- Woman (beloved) → Idol
- Man (lover) → Shaman
- Man of God (arif/vali) → Eye (observer)
- The Prophet → Mirror
- Divine word, wisdom → Milk
- Spiritually thirsty heart → Suckling baby
- Self and greed → Woman
- Useless mind → Snake, scorpion

Similes related to social and political structures

The figures of the Caliph and the Shah in the story are depicted as a "source" that embodies the hierarchy of governance and sustenance. The comparison of the Shah to

a “pool” and his entourage to “pipes” (2821) explains the distribution of divine favor among social layers through a mechanical flow chart. The characterization of the Caliph as the “sun” (2684) and Baghdad as “spring” (2685) legitimizes the revitalizing and encompassing effect of just authority on existence in a rhetorical context.

- Shah (ruler) → Pool
- Entourage (viziers, officials) → Pipes, water channels
- People → Cup, water reservoir
- Life → Battle
- Human life → Grapevine
- Scarcity-plenty (existence-nonexistence) → Flood
- Poor’s house/unstable life → Spider web

Emotional and psychological similes

The conflict between the self and reason is presented through the dialectic of darkness and light. In couplet 2903, the comparison of reason to “candle/light” and the self to “darkness” concretizes the search for guidance within the individual’s inner world. The depiction of misguided reason as “snake and scorpion” (2329) and grief as a “sickle” that uproots (2297) dramatically reveals the destructive impact of uncontrolled emotions and carnal desires on the individual.

- Grief, jealousy → Bread
- Tears → Water
- Loaf of bread → Moon
- Sky → Oven
- Wealth, existence → Cone (headgear)
- Bald person → One devoid of spirituality
- Poverty → Sword
- Sorrows → Sickle

The couplets examined above demonstrate that the similes in the story are not used randomly or solely for aesthetic purposes. The similes function as structural elements that make abstract mystical concepts visible through concrete images and establish the symbolic plane of the narrative. As Mahmut Erol Kılıç pointed out, they serve as symbolic bridges that directly prepare the way for the ‘sublime meaning’ (Kılıç, 2004, 54–55). The similes categorized under ontological, epistemological, mystical, social, and psychological categories form a systematic weave in the meaning production process of the text. This situation reveals that in the Masnavi, simile is not merely a rhetorical ornament but a foundational component that carries the narrative structure. This study contributes methodologically to the literature by examining these similes within a categorical and structural model, demonstrating that the use of analogy in the Masnavi creates a systematic meaning network.

Conclusion

This study has examined the story of the Bedouin Arab and his wife in the Masnavi from a holistic perspective, focusing on narrative structure and the organization of similes. The findings indicate that this story is not merely a mystical admonition text but possesses a multilayered and consciously constructed narrative structure.

As a result of the narrative analysis, it has been determined that the text progresses through interwoven narrative layers rather than a linear account of events. The sub-narratives within the main story are not merely additional elements that provide thematic

richness; they are structural components that deepen meaning production. This situation reveals that the pedagogical function of the text is directly related to the narrative technique.

The symbolic analysis has shown that the characters and objects in the story are repositioned on an allegorical plane. The Bedouin's mind represents the self of his wife; the limited understanding of the jug symbolizes divine truth in the Tigris, indicating that the narrative is built upon ontological tension. This tension is structured as a representation of the struggle between reason and the self within the individual's inner world.

The examination of similes constitutes the main contribution of the article. The classification of the identified similes in twenty-six couplets under five thematic categories demonstrates that these similes are not random rhetorical embellishments; rather, they form a structural system that establishes the meaning network of the text. The analogies constructed on ontological, epistemological, mystical, social, and psychological levels make abstract concepts tangible and reveal the contrast between the manifest and the hidden. Thus, similes serve not only as pedagogical tools but also as a framework that builds the ontological depth of the narrative.

This study aims to establish a connection between the tradition of mystical interpretation and modern narratological analysis, addressing symbolic expression and the structure of similes within the same analytical framework. This approach contributes methodologically to the literature by demonstrating that rhetorical elements in the Masnavi serve a structural and meaning-constructing function rather than merely an aesthetic one.

