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Representation of Modernity in the Works of Iranian Intellectuals from the Qajar to the Pahlavi Era

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how modernity has been represented in the works of Iranian intellectuals from the Qajar period to the Pahlavi era. Using the method of critical discourse analysis and relying on the examination of textual products—including books, speeches, and newspapers—it seeks to uncover the various discursive logics employed by Iranian intellectuals to understand, critique, or reconstruct modernity. The analysis demonstrates that modernity in Iran has not been perceived as a singular or consensual concept; rather, it has been understood as a polyphonic, multilayered, and diverse phenomenon. Each intellectual, depending on their historical context, social conditions, epistemic resources, and identity-related concerns, has offered a distinct formulation of modernity. The findings indicate that Iranian intellectuals have shaped a wide spectrum of engagements with modernity—ranging from active acceptance to radical critique, and from localization to identity-based reinterpretation. Ultimately, these approaches offer a new perspective on the formation of the discourse of modernity in the history of Iranian thought and show that the experience of modernity in Iran has not been merely imitative, but instead the product of epistemic and identity-based negotiation between tradition, indigenous history, and global narratives of modernity.

Keywords: *Modernism; Discourse Analysis; Iranian Modernity; Qajar and Pahlavi Intellectuals; Representation of Modernity*

Introduction

The question of modernity has been one of the most fundamental axes of social and political thought in Iran over the past two centuries and remains at the center of intellectual debates among Iranian thinkers. The encounter of Iranians with the modern world in the Qajar era was not a simple historical event but the beginning of a complex process of epistemic, cultural, and social transformation that in subsequent years took divergent paths and led to the formation of multiple narratives of modernity. Global research has shown that the experience of non-Western societies with modernity takes the form of “multiple modernities,” a trajectory shaped uniquely within each society based on its historical and cultural context and not through full conformity with the European model (1). Based on this approach, examining modernity in Iran is possible only through analyzing intellectual narratives and discursive configurations, as Iranian intellectuals were the first and most significant group striving to redefine the meaning of becoming modern within the context of Iranian history and culture (2, 3).



From the Qajar period onward, thinkers such as Mīrzā Malkom Khān, Mostashār al-Dowleh, and Ṭālebov attempted to introduce concepts such as law, order, nation, rationality, and progress as the main indicators of modernity. The works of Malkom Khān—especially the articles in the newspaper *Qānūn*—reflected the idea that modernity is realized primarily through establishing a legal system, social order, and governmental reform. He viewed modernity as a path to rescue society from despotism, lawlessness, and backwardness and believed that Iran could not develop without adopting the rules of the modern world (4, 5). In contrast, Mostashār al-Dowleh attempted to show that modern principles were not incompatible with Islamic ethics and that the West itself had drawn these principles from religious teachings. His work *One Word* was the earliest conscious attempt to link Sharī'a and modernity and exemplified an initial effort toward indigenizing modernization (6, 7).

With the Constitutional Revolution, Iran's intellectual landscape entered a new phase, and the discourse of political modernity gained unprecedented strength. Intellectuals such as Dehkhodā, Şur-e Esrāfil, and other journalists of the Constitutional era played an essential role in disseminating concepts such as liberty, constitutional law, political participation, and oversight of power. During this period, modernity materialized not only conceptually but institutionally, as modern structures of governance, judicial authority, and legislative bodies emerged in Iran for the first time (8, 9). This phase demonstrated that modernity for Iranian intellectuals was not merely a theoretical notion but a socio-political strategy for rescuing the country from despotism and collapse.

