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A Discourse Study and Examination of Changes in Identity Concepts in Qajar-Period Azerbaijan

Abstract:

The present study examines concepts such as “Azerbaijan,” “Turk,” “Azeri,” “Azerbaijani,” and “Turkic-speaking” during the Qajar period. The main question is how these terms underwent semantic transformations under the influence of political, social, and cultural forces during the Qajar era, and which meanings became prominent or marginalized at each stage. The research method is based on discourse analysis and the study of historical and literary texts by native Azerbaijani authors, ranging from travelogues and local historiographies to literary and political writings. In this study, the aforementioned concepts are examined as “floating signifiers”—that is, words without fixed meanings that acquire new connotations depending on the struggles between different discourses. The aim of the present research is to explain the historical conditions that led to the application, reinforcement, or weakening of specific meanings of these terms at particular times. Ultimately, this study provides a framework for understanding the role of language, discourse, and power in the formation and transformation of regional identity in late Qajar Iran.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, discourse analysis, identity, hegemony, Qajar period

1. Introduction

Identity is not a self-evident or pre-determined matter. Specifically with regard to the topic at hand, each of the concepts—Turk, Turkic-speaking, Azeri, Azerbaijani—carries particular meanings, and choosing any one of them means selecting a specific subject position within an identity contestation. This article attempts to address the issue using a constructivist approach to history and avoiding a positivist perspective that attributes inherent and fixed meanings to concepts.

Prior to the Qajar period, collective identities in Iran were primarily formed around religious, local, and tribal concepts, and political borders were often based on military power and loyalty to the ruler, which was considered fluid and variable. In this space, the Persian language also lacked its later nation-building role. Although Turkic-speaking writers, poets, and bureaucrats used Persian, various ethnic groups and languages within a single political realm continued to exist without any effort toward homogenization. From the mid-Qajar period onward, a fundamental rupture occurred in the dominant discourse. The discourse of nationalism, by presenting a new narrative of Iranian history, turned the Persian language into the cornerstone of national identity

and brought concepts such as “homeland” (*vatan*), “nation” (*mellat*), and “national language” to the center of attention. This discursive transformation challenged other ethno-linguistic groups in Iran, especially the Turkic-speakers.

The main issue of this research is to trace and analyze the transformations of key identity concepts such as “Azerbaijan,” “Turk,” “Azerbaijani,” “Turkic-speaking,” and “Azeri” within this turbulent historical context. The central question is: At each stage of the Qajar period, which of these concepts became prominent or was marginalized? Specifically, how did the Persian-centric nationalist discourse redefine the identity of the Turks of Iran?

The research method is discourse analysis based on the study of historical and literary texts produced by Turkic authors from northwestern Iran during the Qajar period. The scope of sources examined includes travelogues, local historiographies, literary texts, political treatises, and especially private letters and unpublished memoirs. The temporal scope is the Qajar period, which marks the beginning of this rupture and the formation of competing discourses. The spatial scope is the Azerbaijan region (north and south of the Aras River), and the study population consists of texts whose authors had the possibility of identifying as Turk/Turkic-speaking/Azeri and Iranian. It is possible that an author did not call himself a Turk, but still had this possibility—for example, Kasravi. Ultimately, the goal of this study is to provide a framework for understanding the role of language and power in the transformation of regional identities and to explain the complex process in which identity concepts are constructed and transformed through the contestation of discourses.

2. Research Findings

The early Qajar period is considered the starting point—a period in which a gap opened in the previous discourse and disrupted the old order. The present study will examine and analyze the sources in four sections titled “Starting Point,” “The Rise of Nationalist Discourse and the Re-narration of History,” “The Spread of Nationalist Discourse,” and “The Hegemony of Persian-Centric Nationalist Discourse.”