However, the research is limited to a single story. A systematic examination of similar simile organizations in other stories of the Masnavi could yield more comprehensive results regarding the overall poetics of the text. Future studies that address the relationship between narrative layers and rhetorical elements through comparative methods will develop a broader perspective on the structural aesthetics of the Masnavi.

In conclusion, the story of the Bedouin Arab and his wife is a conscious example of a narrative that presents the internal ontological struggle of humanity within a symbolic and multilayered structure, going beyond a historical account. The organization of similes functions as one of the aesthetic and epistemological supporting columns of this structure.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Author contribution

The sole author was responsible for the conceptualization, data collection, formal analysis, and original draft preparation.

AI usage statement

The author declares that no generative artifcial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, writing, analysis, interpretation, or preparation of this manuscript.

References

Bal, M. (2017). *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Bennet, A., ve Royle, N. (2004). *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. London: Pearson.
Chittick, W.C. (1983). *The Sufi Path of Love.* Albany: State University of New York Press.
Eco, U. (1992) İstanbul. *Açık Yapıt.*: Kabalcı.
Fludernik, M. (1996). *Towards a Natural Narratology*. Routledge.
Frye, N. (1973). *Anatomy of Criticism*. New Jersey: Princeton Universit Press.
Genette, G. (1983). *Narrative Discourse.* New York: Cornel University Press.
Gölpınarlı, A. (1965). *Mesnevi ve Şerhi.* İstanbul: Milli Eğitim BakanlığıYayınları.
Guerin., W.L. (2005). *A handbook of critical approaches to literature.* Oxford University Press.
Kılıç, M.E. (2004). *Sufi ve Şiir; OsmanlıTAsavvuf Şiirinin Poetikası.* İstanbul: İnsan.
Kusch, C. (2016). *Literary Analysis.* New York: Routledge.
Lakoff, G., ve Johnson, M. (1981). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The Universit of Chicago.
Nasr, S.H. (2002). *Tasavvufi Makaleler*. İstanbul: İnsan yayınları.
Nicholson, R.A. (1926). *The Mathnawi of Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmí*. London: Luzac & Co.
Ricoeur, P. (1977). *The Rule of Metaphor*. University of Toronto Press.
Rumi, M.C. (2015). *Mesnevî-i Ma'nevî.* Çeviren Derya Örs ve Hicabi Kırlangıç. İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu BaşkanlığıYayınları.
Schimmel, A. (1993). *The Triumphal Sun.* Albany: State University of New York Press.
Tavakoli, H. (1389/2010). *Az Esharathaye Darya: Butighaye Ravayat dar Masnavi.* Tahran: Morvarid.
Wellek, R., ve Warren, A. (1955). *Theory of Literature.* New York: A Harvest Book.
Zarrinkoub, A. (1366/1987). *Bahr dar kuzeh: Naqd va tafsir-e qesseha va tamsilat-e Masnavi.* Tehran: Elmi.
Zerrinkûb, A. (1377/1998). *Pele pele tâ mulâkât-i Hudâ.* Tahran: Elmi.

Appendix 1: Couplet Translations

The 28 couplets that form the dataset of this study are presented below in narrative order: The English translations of the couplets are taken from Reynold A. Nicholson's The Mathnawi of Jalálu'd-Dín Rúmí. (Nicholson, 1926, 122–159)

