

Original Research Article

Critical Discourse Analysis of Coffeehouse Painting in the Representation of National Identity (Based on Norman Fairclough's Model)

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Abstract

Problem statement: As a popular art school, Iranian Coffeehouse Painting transferred artistic expression from the exclusive domain of the royal court and elite classes into the public sphere, thereby playing a significant role in shaping collective consciousness and representing national identity. Despite its cultural significance, however, the discursive potential of this artistic tradition has received limited scholarly attention. Accordingly, the present study seeks to explain how the various dimensions of national identity are constructed and represented within Coffeehouse paintings.

Research objective: This study aims to analyze the role of Coffeehouse Painting in the construction of national identity and to examine the visual mechanisms through which it interacted with the artistic and cultural discourses of its time.

Research method: This research is fundamental in terms of purpose and adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. The theoretical framework is based on Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), employing its three analytical dimensions -description, interpretation, and explanation. Four representative works of Iranian Coffeehouse Painting were purposively selected and analyzed within this framework.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that Coffeehouse Painting functioned not merely as an aesthetic practice but also as an ideological and discursive act. By rejecting both Western and courtly aesthetic conventions and relocating artistic expression to the public sphere, Coffeehouse painters articulated an alternative discourse of identity. Through the integration of religious, mythological, and everyday cultural signifiers, they constructed and reinforced a coherent, people-centered conception of national identity that challenged the dominant discourses of their historical context.

Keywords: *National identity; Iranian Coffeehouse Painting; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Norman Fairclough; Visual discourse.*

Introduction and Problem Statement

The Qajar period represents one of the most decisive

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eras in Iran's political and cultural history. During this period, the encounter with Western modernity and the emergence of profound social crises generated a fundamental tension between tradition and modernity. Painting, as one of the principal artistic media of the time, was deeply influenced by this historical transition and developed along two parallel trajectories: official

(court) painting and popular painting. Within the latter emerged a distinctive narrative-visual tradition known as Iranian Coffeehouse Painting. As one of the most significant forms of Iranian folk painting, Coffeehouse Painting developed independently of courtly artistic conventions and was established primarily by self-taught artists. Drawing upon lived experience and individual imagination, these painters reinterpreted religious narratives and heroic epics through a highly expressive visual language. Their departure from academic artistic conventions should be understood not merely as a stylistic characteristic but also as a manifestation of the semantic and ideological distance maintained by the popular classes from the hegemonic artistic discourse of the royal court. This historical period also witnessed the gradual formation of national consciousness in Iran. Military defeats and increasing colonial pressures stimulated the convergence of multiple identity layers, particularly Iran's ancient cultural heritage and Shi'i religious beliefs. Within this context, Iranian Coffeehouse Painting functioned as a popular communicative medium that preserved and reinforced collective memory by integrating mythological narratives with religious symbolism. Although numerous studies have examined Iranian Coffeehouse Painting from historical, aesthetic, and iconographic perspectives, relatively little attention has been devoted to investigating how the components of national identity are represented and constructed through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Addressing this gap, the present study employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the articulation of identity-related elements within selected works of Iranian Coffeehouse Painting. Accordingly, the principal research question is as follows: How does Iranian Coffeehouse Painting construct and represent the various dimensions of national identity through its discursive mechanisms?

Literature Review

A review of the existing literature indicates that considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to Iranian Coffeehouse Painting and the representation

of national identity in Iran. Nevertheless, most studies on Coffeehouse Painting have adopted descriptive, ethnographic, or thematic approaches, while relatively few have explored its structural and discursive dimensions. Among the notable contributions, Abdolhosseini & Hamed (2020) presented a comprehensive account of Iranian Coffeehouse Painting in "Coffeehouse Painting: Selected Essays and Interviews" through the compilation of historical documents, artists' interviews, and oral narratives. Hossein Abadi & Mohammadpour (2016), in their study entitled "An investigation of Shi'i visual symbols in Iranian Coffeehouse Painting", traced the historical origins of religious iconography to the Buyid period, emphasizing the continuity of Shi'i visual traditions. Hosseini (2023), in "Analysis of the visual and thematic layers of the coffeehouse painting (Case study: Kai Khosrow's court and Chelleh night)", examined the compositional and thematic characteristics of the paintings The Court of Kay Khosrow and Shab-e Chelleh. Likewise, Mehria & Grossi (2022) investigated the role of folk narratives in religious Coffeehouse paintings, highlighting the significance of storytelling and audience engagement. Rasteh (2023), in "Ghahvekhane painting in the passage of time", documented the historical development of this artistic tradition while discussing its thematic evolution and introducing its leading practitioners. In the field of national identity studies, several influential works have explored the historical formation and reconstruction of Iranian identity. Afroogh (2023), in "Iranian Identity Through History", analyzed the evolution of Iranian identity with particular emphasis on its mythological, religious, and historical foundations. Marashi (2008/2025), in "Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940", adopted a historical-discursive approach to examine the processes of nation-building and the redefinition of Iranian identity between 1250 and 1320 SH (1871-1941 CE). Similarly, Alizadeh & Tarafdari (2019), in "Genealogy of the Bases of National Identity in Nationalistic Historiography of Qajar and Constitutional Periods", demonstrated how Qajar nationalist discourse, through its emphasis on ancient Iran, reshaped historical narratives in accordance with modern nationalist ideologies. Within the broader framework of Critical