During the Pahlavi era, the state vigorously pursued a modernization project, implementing expansive economic, administrative, cultural, and institutional reforms. Yet these reforms elicited divergent reactions from intellectuals. Some, such as Taqīzādeh, saw Pahlavi reforms as necessary steps toward progress and global civilization; others—particularly religious and cultural intellectuals—considered the reforms superficial, imitative, and disconnected from Iranian-Islamic identity (10). In this period, Āl-e Aḥmad articulated a fundamental critique of imported modernity through his theory of “Westoxication,” arguing that it produced cultural alienation, erosion of indigenous identity, and a rupture with the historical continuity of Iranian society (11). Similarly, Sharī'atī, with both critical and reconstructive approaches, argued that modernity could not endure without connection to the spiritual foundations of society and that it must be redefined as a cultural-social project (12). Continuing this trajectory, Sorūsh—in his theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge—presented a more rational and epistemological engagement with modernity, attempting to show that modern rationality and religious faith could enter into dialogue rather than imitation or confrontation (13).

This historical trajectory demonstrates that modernity in Iran has been less a governmental project or abstract notion and more a field of discursive contestation—a field in which diverse forces, from secular intellectuals to religious thinkers, have struggled to define the meaning of modernity, reproduce particular narratives, and determine Iran's relation to the modern world. Theorists such as Appadurai (14) and Chakrabarty (15) emphasize that non-Western experiences of modernity unfold through translation, negotiation, and conceptual rearrangement—processes clearly visible in Iran as well. Iranian intellectuals not only imported modern concepts but also interpreted, critiqued, indigenized, or even reconstructed them to align with Iran's social, cultural, and historical structures.

Several domestic and international studies have addressed this subject. For example, Kātūziān (1998) concluded that the earliest modern narratives in Qajar-era Iran emerged from intellectual encounters with political collapse and administrative inefficiency, leading to the prominence of signifiers such as law, justice, and order as central elements of the modernization discourse (16, 17). Malekpour (2005) found that the expansion of travelogues, the growth of the press, and the introduction of new educational systems were the primary channels through which Iranian society

became acquainted with cultural and political manifestations of modernity, thus laying the groundwork for a new intellectual discourse (18). 'Ālam (1999), in a study of Mostashār al-Dowleh, concluded that by emphasizing the compatibility of Sharī'a principles with modern concepts, he attempted to redefine modernity within a religious-ethical framework and thus offered an indigenous and socially acceptable interpretation of law (7). Tabrizi (2012) argued that Constitutional-era intellectuals, influenced by European political thought and Ottoman constitutional experience, institutionalized concepts such as liberty, representation, national rights, and the rule of law in Iranian political discourse (19, 20). Āṭharī (2019) concluded that Iranian intellectuals often treated modernity as a value-laden and identity-oriented issue while paying less attention to its structural, institutional, and economic dimensions (3). Moradi and Miralmassi (2023) found that much of the domestic literature on modernity is descriptive and seldom employs modern discourse-analytic methods or the Laclau-Mouffe framework (21, 22). Haji-Karimi and Heydari (2020) concluded that the binary opposition of tradition versus modernity in Iranian political literature is largely the result of cultural and identity-based interpretations, which have caused misunderstandings of modernization (17). Filin et al. (2022) argued that although Pahlavi reforms modernized administrative and educational structures, the structural gap between state and society generated fertile ground for intellectual critiques of imported modernity (23). Abbaszadeh et al. (2019) found that Iranian perceptions of modernity are strongly dependent on governmental cultural and educational policies, with each historical period producing a distinct representation of modernity (10). Abrahamian (1993) similarly showed that late-Qajar Iran perceived modernity as a solution to structural and economic crises, with intellectuals playing a central role in transmitting modern concepts to society (4). Keddie (2006) concluded that Nāṣerī-era reforms, increased interactions with the West, and the growth of educational institutions were the primary foundations for the formation of new discourses on state and nation in Iran (24, 25). Ādamiyyat (1978) argued that Malkom Khān formulated the first coherent narrative of political modernity in Iran through his emphasis on natural rights, law, and administrative reform (5). Cronin (2021) found that while Pahlavi modernization was structurally successful, it was culturally unsuccessful, creating the conditions for the critiques advanced by intellectuals such as Āl-e Aḥmad and Sharī'atī (10).