2-1. Starting Point

To begin, a starting point must be established. The author has chosen the early Qajar period—prior to the entry of nationalist discourse elements—as the starting point. In this section, early Qajar texts that were still influenced by previous discourses were studied, allowing for a comparison between the elements of pre- and post- discourses. Among Qajar sources written between 1210 and 1268 AH, eight texts were found whose authors could identify as both Turk and Iranian:

Author	Title	Year of Composition
Mahmud Mirza	Safineh al-Mahmud	1240 AH
Abd al-Razzaq Muftun	Ma’asir al-Sultaniyyah	1241 AH

Dunbuli

Mahmud Mirza	Tarikh-e Sahibqirani	1248 AH
Reza Quli Mirza	Safarnameh-ye Reza Quli Mirza	1250 AH
Ali Naqi Mirza I'tizad al-Saltaneh	Aksir al-Tavarikh	1253–1259 AH
Mirza Haydar Vaziraf	Darbandnameh-ye Jadid	1265 AH
Hasan Ali Afshar	Safarnameh-ye Lorestan va Khuzestan	1266 AH
Jahangir Mirza	Tarikh-e Now ya Tarikh-e Jahangiri	1267 AH

Table 1: Information on sources from the first period, 1210–1268 AH

In the early Qajar period, the most important identity element was religion and sect, and self/other was primarily determined by this factor. Based on these texts, people were aware of ethnic categories and differences, but there was no hostility or conflict on the same level as religious conflicts. For example, in the texts of this period, there was a hostile view toward Sunni ethnic groups. I'tizad al-Saltaneh called the Afghans “the ill-natured sect” (I'tizad al-Saltaneh, p. 462), and the two attributes “ill-natured” and “ill-born” were repeatedly used for the Kurds and Turkmens. Although the contrast between Turk and Persian was visible, it did not have a hostile nature; ethnic distinctions were still overshadowed by a shared religious identity and had not risen to the level of a widespread identity conflict. In these texts, the compound “Turk and Tajik” was sometimes used to refer to the general population of Iran: “The light of Islam shone in the hearts of far and near, Turk and Tajik” (Dunbuli, p. 206); “Their swords were sharp and their spears slender, and the eyes of Turk and Tajik were darkened by the heroic attacks of that group” (Dunbuli, p. 468). The word “Turk” in these texts was often accompanied by positive descriptions such as “Turks of Bahram-like vengeance” (I'tizad al-Saltaneh, p. 454) or “fearless Turks” (Dunbuli, p. 154). In references to the Iranian army in wars with Russia or the conquest of Herat, the expression “Turk army” was sometimes used (I'tizad al-Saltaneh, pp. 105, 392), even when reports indicated the presence of non-Turkic groups (such as musketeers from Damavand and Kerman) in the same army (ibid., p. 109).

In the texts of this period, Genghis Khan and his successors were portrayed positively, and even Genghis's good morals were praised (Dunbuli, pp. 471). This shows that at that time, connection to Genghis did not carry a negative connotation for the Turks of Iran and could even be a source of pride (ibid., p. 166).

“The prince of Faridun-like rank [...] adorned his steadfast stature with the tight ringed armor of David, whose amber chain was tangled like the locks of beloveds, and that fine armor, like the tresses of Turks knot upon knot, was a memento left by Tuli Khan son of Genghis” (Dunbuli, p. 166).

The above quotation shows that Turkic-Mongol historical figures such as Tuli Khan (son of Genghis) were respected. Preserving Mongol mementos (regardless of their historical accuracy) is meaningful in itself and reflects the position of these figures in the dominant discourse of the early Qajar period. Reza Quli Mirza's praise of the ruler with titles such as “Genghis-like fortune” and “Afrasiyab-like army commander,” or likening him to “Timur Gurkhani,” also confirms this point (Reza Quli Mirza, p. 51). I'tizad al-Saltaneh (p. 8), Mahmud Mirza (Mahmud Mirza, 1389, p. 3), and the address “greatest king” for Genghis in *Darbandnameh* (Vaziraf, p. 37) all indicate that these figures were not only not symbols of destruction but were respected and praised as ancestors or models of bravery and glory. Based on the presented data, it can be concluded that the Turkic authors of Iran in this period had a positive view of Turk, Genghis, and the Mongols. This indicates a completely different identity narrative from the later nationalist narrative.