Discourse Analysis (CDA), several scholars have applied Fairclough's approach to textual and visual cultural artifacts. Amani et al. (2021), in "Changing the meaning in the discourse of contemporary Iranian calligraphy from the perspective of critical discourse analysis", argued that increasing detachment from religious and traditional values has distanced both artists and society from the underlying meanings embedded in Islamic calligraphy, rendering it increasingly subject to commercialization. Likewise, Marandi et al. (2016), in *The Formation of Iranian Identity in Contemporary Iranian Graphic Design*, demonstrated the analytical potential of discourse analysis for investigating identity construction in contemporary visual arts. Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, no previous study has specifically employed Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate the discursive mechanisms through which national identity is represented and constructed in Iranian Coffeehouse Painting. The present study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by applying Fairclough's three-dimensional analytical framework to selected Coffeehouse paintings, thereby elucidating the role of this visual tradition in representing and consolidating the constituent elements of Iranian national identity within their historical and socio-cultural context.

Theoretical Foundations

• Discursive transformation in Qajar-Era Painting

The Qajar period (1796–1925 CE) was characterized by profound political and cultural transformations resulting from Iran's direct encounter with the West, changes in the structure of political power, increasing urbanization, and the emergence of new media. These developments fundamentally reshaped the artistic landscape, particularly the practice of painting. Based on their origins, patronage, and intended audiences, scholars generally classify Qajar painting into two distinct traditions: court painting and popular painting (Khansalar, 2017, 114).

- **Court Painting:** Court painting, which flourished primarily during the first half of the Qajar era, developed under the direct patronage of the royal court and was

closely intertwined with political authority. During this period, painting gradually departed from the heroic and mythological narratives that had traditionally characterized Persian visual culture, evolving instead into an instrument for glorifying the monarchy and legitimizing political power. Its most distinctive visual features included an anthropocentric perspective, the adoption of linear perspective, and three-dimensional spatial representation inspired by European academic painting (Pakbaz, 2013, 41). Over time, this artistic tradition increasingly embraced an aesthetic centered on visual pleasure, corporeality, and entertainment (Afsarian, 2023, 30). Consequently, court painting gradually lost much of its broader social function and became primarily a medium of aesthetic enjoyment for the ruling elite.

- **Popular Painting and the Discursive Shift:** During the second half of the Qajar period, the declining influence of court art, together with the accelerating forces of modernization, rendered official painting increasingly incapable of addressing the cultural and emotional needs of the wider population (Modarresi, 2008, 32). The cultural vacuum created by this separation facilitated the emergence of an alternative mode of visual expression rooted in popular culture. A clear distinction consequently developed between aristocratic art and a form of popular art characterized by collective participation, ritual functions, and identity formation (Afshar Mohajer, 2005, 43).

This transformation represented far more than a change in artistic subject matter. Rather, it fundamentally redefined the function of visual art, transforming it into a medium for narrative expression, emotional communication, and direct engagement with the public. From a discursive perspective, this shift can be understood as a process of discursive reconfiguration in which the locus of symbolic authority moved from the royal court to the sphere of collective memory. Within this new discursive formation, visual representation no longer primarily served the interests of political power but instead became a vehicle through which shared cultural values, historical memory, and collective identities were articulated and sustained.

• Socio-cultural context of the Iranian Coffeehouse Painting School

Iranian Coffeehouse Painting represents a distinctive and relatively late development in the history of Iranian art. Emerging concurrently with the Constitutional Revolution, it evolved from the traditions of popular and religious art (Hossein Abadi & Mohammadpour, 2016, 38). As official Qajar painting increasingly gravitated toward naturalism and Western academic conventions, the middle and lower strata of urban society sought an artistic language capable of reflecting their aspirations, national sentiments, and religious beliefs (Pakbaz, 2013, 201). Within this historical context, Iranian Coffeehouse Painting emerged as a discursive practice of cultural resistance and one of the most authentic expressions of Iranian folk art, challenging the hegemony of official court painting.