Discourse analysis, as a research approach, holds significant importance because it assumes that discourses construct reality and that meaning is produced through language, text, and power relations (26). Based on this perspective, intellectual texts are not merely carriers of information but discursive acts through which narratives of modernity are produced, stabilized, or challenged (27). Thus, examining books, speeches, newspapers, and treatises written by intellectuals during the Qajar and Pahlavi periods enables us to understand how the concept of modernity has been represented over time and what political, social, and intellectual forces have shaped it.

The significance of the present study lies in offering, through an inter-period analysis and discourse analysis, a coherent representation of the transformation of modernity narratives from Qajar to Pahlavi. Many previous studies either focused on one specific period or merely described discourses in general terms; however, this study seeks to synthesize historical, textual, and theoretical data to provide a comprehensive picture of the discursive logics of Iranian intellectuals. The aim is to show how intellectuals, depending on their historical position, lived experience, epistemic resources, and identity concerns, constructed different narratives of modernity and how these narratives influenced the formation of collective memory and Iran's modernization trajectories. Ultimately, this research seeks to understand that modernity in Iran, rather than being an imitative experience, is a negotiated, multilayered process emerging from tensions among tradition, power, history, and the modern world.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on a combination of two complementary approaches: Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis; an approach that makes it possible to understand the representation of modernity in the works of Iranian intellectuals from the Qajar to the Pahlavi periods not as a fixed and propositional set of statements, but as a dynamic, conflictual, and constantly redefined semantic system (22, 26). Within this framework, modernity is not a single, pre-given concept but a floating and contested signifier that is produced, stabilized, or transformed in the course of struggles among discourses and social forces—a process in which Iranian intellectuals, especially in periods of political and epistemic transition, have played a crucial role.

In discourse theory, Laclau and Mouffe argue that every symbolic order is organized on the basis of a set of signifiers, and these signifiers are articulated within a network of equivalence and difference around one or several nodal points (22). In the history of Iranian intellectual life, modernity is precisely one of these nodal points whose semantic load has undergone transformation in different periods under the influence of power relations, social conditions, and cultural contexts. For example, in the late Qajar period, modernity was more closely associated with signifiers such as "law," "freedom," "justice," "administrative reform," and "constitutionalism," whereas in the Pahlavi period, this articulation shifted toward concepts such as "modernization," "administrative rationalization," "state authority," "national unity," and "material progress." This process is what Laclau and Mouffe call "discursive articulation," an act through which meaning is constructed not by reference to an external reality but through its relations to other signifiers.

In this theoretical apparatus, chains of equivalence and difference play a central role in the reproduction of meanings. When Qajar intellectuals placed "despotism" in a chain of difference opposed to "law" and "freedom," they were in fact constructing the discourse of modernity as an alternative to the existing political order. The same mechanism made it possible for the constitutionalist discourse to achieve expressibility and social legitimacy. Conversely, in the Pahlavi period, the chain of difference was constructed in another way: the official state discourse positioned modernity against "tradition," "backwardness," "disorder," and "ethnic fragmentation," while many intellectuals such as Sharī'atī and Āl-e Aḥmad challenged this discourse and set state-led modernity in opposition to concepts like "Westoxication," "cultural humiliation," "alienation," and "dependent development" (17, 28). These semantic antagonisms show that modernity in Iran is not a closed meaning but an "empty signifier" that different social forces attempt to fill with their preferred meanings (21).

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, one of the most influential approaches in the study of the relationship between discourse and power, constitutes the second layer of this article's theoretical framework. Fairclough emphasizes that discourses do not merely reflect social reality; they construct it, and this constructiveness operates on three levels: text, discursive practice, and social structure (26). Accordingly, to analyze the works of Iranian intellectuals, it is first necessary to examine the textual level, including lexical choices, metaphors, sentence organization, and rhetorical patterns. Second, the discursive practice or communicative purpose of the text must be analyzed—that is, how the text seeks to stabilize, reconstruct, or challenge semantic or political structures. Third, it is essential to consider the historical context and power structures within which the text is produced (26).