2-2. The Rise of Nationalism and the Re-narration of History

On the one hand, Iran's military encounters with Western powers and the loss of territories created a fundamental question—“Why did we lag behind?”—in the minds of the elites. On the other hand, with the dispatch of students and the arrival of European advisors, Iranian intellectuals were exposed to the propositions of nationalist discourses, which led to changes in identity components. For this period, from the late reign of Muhammad Shah to the end of Naser al-Din Shah's reign, 58 texts were examined. (A detailed table of these sources is provided in the original Persian text, covering authors such as Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh, Malkum Khan/Mustashar al-Dowleh, Nader Mirza, Talibov, Mirza Aqa Tabrizi, Etemad al-Saltaneh, Nasir al-Din Shah, Jalal al-Din Mirza, Farhad Mirza, and others.)

It should be noted that many of these texts simultaneously contained elements of several discourses, sometimes even contradictory ones, and the elements of one discourse were not fully present in a single text.

1-2-2. The Collapse of Monopoly: The Entry of New Sources and the Instability of Historical Narrative

In the effort to answer the question “Why did Iran lag behind?,” a re-reading of the past was placed on the agenda. One of the popular answers was the decline of Iran as a result of the Arab and Turk invasions (Tavakoli-Targhi, pp. 56–65). This re-reading took place at a time when the monopoly of the Islamic historical narrative on Iran's past was broken. Until then, knowledge of

pre-Islamic Iran was largely limited to the mythical narratives of the *Shahnameh* or Islamic historiography. From the mid-Qajar period, four new epistemological currents permanently transformed this uniform landscape:

- Works of Western historians;
- Texts of ancient Greek and Roman historians;
- Archaeological findings;
- Zoroastrian, Indian Parsi, and Azar Kayvani texts.

As a result of the influx of new sources, a historical polyphony emerged. The past was no longer a fixed and frozen “truth” but became an arena for selection, interpretation, and conflict. Three grand narratives competed, each drawing the boundaries of “self” and “other” differently.

Religious-Centric Narrative

This narrative, common among religious traditionalists and clerics, essentially lacked that epistemological rupture. In this discourse, represented by works such as *Manzar al-Awliya* or *Hedayat al-Hujjaj*, history finds its meaning and purpose in the emergence and spread of Islam. Turkic and Mongol rulers such as Ghazan Khan are praised as legitimate Muslim sultans. No new identity crisis forms around “Turk” or “Persian,” as religious identity is the determining factor.

Syncretic-Continuity Narrative (Religious Nationalism)

This narrative, which can be called the discourse of “religious nationalism,” emphasizes the continuity and connectedness of Iranian history. It views all periods of Iranian history—including ancient, Islamic, and even Turkic and Mongol rule—as part of a continuous whole. Zoroastrians are introduced as “sons of our homeland.” There is no inherent historical enemy—neither Arab nor Turk. The boundaries of national identity are shaped around territorial belonging to Iran. Backwardness is attributed to the unwise decisions of officials rather than to historical “others.”

Persian-Ancientist Narrative

This narrative, the most influential and ultimately hegemonic response to the question of decline, rested on two main pillars: reconstructing an idealized golden age of ancient Iran and identifying specific external factors as the agents of its collapse. Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh in *Maktubat-e Kamal al-Dowleh* clearly outlines this framework. In his view, pre-Islamic Iran was a lawful, orderly, and vast land ruled by the “chosen Persian nation.” The fall had only one external cause: the Arab invasion. Later, in *Nameh-ye Khosrowan*, the destructive role of Turks

and Mongols is also added. Turks are portrayed as the “oldest enemy” of Iran. This confrontation turned the concept of “Turk” from a mere ethnic identity into a negative political signifier and a symbol of tyranny, destruction, and historical alienation.

2-2-2. The Encounter of the Turks of Iran with the Identity Elements of Persian-Centric Nationalist Discourse

The first manifestations of the impact of this discourse can be seen in two “testimony certificates” prepared in 1261 AH to prove the “Iranianness” of Mirza Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh. Later, in a letter dated 1871 to Manekji the Zoroastrian, Akhundzadeh explicitly called himself “apparently Turk” but “originally from the children of the Persians.”