During the Qajar period, the coffeehouse functioned far beyond a venue for leisure and social gathering; it constituted a public sphere in which collective opinions and shared cultural values were formed and negotiated. The origins of Coffeehouse Painting can be traced to the longstanding traditions of storytelling (*naqqālī*), elegiac recitation, and *ta'ziyeh* performances. In this context, the Coffeehouse painter may be regarded as the silent narrator of stories that the storyteller orally performed before the public (Zekrali, 2021, 42). The visual language of this artistic tradition is fundamentally grounded in imaginative representation rather than empirical realism. Coffeehouse painters deliberately rejected Western academic principles such as linear perspective and anatomical accuracy, relying instead on a distinctive system of symbolic conventions. Among its most characteristic features are a hierarchical perspective, the symbolic use of color, and the simultaneous representation of multiple temporal and spatial dimensions within a single pictorial composition. Consequently, narrative meaning and ideological expression consistently take precedence over visual realism (Hosseini, 2023, 15). Thematically, Coffeehouse paintings generally revolve around three principal categories: heroic narratives derived

from the Shahnameh, religious events and sacred histories, and scenes depicting festive or popular social life (Golaghaei et al., 2026, 7). More broadly, Iranian Coffeehouse Painting fulfilled an ideological and identity-forming function. Through the repeated depiction of national heroes and Shi'i sacred figures, it naturalized a particular symbolic order and reinforced it as a legitimate representation of Iranian national identity (Rasteh, 2023, 56).

• The formation of national identity in Iran in the context of modernity

The construction of national identity in Qajar Iran must be understood within the broader framework of the period's intellectual and discursive transformations. Confrontation with modernity, repeated military defeats, and the growing pressure of colonial powers transformed the redefinition of Iran and Iranian identity into a fundamental socio-political concern. During this period, intellectuals and historians, influenced both by emerging nationalist ideologies and by Orientalist interpretations of ancient Persia, reconstructed an image of the Iranian nation founded upon a unified, glorious, and predominantly mythological past (Marashi, 2008/2026, 25).

This form of ancient-oriented Iranian nationalism was shaped less by indigenous historical scholarship than by the romanticized and often exaggerated narratives of Western historians and Iranologists, who portrayed pre-Islamic Persian civilization as the primary source of Iranian national identity. Within this discursive framework, national identity gradually assumed a multilayered structure comprising three interrelated dimensions: the heritage of ancient Iran and the mythological world of the Shahnameh as its historical foundation; the religious dimension rooted in Shi'ism, which had constituted the cultural core of Iranian society since the Safavid era; and the territorial-social dimension, which consolidated the concept of Iran as a sovereign political entity with defined geographical boundaries (Afroogh, 2023, 31). This synthesis of historical, religious, and territorial elements -commonly characterized in identity studies as a composite historical Iranian identity- was further reinforced during the

Qajar period through the expansion of visual literacy and the dissemination of political ideas among broader segments of society. Within this process, popular arts, and Iranian Coffeehouse Painting in particular, played a pivotal role in representing and consolidating national identity. As a visual manifestation of the collective memory of ordinary people, Coffeehouse Painting simultaneously reconstructed the two principal pillars of Qajar national identity -Persian mythological heritage and Shi'i religious symbolism- through visual narratives depicting heroic epics, the events of Karbala, legendary kings, and the perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil (Zekrali, 2021, 52). Accordingly, Iranian Coffeehouse Painting transcended the function of mere visual representation and became a discursive practice through which artists actively participated in constructing collective perceptions of the Iranian nation. By selectively employing shared motifs, heroic figures, narrative scenes, and culturally embedded symbols, Coffeehouse painters contributed to the production, dissemination, and reinforcement of a common national consciousness (Abdolhosseini & Hamed, 2020, 29).

• Critical discourse analysis: Norman Fairclough's model

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary analytical approach widely employed in cultural and social studies to examine the underlying relationships between texts -both verbal and visual- and the broader structures of society (Moridi, 2024, 18). Through the processes of description, interpretation, and explanation, researchers are able to uncover the complex relationships and networks of meaning embedded within texts (Ghahremani, 2022, 20). Within contemporary cultural studies, discourse analysis serves as an effective framework for revealing the interconnections between systems of representation and structures of power. Accordingly, works of art can be understood as social texts that actively participate in the production of meaning, the reproduction of collective memory, and the construction of national identities (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2025, 22). Among the major contributors to this field, Norman Fairclough occupies a central position. He conceptualizes discourse

as a particular mode of representation and meaning-making embedded within social practices and realized through semiotic systems such as language and visual imagery (ibid., 62). From this perspective, discourse is itself continuously shaped by broader social structures while simultaneously contributing to their reproduction and transformation. Fairclough further argues that every communicative event is constituted through relations of power and therefore requires an integrated three-dimensional analytical framework for its investigation (Fairclough, 1995/2020, 21-27).

The first dimension, Description (Text), focuses on the formal organization and internal characteristics of the text (ibid., 117). In the analysis of visual texts and works of art, this stage involves the systematic examination of themes, compositional structures, color schemes, represented identities, and aesthetic conventions, thereby establishing the material basis for subsequent interpretation.

The second dimension, Interpretation (Discursive Practice), functions as the intermediary between the text and its socio-cultural context by examining the cognitive processes involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of discourse. At this level, the interaction between the text and the audience's prior knowledge, cultural assumptions, and interpretive frameworks is explored. Moreover, interpretation encompasses the analysis of both intertextuality and interdiscursivity, investigating how the artwork engages with other cultural texts, historical narratives, and contemporary discourses (Fairclough, 1989, 140).