Combining Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory with Fairclough's critical discourse analysis makes it possible to study the representation of modernity in Iran from two key angles: first, the mechanisms of articulation,

antagonisms, and key signifiers; second, the relationship of these mechanisms to structures of power, ideology, and social context. For example, Qajar intellectuals' emphasis on "law" was not merely an epistemic choice but a direct reaction to the despotic structure of the period and an attempt to redefine the relationship between the people and the state. Similarly, the Pahlavi-era intellectual critique of "authoritarian modernization" was not only a cultural concern but was directly related to top-down modernization policies and structural inequalities (28).

Within this framework, the concept of "intertextuality" is also central. Fairclough argues that texts are always formed on the shoulders of previous texts and that there is no completely independent text; rather, every text is a network of references, rereadings, and discursive reproductions (26). Therefore, an analysis of modernity in the works of Iranian intellectuals must show how these texts are, on the one hand, influenced by European discourses on liberalism, law, freedom, and progress, and, on the other hand, shaped in interaction with local traditions such as political jurisprudence, religious ethics, reformist literature, and Iranian lived experience. This is precisely the process that Chakrabarty calls the "provincializing" or localization of modern concepts (15), and in Iran it has unfolded through translation, adaptation, and reinterpretation.

Another key element in this framework is the role of power and ideology. Fairclough shows that discourses are always produced within power structures and that even the critique of dominant discourse is a form of power practice (26). Qajar intellectuals were positioned vis-à-vis despotic power, and their critique constituted a discursive resistance that sought to open new possibilities for the political order. In contrast, intellectuals in the Pahlavi period faced a power that presented itself as the "agent of modernization," and thus intellectual critique shifted from despotism to issues such as "Westoxication" and the crisis of the meaning of modernity. This analytical reorientation can be fully understood only within the framework of the connection between discourse and power.

Overall, this combined theoretical framework allows modernity in Iran to be studied not as an abstract concept but as a discursive and historical construct—one that intellectuals have produced through writing, oratory, and social critique, and that states have redefined through official policies. Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory helps to illuminate the semantic and discursive mechanisms employed by intellectuals, while Fairclough's critical discourse analysis makes it possible to situate these mechanisms within the contexts of power, ideology, and social structures. From this perspective, modernity in Iran is a "fluid semantic field" formed through discursive struggles, and the works of intellectuals between the Qajar and Pahlavi periods constitute one of the most important arenas for its representation, redefinition, and contestation.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is qualitative and grounded in critical discourse analysis, seeking to examine, on the basis of textual sources from the Qajar to the Pahlavi periods, the different ways in which modernity has been represented in intellectual works. The data of the research consist of books, treatises, articles, speeches, and influential newspapers authored by intellectuals, and the aim is not to collect historical data but to conduct an in-depth analysis of the meanings embedded in these texts. The sources were selected through purposive sampling, and works that have played the most significant role in shaping the discourse of modernity were chosen—notably the writings of Malkom Khān, Ākhūndzādeh, and Mostashār al-Dowleh in the Qajar period, and the works of Taqīzādeh, Forūghī, Dehkhodā, Āl-e Aḥmad, and Sharī'atī in the Pahlavi period.

Discourse analysis was carried out according to Fairclough's three-level model. At the textual level, key vocabulary, metaphors, and modes of expression were examined in order to identify the semantic patterns of each

period—for example, how concepts such as law, progress, and civilization were deployed in opposition to despotism and ignorance in Qajar-era texts. At the level of discursive practice, the social role of these texts was analyzed—how Qajar intellectuals sought, through writing, to transform the political and legal order, and how Pahlavi-era intellectuals, by critiquing authoritarian modernization, advanced a new formulation of indigenous modernity. At the level of social context, the historical and political conditions of each period—such as Qajar crises, colonial encroachment, Pahlavi modernization policies, institutional transformations, and identity tensions—were examined to clarify how power and social structures influenced the production of divergent meanings of modernity.

Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the representation of modernity in the works of Iranian intellectuals from the Qajar to the Pahlavi era has been neither linear nor uniform, but discursive, conflictual, and multilayered. The discourse analysis of the texts revealed that the concept of modernity in the Qajar period was primarily linked with signifiers such as law, freedom, justice, education, progress, and rationality, whereas in the Pahlavi period these signifiers were replaced by notions such as modernization, the modern state, material progress, social homogeneity, and the organizing authority of the state. This transformation is not merely a lexical shift but a change in the semantic and discursive constellation of modernity, reflecting the social conditions and power relations of each period. The findings further showed that intellectuals in each era, through different articulations, competed to claim the meaning of modernity, and this competition ultimately shaped the final form of this discourse—a result that aligns with key concepts of discourse theory such as nodal points, chains of equivalence, and antagonism (22).

In analyzing Qajar-era intellectual texts, the first significant finding concerns the emergence of a “modernity–legalism” discourse—one in which authors such as Mostashār al-Dowleh, Malkom Khān, and Ākhūndzādeh, by foregrounding the signifier “law” as a nodal point, constructed a chain of equivalent signifiers such as freedom, justice, rationality, order, and progress around it. Examination of their key vocabulary and textual structures showed that “law” was introduced not merely as an administrative tool but as the basis for reconstructing the social and political order. This discourse positioned itself in opposition to “despotism,” “ignorance,” “superstition,” and “disorder.” Textual analysis of Qajar treatises revealed that these authors understood modernity as a form of liberation from the previous order and, through rhetorical strategies, irony, historical narratives, and comparisons with Europe, sought to offer a new meaning for politics and society—a meaning constructed through discursive articulation rather than through a fixed technical definition (4).

During this period, the tendency among intellectuals to adopt European models is evident; in many texts, Europe is represented as the “desirable Other.” The findings show that Qajar intellectuals, by presenting an idealized image of Western civilization, placed indigenous tradition in a weakened position and, through oppositions such as “progress/ignorance,” “law/despotism,” and “reason/superstition,” introduced modernity as a salvific project. This analysis corresponds with the third level of Fairclough’s model—the social context—which shows that political crises, institutional weakness, international pressures, and the expansion of translation activities in the late Qajar period provided the necessary groundwork for the emergence of this discourse (26).

The findings for the Pahlavi period, however, present a markedly different image of modernity. In this era, the dominant Pahlavi state discourse articulated modernity around the concept of “state-led modernization,” a signifier linked with notions such as infrastructural development, a modern army, new education systems, centralized authority, national homogeneity, and top-down planning. Examination of official texts, speeches, and administrative

reports from the Pahlavi era shows that modernity was framed less as a cultural project and more as a social engineering endeavor whose goal was to weaken traditional forces and create a disciplined and compliant society. In this discourse, the state serves as the principal agent, while technocratic intellectuals play a peripheral but influential role in producing legitimacy for it. Syntactic and semantic analysis of official texts showed that this discourse relies on reportorial language, prescriptive structures, and uniform vocabulary in order to create a sense of certainty—an operation aligned with the state's claim of reconstructing society in its entirety (17).

Alongside this official discourse, the findings show that critical Pahlavi-era intellectuals—such as Āl-e Aḥmad, Sharī'atī, and segments of the nationalist intelligentsia—represented modernity from a radically different perspective. Their articulation revolves around the concept of an “identity crisis,” constructing a chain of negative signifiers such as Westoxication, cultural disintegration, dependency, imitation, and social collapse. These intellectuals, in contrast to the state's view, regarded modernity not as a project of progress but as a rupture in identity and attempted to construct a semantic alternative to it. Analysis of *Westoxication* demonstrates that Āl-e Aḥmad uses metaphors such as “plague” and “cancer” to portray dependent modernity as a destructive force and, through historical narratives and references to the experiences of other societies, challenges the legitimacy of the official discourse. This critique is a clear example of the mechanism of de-articulation and the struggle to refill the signifier “modernity” with a new meaning—what discourse theory describes as the “struggle for hegemony” (21).