1. نانمان نه، نانخورشمان درد و رش / وزهمان نه، آبمان از دیده اش
   (2254. "We have no bread, our (only) condiment is anguish and envy:we have no jug, our (only) water is the tears (that flow) from our eyes.".)
2. قرص مه را قرص نان نداشته / دست سوی آسمان برداشته
   (2256. We fancy the disk of the moon is a disk (round cake) of breadand lift up our hands towards the sky.)
3. ه غزا ما بی غذا خود شتهام / ما به تغ فقر بی سر شتهام
   (2261. What fighting (can we do)? We are killed without fighting, we are made giddy (utterly distracted) by the sword of want.)
4. عاقل اندر بش و نقصان نرد / زان هر دو همو سلی بذرد
   (2289. The sensible man does not look at increase or deficiency, because both (these) will pass by like a torrent.)
5. همنن از شهری تا به بل / عیال الله و حق نعم المعل
   (2295. Similarly you may take (every animal) from the gnat to the elephant: they all have become God's family (dependent on Him for their nourishment), and what an excellent nourisher is God!)
6. ابن غمان ببخن ون داس ماست / ابن نن شد و آننان وسواس ماست
   (2297. These uprooting griefs are as a scythe to us: (to think that) this is such and such or that that is such and such is a temptation (of the Devil) to us!)
7. وقت موه ختنت فاسد شدی / رز بدی ر موه ون اسد شدی
   (2306. Thou wert a fruitful vine: how hast thou become unsaleable (worthless)? How hast thou become rotten when thy fruit is ripening?)
8. ند دعوی و دم و باد و بروت؟ / ای ترا خانه و بتالعنبوت
   (2319. How long (this) pretension and palaver and bluster? O thou whose house is (frail) as the house of the spider?)
9. ونه عقل تو عقلهٔ مردم است / آن نه عقلست آن ه مار و دم است
   (2329. Since thy understanding is a shackle for mankind, it is not understanding; it is a snake and scorpion.)
10. مال و زر سر را بود همون لاه / ل بود او ز له سازد ناه
    (2343. Wealth and gold are as a cap to the head: 'tis the bald man that makes a shelter of his cap.)
11. مرد حق باشد بمانند بصر / س برهنه به ه وشده نظر
    (2345. The man of God (the saint) resembles the eye; therefore (his) sight is better bare (unveiled) than covered.)
12. فت من آبنهام مصقول دست / تر و هندو در من آن بنند ه هست
    (2370. He replied, 'I am a mirror polished by the (Divine) hand: Turcoman and Indian behold in me that which exists (in themselves)..)
13. ابن سخن شربست در ستان جان / بی شنده خوش نمردد روان
    (2378. This discourse is milk in the teat of the soul: it will not flow well without someone to suck (the teat).)

14. ماد من آن زمانی را ه من / ون صنم بودم تو بودی ون شمن
(2407. Remember the time when I was (beautiful) as the idol, and thou (adoring) as the idolater.)
15. ماجرای مرد و زن افتاد نقل / آن مثال نفس خود مدان و عقل
(2617. The altercation of the man and wife has been related (as a story): know that it is a parable of your own flesh (nafs) and reason.)
16. در دلالت همو آبند و درخت / ون بماهیت روی دورند سخت
(2641. In regard to indication, they (the meaning and the form) are like the sap and the tree; but when you turn to the quiddity, they are very far (removed from each other).)
17. فت زن ی آفتابی تافتست / عالمی زو روشنایی یافتست
(2684. The wife said, "A sun has shone forth, a (whole) world has received light from him.)
18. نایب رحمان خلیفهٔ ردار / شهر بغدادست از وی ون بهار
(2685. The Vicar of the Merciful (God), the Khalifa of the Creator: through him the city of Baghdad is (gay and happy) as the season of spring.)
19. بست آن وزه تن محصور ما / اندرو آب حواس شور ما
(2708. What is that jug? Our confined body: within it is the briny water of our senses..)
20. وزهای با نج لولهٔ نج حس / ا دار این آب را از هر نجس
(2710. Tis a jug with five spouts, the five senses: keep this water pure (and safe) from every filth.)
تا شود زین وزه منفذ سوی بحر / تا برد وزهٔ من خوی بحر
(2711. That there may be from this jug a passage to the sea, and that my jug may assume the nature of the sea.)
21. زن نمیدانست انجا برذر / هست جاری دجلهای همون شر
(2716. The wife did not know that in that place (Baghdād) on the thoroughfare there is the great stream (of water) sweet as sugar.)
22. ه نهدار آب ما را از خسان / یا رب آن وهر بدان دریا رسان
(2732. Crying, "Keep our water safe from scoundrels! O Lord, let that pearl arrive at that sea!)
23. شه و حوضی دان حشم ون لولهها / آب از لوله روان در ولهها
(2821. Regard the king as a reservoir with pipes in every direction, and water running from all (the pipes) like hoppers (in a mill).)
24. آن سبوی آب، دانشهای ماست / وان خلیفه دجلهٔ علم خداست
(2848. That jug of water is (an emblem of) our different sorts of knowledge, and the Caliph is the Tigris of God's knowledge.)
25. ل عالم را سبو دان ای سر / او بود از علم و خوبی تا به سر
(2860. Know, O son, that everything in the universe is a jug which is (filled) to the brim with wisdom and beauty.)
قطرهای از دجلهٔ خوبی اوست / ان نمنجد ز اُری زیر وست
(2861. It (everything in the universe) is a drop of the Tigris of His beauty, which (beauty) because of its fullness is not contained under the skin (that should enclose it).)
26. عقل را شو دان و زن این نفس و طمع / این دو ظلمانی و منِر، عقل شمع
(2903. Know that the husband is Reason, and the wife is greed and cupidity: these twain are dark and deniers (of Reason); Reason is the (bright) candle.)