The final dimension, Explanation (Social Practice), situates discourse within broader structures of ideology and power. Fairclough argues that the descriptive and interpretive stages alone are insufficient to reveal relations of domination; such relations become fully intelligible only through explanation. At this level, the artwork is understood as part of a hegemonic struggle among competing discourses -including royal discourse, popular religious discourse, and the emerging discourse of modernity- through which ideological meanings are negotiated, legitimized, or contested (Fairclough, 1995/2020, 131).

Research Method

Given that Iranian Coffeehouse Painting embodies the cultural, social, and historical dimensions of the period in which it emerged, this study is situated within the interdisciplinary fields of the sociology of art and Critical Discourse Analysis. In terms of its objective, the research is fundamental, while methodologically it adopts a descriptive-analytical approach. The analysis is conducted within the theoretical framework of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, with the aim of examining the discursive mechanisms through which national identity is represented and constructed in Iranian Coffeehouse Painting. Adopting a genealogical perspective, the study seeks to investigate the processes through which traditional visual and identity-related discourses have been reproduced within a specific historical and cultural context. Accordingly, the methodological framework integrates the structural analysis of visual texts with an examination of the social and cultural processes underlying their production. The research population consists of representative works from the Iranian Coffeehouse Painting tradition. Purposive sampling was employed to select four significant paintings created by four prominent Coffeehouse painters. These works were chosen based on their rich semiotic potential, their frequent citation in authoritative art historical scholarship, and their capacity to represent four principal dimensions of identity: religious, heroic-national, social, and ethical-mythological. Although some of the selected paintings were produced during the mid-twentieth century, they are examined from a genealogical perspective as visual reproductions of the traditional discourses established during the late Qajar period. Data analysis follows Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis, encompassing the levels of Description (visual text),

Interpretation (discursive practice), and Explanation (social practice). To ensure analytical consistency, a set of specific indicators was defined for each analytical level and operationalized according to Table 1. The study employs a qualitative analytical methodology throughout.

Discussion

To investigate the construction of national identity in Iranian Coffeehouse paintings, this section presents a critical analysis of four representative works from this artistic tradition. These paintings are approached as visual texts situated at the intersection of heroic traditions derived from the Shahnameh, religious narratives centered on the events of Karbala, and popular cultural beliefs. The analysis is conducted within the framework of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Accordingly, the visual characteristics of each painting -including composition, color scheme, the representation of figures, and hierarchical perspective-are first examined at the textual level. The analysis then proceeds to the level of discursive practice, where the processes through which meaning is produced and the relationships between the artworks, cultural narratives, and the audience's interpretive frameworks are explored. Finally, at the level of social practice, these visual representations are analyzed in relation to the dominant discourses of the Qajar period. Within this analytical framework, the visual elements of each painting are understood as meaningful semiotic resources through which Coffeehouse painters articulated a particular discourse of Iranian Shi'i identity. This discourse emerged through both interaction with and resistance to the dominant ideological formations of its time, particularly the

Table 1. Analytical framework based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. Source: Authors.

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model		Variables Examined in the Selected Artworks
Level 1: Description	Visual Text	Composition, color scheme, hierarchical perspective, spatial organization, and other formal visual characteristics.
Level 2: Interpretation	Discursive Practice	Representation of key concepts (e.g., good and evil, mythology, religion, and power); strategies for positioning the viewer, including viewpoint, modes of address, and social distance.
Level 3: Explanation	Social Practice	The role of visual signs in constructing the dimensions of national identity and their potential to resist the dominant discourses of court art and emerging modernist trends

official discourse of court art and the expanding influence of modernist cultural trends. Although Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis was originally developed for the examination of linguistic texts, subsequent scholarship in cultural studies and visual culture has demonstrated its applicability to the analysis of visual discourse. From this perspective, visual components -including compositional organization, color, the spatial arrangement of figures, and pictorial structure- are treated as semiotic elements that actively participate in the production of meaning and are interpreted in relation to their broader social and cultural contexts. Accordingly, the Coffeehouse paintings examined in this study are approached as cultural representations that provide valuable insight into the processes through which national identity is constructed, communicated, and reproduced within a specific historical and discursive context.

• “Nodang Shemiran Coffeehouse”

“The Nodang Shemiran Coffeehouse” (Fig. 1), painted by Hassan Esma'ilzadeh, can be regarded as one of the most significant visual documents representing the social identity and everyday life of ordinary people during the Qajar period. At the first analytical level (Description: Visual Text), the composition does not employ the single-point linear perspective characteristic of Western academic painting. Instead, it adopts a hierarchical and narrative perspective that organizes the pictorial space according to semantic significance rather than optical realism. A large tree and a flowing stream positioned at the center divide the composition into a network of interconnected spatial units. In the right foreground stands a storyteller (naqqāl) or dervish, distinguished by his white beard, walking stick, and expressive hand gestures, whose figure directs the viewer's visual attention. In the lower-right corner, a young boy is shown preparing charcoal and tea, while in the upper-right corner, a barber is depicted shaving a customer, introducing another layer of everyday social activity into the composition. In the middle ground, a coffeehouse attendant stands behind a large brass samovar, whereas groups of men seated on wooden platforms and woven mats occupy the left side of the painting, smoking water

pipes and engaging in conversation. The vibrant color palette and the variety of head coverings -including felt hats, fur hats, and skullcaps- further emphasize the visual diversity and social richness of the scene.