The findings also revealed that in the works of Sharī'atī, modernity shifts from a purely political concept to an existential and cultural issue. Through complex linguistic structures, historical narratives, mythological analysis, and references to poetry and literature, he offers a spiritual reinterpretation of modernity and redefines it in relation to the Muslim experience and Eastern identity. In Sharī'atī's texts, modernity is sometimes introduced as a historical necessity and sometimes as a grave threat—a contradiction that the findings show is rooted in his attempt to articulate an indigenous and “liberatory” modernity. This finding aligns with the notion of the “empty signifier” in discourse theory—that is, a concept that different forces attempt to fill with their desired meanings (21).

Intertextual analysis also yielded significant findings. Qajar-era intellectual texts were strongly influenced by translations and Western writings, and many key signifiers of modernity entered Iranian political language through translation. However, in the Pahlavi period, intellectual texts were less translation-based and more locally produced, seeking to provide epistemic responses to Iran's specific conditions. This difference demonstrates that modernity in Iran shifted from an “imported–imitative discourse” to a “critical–identity discourse,” a process shaped by political changes, the emergence of the modern state, the expansion of education, and the rise of a new intellectual class (15).

The findings further showed that the relationship between intellectuals and power played an essential role in the representation of modernity. In the Qajar period, intellectuals occupied an oppositional position, and their critique had a liberatory orientation; in the Pahlavi period, however, some intellectuals aligned themselves with power and participated in producing the official discourse. This shift in discursive positioning led to the production of entirely different meanings of modernity. The findings confirm Fairclough's analysis of the relationship between discourse and power: discourses do not simply reflect reality but construct it, and this construction may serve to maintain or challenge power structures (26).

In summary, the findings suggest that modernity in Iran has been a fluid and contested discursive field, and in each period intellectuals sought to articulate this central signifier in a direction favorable to their own objectives. In the Qajar period, modernity was introduced as a solution to a historical crisis and as the product of a legalist project;

in the Pahlavi period, the state understood it as an authoritarian modernization project, while critical intellectuals perceived it as a crisis of identity and dependency. This multilayered and diverse semantic landscape reflects the antagonism of discourses and the structural transformations of Iranian society, showing that modernity is not a fixed concept but a discursive construct continuously undergoing redefinition.

Discussion and Conclusion

The discourse analysis of the modernist orientations of six Iranian intellectuals from the Qajar to the Pahlavi period demonstrates that modernity in Iran has not been a singular or linear process, but rather a multilayered, contested, and continually open discursive field. Drawing from the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe in analyzing discourse and tracing hegemonic articulations, and employing Fairclough's critical approach to understanding the relationship between text and social structures, this study sought to show how Iranian intellectuals have represented modernity through language, semantic nodal points, central signifiers, and mechanisms of equivalence and differentiation—demarcating its boundaries and crafting divergent pathways for its integration into Iranian society. The findings indicate that "Iranian modernity" is not a rigid or fixed totality, but a discursive construct that takes different forms depending on the historical period, socio-political conditions, and intellectual background of each thinker.

In the Qajar period, Malkom Khān and Mostashār al-Dowleh articulated modernity through an inseparable linkage with the concept of law. For Malkom Khān, "law" was not merely an instrument of regulating power but served as a central signifier around which other concepts—such as progress, justice, rationality, and social order—were articulated. Within his discourse, the mechanism of "equivalence" between law and modernity played a decisive role, whereby lawlessness was equated with backwardness and disorder, and legality was identified with development and civility. For Mostashār al-Dowleh as well, law—especially in his treatise *One Word*—represented the essence of modernity; however, unlike Malkom Khān, he reinterpreted law within religious and ethical traditions rather than linking it to the Western experience. This integrative articulation resulted in a form of ethical-religious modernity that bridged the perceived divide between tradition and modernity. Thus, at the discursive level, the Qajar era witnessed attempts to "hegemonize law" as a prerequisite for entering the modern world, though such hegemony encountered structural and discursive resistance and never fully solidified into an unquestioned norm.