Appendix 2: Similarity Table

No	Similarity (Müşebbeh)	Compared (Müşebbehün Bih)	Comparison Direction and Thematic Category
2254	Sorrow and Jealousy	Bread/Food	Change of life necessity (Ontological)
2254	Tears	Water (in the Jug)	Formal similarity/fluidity (Ontological)
2256	Roundness of the Moon	Bread Loaf	Perception transformation and hunger (Ontological)
2261	Poverty (Fakr)	War	Continuous state of struggle (Ontological)
2261	Poverty (Fakr)	Sword	Destructive and lethal power (Ontological)
2289	Fewness and Abundance	Flood	Transience and discontinuity (Ontological)
2295	All Living Beings	Family Members	Divine protection and guardianship (Sufi)
2295	God	Head of the Family	Provision and management (Sufi)
2297	Grief (Gam)	Sickle	Power that cuts spiritual values (Psychological)
2306	Human Life	Fruit-bearing Vine	Ripening and potential for perfection (Ontological)
2319	Groundless Life/Claim	Spider Web	Fragility and unsustainability (Ontological)
2329	Misguided Intellect	Snake and Scorpion	Toxicity and harm (Psychological)
2343	Wealth and Gold	Cone	Instrumentality and external cover (Sociopolitical)
2345	People of Truth	Eye	Illuminating and guidance (Sufi)
2370	Prophet	Polished Mirror	Reflecting the truth as it is (Sufi)
2378	Divine Word	Milk	Nourishing and spiritual sustenance (Sufi)
2407	Beloved (Woman)	Idol	Absolute orientation and love (Psychological)
2407	Lover (Man)	Shaman	Devotion and surrender (Psychological)
2617	Man	Intellect	Allegorical representation and key (Sufi)
2617	Woman	Self	Allegorical representation and key (Sufi)
2641	Meaning	Tree	Interdependence (Knowledge/Understanding)
2641	Appearance/Outward	Water	Interdependence (Knowledge/Understanding)
2684	Caliph	Sun	Illuminating and central power (Sociopolitical)
2685	Baghdad	Spring	Vitality and social order (Sociopolitical)
2708	Body	Jug	Limitation and being enclosed (Knowledge/Understanding)
2708	Emotions	Bitter Water	Limitation and being enclosed (Knowledge/Understanding)
2710	Five Senses	Five Openings of the Jug	Knowledge channel and perception tool (Knowledge/Understanding)
2711	Divine Truth	Sea	Infinity and inexhaustibility (Knowledge/Understanding)
2716	Tigris River	Sugar	Sweetness and value of bounty (Knowledge/Understanding)
2732	Water/Human Knowledge	Pearl/Gem	Valuable but dependent on source (Knowledge/Understanding)
2732	Divine Knowledge Source	Sea	Absolute destination (Knowledge/Understanding)
2821	King	Pool	Hierarchical transmission and flow (Sociopolitical)
2821	Subordinate	Pipes	Hierarchical transmission and flow (Sociopolitical)
2848	Human Knowledge	Water Jug	Partial knowledge and limitation (Knowledge/Understanding)
2848	Caliph/Divine Knowledge	Tigris	Total knowledge and infinity (Knowledge/Understanding)
2860	Entire Universe	Knowledge-Filled Jug	Manifestation and limited vessel (Sufi)
2903	Intellect	Large Candle/Light	Illuminating and guidance (Psychological)
2903	Self and Greed	Woman/Darkness	Obstruction and denial (Psychological)