At the second analytical level (Interpretation: Discursive Practice), Esma'ilzadeh adopts an eye-level viewpoint that conveys equality, intimacy, and an invitation for the viewer to enter this shared public space. The repeated depiction of water pipes, the samovar, and various serving utensils constructs the coffeehouse as a site of sociability and collective interaction, where individual identity acquires meaning through communal participation and everyday ritual practices. This interpretation is consistent with Pollak's observations regarding the widespread consumption of charcoal for preparing tea and water pipes, as well as the indispensable role of offering a water pipe in traditional Iranian social etiquette (Polak, 1865/2022, 58). Likewise, the diversity of headwear -including the characteristic Tatar and Qajar conical hats- underscores the significance of clothing as a marker of personal identity and social distinction during the period. The inclusion of the barber within the composition further reflects the artist's realistic understanding of the multifunctional character of the Qajar coffeehouse. As Anthony Smith argues, historical memory, shared symbols, and collective rituals constitute essential foundations of national identity (Smith, 2009/2023, 43). Within this painting, the coffeehouse functions precisely as a social setting in which these collective memories and symbolic traditions are continuously reproduced.

At the third analytical level (Explanation: Social



Fig. 1. Nodang Shemiran Coffeehouse, Hassan Esma'ilzadeh, 100 × 150 cm. Source: Rasteh, 2023, 98.

Practice), the painting demonstrates that national identity is represented through social cohesion and a shared way of life. Here, the coffeehouse performs a function comparable to that of the public sphere. As Seif (2015, 24) observes, the coffeehouse was a social environment in which class distinctions were substantially diminished, bringing together individuals ranging from members of the declining aristocracy to craftsmen and artisans. Moreover, within Iranian urban culture, the coffeehouse served as an important venue for the narration of heroic epics, religious stories, and historical accounts, thereby facilitating the transmission of cultural values across different social groups (Al-Davoud, 2021, 25). By portraying this socially diverse gathering, the artist visualizes the egalitarian discourse embedded within Iranian collective identity. The inclusion of complementary activities, such as the barber's work, further suggests that the coffeehouse constituted an integrated socio-spatial network capable of simultaneously satisfying the communicative, recreational, and practical needs of ordinary people. This integrated structure itself reflects the social cohesion and shared identity of the popular classes during the Qajar period. Particularly significant is the active presence of the storyteller or dervish positioned on the right side of the composition. According to Pollak, this social group consisted largely of poets, intellectuals, and ascetics who remained detached from material wealth (Polak, 1865/2022, 42). Within the coffeehouse environment, they assumed the crucial role of transmitting cultural memory and collective identity. As Abdolhosseini & Hamed (2020, 67) note, coffeehouses functioned as gathering places for orators, storytellers, and reciters of the *Shahnameh*, thereby preserving and disseminating shared historical narratives. From this perspective, the coffeehouse depicted in the painting performs a role closely resembling Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere -a social arena in which communication, narrative exchange, and the formation of collective consciousness become possible (Habermas, 1989/2023, 64). In contrast to Qajar court painting, which primarily celebrated monarchs, aristocrats, and political authority, Esma'ilzadeh

deliberately places ordinary people at the center of the visual narrative. Consequently, Iranian Coffeehouse Painting effects a fundamental discursive shift, repositioning the common people -not the ruling elite- as the principal bearers and producers of national identity.

• “The Tragedy of Karbala”

“The Tragedy of Karbala” (Fig. 2), painted by Mohammad Modabber, presents a visual narrative of the events of Ashura within the tradition of Iranian folk art. The painting may be regarded as a visual manifesto of the religious beliefs, collective values, and Shi'i identity of Iranian society during the Qajar period.

At the first analytical level (Description: Visual Text), the painting is distinguished by its narrative multiplicity, in which several episodes are represented simultaneously within a single pictorial composition. Western linear perspective is entirely absent, giving way instead to a hierarchical perspective that organizes space according to symbolic importance rather than optical realism. Spatially, the composition is structured into three principal layers. The central layer, functioning as the sacred focal point, depicts Imam Husayn mounted on his white horse (Dhu al-Janah) while holding the infant Ali al-Asghar. This central figure is rendered on a larger scale than all other figures, emphasizing its supreme symbolic significance. The upper and background layers contain the tents of the camp, mourning women, rows of grieving angels, and the bodies of the martyrs. The foreground,



Fig. 2. The Tragedy of Karbala, signed by Mohammad Modabber, oil on canvas, 181 × 211 cm. Source: Seif, 1990, 108.

by contrast, is dominated by scenes of violent combat, hand-to-hand fighting, and the army of Yazid, whose soldiers are portrayed with distorted, aggressive facial features. Moreover, the visual vectors created by the gazes of the angels, the women surrounding the tents, and even the directional movement of swords and spears ultimately guide the viewer's attention toward the sacred center of the composition -the figures of Imam Husayn and the infant Ali al-Asghar.