Etemad al-Saltaneh also systematically tried to establish a link between the Turks of Iran and the glorious ancient past. In *Dorr al-Tijan*, he introduced the Arsacids (Parthians) as being of Scythian (Turanic/Turkic) origin and extended the presence of Turks in Iran back to mythical times. In *Khalaseh*, among nine celebrated kings of Iranian history summoned for judgment, five are of Turkic origin.

The Persian-centric nationalist discourse, by emphasizing Persian as the national language, had a clear impact on the attitudes and practices of the Turks of Iran regarding language:

- Tendency toward pure Persian writing and purifying the language from Arabic words;
- Reluctance to use the Turkish language;
- Emphasis on Persian as the official and national language.

Nevertheless, many individuals in this period were still subjects of the religious-centric discourse and identified primarily through religious and tribal identities.

2-3. The Spread of Nationalist Discourse

For this period—from the end of Naser al-Din Shah’s autocracy to the end of the Minor Tyranny—69 texts were examined (detailed table in the original).

In the texts of this period, the second and third narratives of history were reproduced more than before, with the second (religious-nationalist) having greater dominance. Differences from the previous period include:

- Greater focus on the present rather than the past, attributing backwardness to the corruption of contemporary rulers, social inefficiency, and public ignorance;

- For the first time, Sharaf al-Dowleh refers to himself and the residents of southwestern Iran as “Azeri” (positive) while using “Turk” negatively for troublemakers;
- The emergence of elements of Turkic nationalist discourse in some texts, with emphasis on the importance of the mother tongue (Turkish) and the production of more texts in Turkish.

2-4. The Hegemony of Persian-Centric Nationalist Discourse

The final period of the Qajar era is the period of the dominance of Persian-centric nationalist discourse and the widespread acceptance of the third historical narrative among the studied group. Many elites no longer identified as Turks.

In this period, the concept of “Turk” was recognized as an undesirable element and “other,” and many regional elites became subjects of this discourse. Key factors included dissatisfaction with the Qajar dynasty (Turkic origin), Ottoman Turkish attacks on Iranian borders, and opposition to pan-Turkic ideas.

Instead of “Turk,” concepts such as “Turkic-speaking” and “Azeri” were used. The concept of “Azeri” negated Turkic identity while distinguishing this group from the Persian “other” in central Iran. Figures such as Taqizadeh, Arani, Shafaq, and Qazvini not only denied Turkic identity for themselves but also absolved the Turkish-speaking residents of northwestern Iran from being “Turk” (equated with foreigner, invader, and agent of destruction). The word “Turk” gradually became an insult.

In this period, the Persian-centric nationalist discourse exercised power not through coercion but through subjectification. Many intellectuals willingly accepted and reproduced the “Azeri” subject position and called for changing the region’s language to Persian.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

From the examination of the eight texts of the first period, we found that:

1. Subjects of the religious-centric discourse in the early Qajar period could identify simultaneously as Turk and Iranian;
2. Turk and Turkic-speaking were not distinguished;
3. North and south of the Aras were considered part of Azerbaijan;
4. Concepts such as “Azeri” and “Turkic-speaking” were not used.

The Turks of Iran displayed a spectrum of reactions to the emerging nationalist discourse: from redefining history to share in the glorious past (Etemad al-Saltaneh) to denying Turkic identity (Jalal al-Din Mirza), from continuing tribal identity (Azod al-Molk) to dual identity (Akhundzadeh). This diversity demonstrates the concept of “floating signifiers” in practice.

However, with the examination of texts from subsequent periods influenced by Persian-centric nationalist discourse, we found that subjects of this discourse could not simultaneously define themselves as Iranian and Turk. Therefore, subject positions such as “Azeri” and “Turkic-speaking” were constructed to resolve the identity conflict.

The research sought to show the course of transformation of identity concepts of the Turks of Iran during the Qajar period. In sum, what is taken for granted today is in fact the product of discursive struggles over the past two hundred years. These concepts have no inherent or eternal meanings; they are constructed and reproduced in the field of contestation between rival narratives. Today, the Turks of Iran are experiencing a deep identity crisis. Understanding the roots of this crisis may open the way for dialogue and resolution of differences.

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