With the onset of the Pahlavi era, the articulation of modernity became more complex and polyphonic. Unlike Qajar intellectuals, Āl-e Aḥmad did not view modernity as a historical necessity but as an identity-based threat—an affliction imposed upon Iranian society through cultural domination and Western influence. The central signifier of "Westoxication" in his discourse established a sharp boundary between "the West/Other" and "Us/Self" through a mechanism of differentiation. By portraying the West as a destructive force that erodes Iranian cultural identity, his representation redirected modernity from a discourse of progress toward a discourse of resistance. From a critical discourse perspective, his language is conflictual, metaphor-laden, and oppositional, overturning the dominant discourse of Western modernity and enabling the emergence of an alternative narrative.

Shari'ati, like Āl-e Aḥmad, called for a "return to the self," but his notion of selfhood was not a static historical essence; it was a liberatory project capable of engaging with modern concepts. Through the articulation of signifiers such as community, leadership, justice, awareness, and responsibility, he constructed a form of Islamic modernity in which tradition is not a negation of modernity but its driving force. Within a discourse-theoretical reading,

Shari'ati's discourse represents a model of "emancipatory populism" that mobilizes the masses and constructs an aware and resistant subject—transforming modernity from an elite project into a societal force.

Soroush, however, offered a distinctly different formulation. In his works, modernity is redefined not in the political or social realm but at the level of knowledge and rationality. His theory of the "contraction and expansion of religious knowledge," by challenging claims of objectivity and permanence in religious epistemology, creates space for pluralism, dialogue, and critical reason. From a discourse-analytic perspective, the relationship between text and socio-historical context is evident: Soroush's discourse emerges as a response to ideological conflicts in late twentieth-century Iran, reframing modernity as fluid rationality and intellectual openness. Through this shift, he moves the discourse of modernity away from binary value conflicts toward deliberation and reason-giving.

Dowlatabadi's approach differs from that of the other intellectuals, as he represents modernity not in abstract theoretical terms but within the lived experiences and everyday lifeworld of society. *Kelidar* depicts the confrontation between rural communities and processes of societal transformation—processes that fracture tradition and generate tensions within modernity. For him, modernity is neither wholly positive nor entirely negative; rather, it is a dual and complex experience. His works demonstrate how modernity takes shape at the micro-level—in bodies, relationships, social classes, and lived experience—and how it impacts collective identity formation.

A comparative synthesis of these six discourses reveals that modernity in Iran has taken multiple forms. In the Qajar era, modernity was predominantly articulated around "law" and "state-building," whereas in the Pahlavi era it became organized around themes of "identity," "critique," "consciousness," and "lifeworld." From a discourse-analytic perspective, this divergence reflects a shift in central signifiers and hegemonic structures: law no longer held the mobilizing power it once had and was replaced by concepts such as selfhood, critique, awareness, and social experience. Thus, modernity appears not as a universal truth but as a discursive field with fluid boundaries that is continually subject to redefinition. The shift in central signifiers—from law to identity, or from anti-Western sentiment to critical rationality—reflects the dynamic nature of the discourse of modernity in Iran.

This study also demonstrates that the tradition/modernity divide in Iran is neither absolute nor insurmountable. Malkom Khān and Mostashār al-Dowleh attempted to situate modernity within the framework of Islamic ethics; Shari'ati reframed modernity through tradition; Soroush recognized modernity within the realm of religious epistemology; and Dowlatabadi grounded modernity in the lived experience of the Iranian people. Even Āl-e Aḥmad, who harshly critiqued Western modernity, ultimately produced a discourse constructed through engagement with the West. Thus, tradition and modernity function not as opposing poles but as elements within a semantic chain that intellectuals reinterpret according to their historical and social positions.

The findings of this study show that "Iranian modernity" is the product of complex interactions among discourses: from early attempts at legal order to identity-based critiques, from Shari'ati's emancipatory modernity to Soroush's critical rationality and Dowlatabadi's experiential interpretations. None of these discourses alone can fully articulate modernity, as each represents only part of the social reality. Therefore, Iranian modernity is not a failed project but an always unfinished and continually evolving one. This incompleteness reflects the discursive openness of the social order and underscores that discourses are constantly redefined in interaction with structural transformations and lived experiences.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

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All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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