At the second analytical level (Interpretation: Discursive Practice), the binary opposition between good and evil is articulated through the established chromatic conventions of Shi'i visual culture. The sacred protagonists are represented with luminous halos, serene and idealized faces, and garments rendered predominantly in green, white, and blue, symbolizing purity, tranquility, and spiritual transcendence. Simultaneously, the historical complexity of the Battle of Karbala is deliberately simplified, producing a polarized moral structure in which ethical and ideological meanings take precedence over historical ambiguity, thereby limiting the possibility of alternative interpretations. Conversely, the antagonists are constructed as violent and morally corrupt subjects through the use of dark and red tones, heavy armor, horned helmets, and exaggerated, almost inhuman facial expressions. These visual elements function as semiotic resources that produce an ideological representation of violence and evil within the painting's system of signification. In contrast, the sacred figures -particularly Imam Husayn- are portrayed with emotional restraint and indirect gazes, positioning them beyond ordinary human emotions and reinforcing their transcendent and sanctified status. This visual strategy reflects a distinctive formulation of sacred discourse within the pictorial text. Likewise, the arrows piercing the bodies of the horse, the Imam, and the infant Ali al-Asghar operate as affective visual signs that activate empathy and mourning. Through these representational strategies, the viewer is symbolically positioned as a participant in the ritual of grief, allowing the painting to engage directly with the emotional and religious consciousness of its audience.

At the third analytical level (Explanation: Social Practice), the painting is understood as a form of social

practice whose function extends well beyond aesthetic representation to the preservation and reproduction of Shi'i collective identity. During the Qajar period, political tensions with the Ottoman Empire, together with the expanding influence of Western powers, made the maintenance of internal social cohesion an urgent historical necessity. Within this socio-political context, the discourse of Ashura became one of the principal mechanisms through which collective solidarity and cultural identity were constructed and sustained (Abrahamian, 1982/2025, 32). Viewed from this perspective, Iranian Coffeehouse Painting appropriated Shi'i discourse from its exclusive association with official religious institutions and rearticulated it within a popular visual language accessible to the broader public. Modabber's painting further demonstrates the inseparable relationship between folk art and popular religious institutions, including tekyehs, husayniyyas, and ta'ziyeh performances. In this regard, Peter Chelkowski (1979/2021, 115) argues that Coffeehouse Painting and ta'ziyeh function as complementary cultural practices that collectively shaped the historical memory of Iranian society. Accordingly, collective identity is represented through a symbolic synthesis of historical-religious memory and the lived experience of Iranian society, whereby the ethical paradigms embodied in the narrative of Ashura become enduring sources of cultural meaning and identity formation (ibid.). From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, this process constitutes a form of ideological naturalization through which concepts such as martyrdom, oppression, and resistance are transformed into self-evident moral truths and continuously reproduced within the collective consciousness (Fairclough, 1995/2020, 58).

• “The Battle of Iran and Turan”

“The Battle of Iran and Turan” (Fig. 3), attributed to Mohammad Hamidi, depicts one of the central narrative episodes of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*: the confrontation between the Iranian and Turanian armies. The painting plays a pivotal role in articulating the discourse of heroic national identity by establishing a symbolic boundary between the Self (the Iranian nation) and the Other (the Turanian enemy).

At the first analytical level (Description: Visual Text), the composition is organized according to a hierarchical perspective rather than a Western linear perspective. The pictorial space is divided into three principal zones: the foreground, occupied by hand-to-hand combat and the principal protagonists; the middle ground, where Iranian warriors surround the central hero; and the background, which depicts dense, anonymous masses representing the opposing armies. The most visually salient element is the monumental figure positioned at the center of the composition. Mounted on a white horse and raising a mace above his head, this heroic figure dominates the visual field through its enlarged scale, central placement, symbolic costume -particularly the tiger-skin garment (Babr-e Bayan)- and dynamic posture. Numerous diagonal vectors, including the hero's raised mace, unsheathed swords, and the directional gazes of the warriors, generate a strong sense of movement, tension, and visual dynamism. On the left side, the violent struggle between two combatants forms a subsidiary narrative, while on the right, a group of Iranian champions directs their attention toward the central hero, reinforcing the primary narrative structure. The right side of the composition also carries substantially greater visual weight. The concentration of Iranian warriors, the density of directional lines, and the convergence of visual attention create a strengthened field of symbolic power. This asymmetrical distribution establishes a clear visual hierarchy in which the Iranian side is implicitly privileged, thereby naturalizing its discursive superiority within the viewer's perceptual experience.



Fig. 3. The Battle of Iran and Turan, attributed to Mohammad Hamidi, oil on canvas, 129 × 207 cm, Sa'dabad Cultural Complex Collection. Source: Rasteh, 2023, 105.

At the second analytical level (Interpretation: Discursive Practice), the visual elements derive their meaning through their relationship with the narrative tradition of the Shahnameh. The central figure is unmistakably identifiable as Rostam, whose iconic attributes -including the Babr-e Bayan and the ox-headed mace- constitute well-established visual markers within Persian epic iconography. Rostam, therefore, functions as the symbolic bearer of Iranian heroic identity within the visual discourse. By contrast, the Turanian army is represented as an undifferentiated and faceless mass lacking identifiable individual protagonists. This visual strategy constructs a binary opposition between the individualized heroism of the Iranian Self and the anonymous collectivity of the hostile Other. Furthermore, the slightly low viewing angle elevates the central hero both physically and symbolically, endowing him with mythic authority and positioning him beyond the realm of ordinary human experience. Consequently, the viewer occupies the position of an observer confronting an established mythical order. The painting thus operates as a visual proposition that encourages identification with the heroic protagonists while simultaneously cultivating a sense of national pride.

At the third analytical level (Explanation: Social Practice), the painting can be interpreted within the broader political and military crises of the Qajar period. Repeated military defeats and the weakening of political authority encouraged a widespread return to mythological traditions as a means of redefining collective identity (Marashi, 2008/2025, 64). Within this historical context, Shahnameh-based narratives assumed a compensatory cultural function in Iranian Coffeehouse Painting by reconstructing an imagined vision of national power and historical grandeur at the level of popular culture. Heroic mythology thus became a symbolic response to the experience of contemporary political decline. As a popular visual medium, Coffeehouse Painting articulated an alternative discourse of national identity in which the epic glory of Iran's legendary past symbolically compensated for the perceived weakness of the present. The painting also contributes to the construction of what Benedict Anderson

conceptualizes as an “imagined community.” Audiences gathered in coffeehouses to listen to storytellers while simultaneously engaging with these visual narratives, thereby imagining themselves as descendants of a heroic lineage and participants in a shared national history. Through this collective experience, the coffeehouse became a space in which visual storytelling fostered a sense of belonging to a common historical and cultural community. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, the painting therefore represents a process of ideological naturalization through visual myth-making. Within this process, the binary opposition between hero and enemy is normalized through the visual organization of the composition, reinforcing collective memory, national belonging, and the ideological foundations of Iranian identity.

• “Siyavash Passing Through the Fire”

“Siyavash Passing Through the Fire” (Fig. 4), painted by Ahmad Khalili, depicts one of the most significant moral trials narrated in Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*. Within the discourse of Iranian Coffeehouse Painting, Siyavash’s passage through the flames to prove his innocence against Sudabeh’s accusations positions him at the intersection of heroic mythology and religious morality. In this visual representation, concepts such as righteousness and innocence transcend the epic narrative itself and are reinterpreted within a broader network of religious and cultural meanings (Ghanei, 2022, 35).

At the first analytical level (Description: Visual Text), the composition is organized around a powerful visual center. The figure of Siyavash, mounted on a white horse and surrounded by blazing red flames, occupies the largest portion of the composition and possesses the greatest visual salience. The pictorial space is structured into three principal zones: the center, representing the locus of truth and consisting of Siyavash and the purifying fire; the right background, depicting the royal palace and the female spectators, including Sudabeh; and the left background, occupied by the assembled soldiers and King Kay Kavus. The principal visual vectors are created through the gazes of both the women and the soldiers, all of which converge upon Siyavash, thereby establishing him as the focal point of the viewer’s

attention. Furthermore, a panel of Nasta’liq calligraphy positioned in the upper corner, containing a verse from the story of Siyavash - “The horse and rider emerged as though jasmine blossomed beside them” - introduces a verbal dimension into the visual text, reinforcing and directing its intended interpretation.

At the second analytical level (Interpretation: Discursive Practice), the visual elements derive their significance through cultural references and intertextual associations that together construct a coherent narrative structure. Within this framework, the white horse and Siyavash’s green garments should be understood in relation to the established conventions of Iranian Coffeehouse Painting. These visual signs activate culturally shared meanings that are readily recognizable to audiences familiar with Persian epic traditions and consequently shape a particular reading of Siyavash’s character within the visual culture of the period. Significantly, however, classical literary sources describe Siyavash’s horse, *Shabrang-e Behzad*, as black (Meskoob, 2015, 45). The deliberate substitution of a white horse and green garments, therefore, represents a symbolic transformation of the *Shahnameh*’s original chromatic system. Through this transformation, the visual language of the epic is brought into closer alignment with Shi’i symbolic conventions, producing a more sacred interpretation of Siyavash as a moral and spiritual exemplar.

Siyavash’s raised hand may likewise be interpreted as a ritual gesture signifying the surrender of judgment to divine authority. In conjunction with the narrative of the ordeal by fire, this gesture transforms the hero’s body into a vehicle for ethical and spiritual meaning. His gaze



Fig. 4. Siyavash Passing Through the Fire, Ahmad Khalili, oil on canvas, 60 × 70 cm. Source: Seif, 2015, 121.

is directed beyond the pictorial frame and deliberately avoids eye contact with the figures within the painting -including Sudabeh and the assembled soldiers- thereby symbolizing his spiritual detachment from the corrupt worldly order and his orientation toward a transcendent realm (Rajayi Bokharayi, 2022, 48). The viewer, positioned at eye level with the scene, witnesses not anxiety or uncertainty but rather the triumph of truth and virtue over falsehood. Fire itself functions as both a divine trial and a symbol of purification. By clothing the epic hero in green and placing him within the flames, the Coffeehouse painter creates a multilayered symbolic structure in which several religious narratives converge. Within this representational framework, the painting invites associations with the Qur'anic account of the Prophet Abraham's deliverance from the fire, while simultaneously evoking the paradigms of martyrdom embedded within the Ashura tradition. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, the painting represents a process of ideological naturalization through

which values such as purity, truth, and innocence are stabilized by means of visual codes and reproduced as self-evident moral principles within the collective consciousness. Consequently, the artwork functions as a cultural instrument that integrates mythological memory with religious ethics, thereby contributing to the discursive construction of Iranian cultural identity.

To synthesize the analyses of the four selected paintings and to clarify how the components of national identity are represented and reproduced in Iranian Coffeehouse Painting, the findings derived from the application of Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Conclusion

This study employed Norman Fairclough's framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Iranian Coffeehouse Painting as a significant site for the construction and consolidation of identity discourse within Iranian culture. The findings demonstrate that

Table 2. Summary of the research findings based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis. Source: Authors.

Artwork	Identity-Constructing Visual	Elements Description (Visual Text)	Interpretation (Discursive Practice)	Explanation (Social Practice)	Dimension of National Identity
Nodang Shemiran Coffeehouse Hassan Esma'ilzadeh	The coffeehouse as a discursive public space (storyteller/audience), samovar and water pipe (markers of the coffeehouse lifeworld), dervish and Tatar attire, stream and trees (social-spatial setting)	Horizontal composition, dense arrangement of figures, informal and collective atmosphere	Represents the coffeehouse as a space of social interaction and the formation of a popular lifeworld; it emphasizes the coexistence of different social groups	Reproduces the popular lifeworld and reinforces the discourse of folk culture in opposition to official modernizing tendencies	Social Identity
The Battle of Iran and Turan Attributed to Mohammad Hamidi	Babr-e Bayan (heroic identity), ox-headed mace, banners, and armor (symbols of warfare and opposition)	Dynamic composition, confrontation between opposing forces, emphasis on movement, and heroic combat	Represents the conflict between rival forces while foregrounding courage and heroism as core cultural values	Reinforces epic narratives and reproduces the model of the national hero within the historical memory of society	Heroic-National Identity
Siyavash Passing Through the Fire Ahmad Khalili	White horse (purity/liberation), fire (trial/righteousness), contrast between serene and agitated facial expressions (moral duality)	Strong visual focus on Siyavash at the center of the composition, forward movement, dominance of warm colors	Represents Siyavash as an embodiment of purity, integrity, and self-sacrifice within the epic tradition	Constructs an ethical dimension of Iranian identity by linking the Shahnameh narrative with the cultural values of Iranian society	Ethical-Mythological Identity
The Tragedy of Karbala Mohammad Modabber	Imam Husayn (sacred authority), angels (the divine realm), contrast between green and red (sacred/profane opposition)	Dense arrangement of figures, chromatic opposition between the two camps, emphasis on sacred protagonists	Establishes an emotional bond with viewers by foregrounding the suffering and innocence of the sacred figures while directing empathy toward the righteous	Consolidates Shi'i collective memory and reinforces the religious discourse surrounding the Battle of Karbala as a central component of Iranian religious	Religious-Shi'i Identity

these paintings integrate heroic, religious, and popular cultural elements into an interconnected semiotic system through which mythological memory, religious tradition, and the everyday lifeworld are simultaneously mobilized in the representation of Iranian national identity. From a methodological perspective, the three analytical dimensions of Fairclough's model -text, discursive practice, and social practice- provided a systematic framework for examining the visual structures of the paintings, their processes of meaning-making, and the historical and socio-cultural contexts in which these representations were produced. The analysis revealed that the prominent depiction of epic heroes, the visualization of communal spaces, and the emphasis on religious narratives collectively establish a semantic linkage between Iranian national identity and Shi'i cultural traditions. The historical and cultural context of the Qajar period, characterized by profound political and social transformations, provided the conditions under which Coffeehouse Painting emerged as an effective popular medium for disseminating heroic and religious narratives within the public sphere of the coffeehouse. In doing so, it contributed to the formation of a shared collective memory and played a significant role in the rearticulation of Iranian collective identity. Overall, the significance of this artistic tradition lies in its discursive function. Iranian Coffeehouse Painting operated not merely as a form of visual representation but as a cultural mechanism for constructing and naturalizing a distinctive model of Iranian identity, in which national, religious, and popular cultural elements are integrated into a coherent visual narrative and continually reproduced within the collective cultural memory of Iranian society.

Declaration of No Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

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