

Original Research Article

Recognition of the Concept of “Persian Landscape” Based on Its Constituent Elements

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Abstract | Examining the specific characteristics of various attributes and derivatives of the landscape is among the most important topics in the field of landscape study. The term “Persian landscape” refers to specific aspects of it that naturally possess unique features. Despite the significant importance of understanding the meaning and concept of the Persian landscape, its examples and instances are often referenced instead, while its essence and nature are overlooked. This has led to a multiplicity of meanings, causing various and sometimes inconsistent interpretations to arise. In the present study, an ontological approach is taken to delve into the essence and core concept of the Persian landscape, aiming to clarify its dimensions and constituent elements, and to refine this concept fundamentally. To explain the concept of the Persian landscape, this study employs an analytical-descriptive and documentary method. Initially, the constituent elements of the landscape were identified and introduced. Subsequently, the identity-giving components were examined to discuss their Persian characteristics. Accordingly, the Persian nature of the landscape is dependent on the existence and impact of natural and artificial elements with national identity, each encompassing a set of Persian identity-giving aspects. Additionally, the Persian-cultured human is recognized as an element with the highest capacity to manifest Persian identity in the creation of the landscape.

Keywords | Persian-ness, Elements, Identity, Human, Culture.

Introduction | The landscape can be considered the result of a reciprocal and interactive relationship between humans and the environment. This phenomenon, whether consciously or unconsciously, has accompanied humans since their early presence and role in their surrounding environment, having tangible and intangible impacts on their way of life and judgments. The comprehensive and overarching nature of the concept of landscape on one hand, and the complexity of its layers on the other, have led to the usage of the term “landscape” in conjunction with other words and phrases to emphasize a particular aspect or quality. Cultural landscape, ritual landscape, industrial landscape, natural landscape, and the like are all combinations that highlight a specific aspect, feature, or approach to the concept of landscape.

The phrase “Persian/Iranian landscape” is one of the frequently used terms in the field of landscape study and understanding. The combination of the word “landscape” as a noun and the adjective “Persian” indicates a specific quality of the landscape that endows it with distinctive features. Despite the frequent use of this phrase in various research contexts, its exact meaning, concept, and intended quality have not been fully defined and elucidated. When the phrase “Persian landscape” is used, it mainly refers to the landscapes of Iran or examples of Persian landscapes such as Persian gardens or the squares and

streets of traditional Iranian cities, while the essence of what makes a landscape distinctly Persian, in terms of its core that differentiates it from other landscapes, has been overlooked.

In this study, the concept of the landscape is first examined and redefined through the identification of its constituent elements. Then, by aligning with identity-giving indicators, the potential for the manifestation of Persian identity in each element is identified. Finally, through the synthesis of the previous two stages, the concept of the Persian landscape and its specific qualities are described and redefined.

Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer questions such as: What quality of the existing landscapes does the Persian landscape refer to? Does any landscape that arises from the elements present in the land of Iran or created by the Persian people qualify as a Persian landscape?

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative research utilizing a combination of analytical-descriptive and documentary methods. In accordance with the research objectives, library resources such as reputable articles and books were reviewed, and the opinions of experts regarding the concepts and theoretical foundations of “landscape” and “identity” were analyzed to identify their

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elements and components. Then, the relationship between these concepts was explained using inferential and deductive methods.

Literature Review

Studies conducted on the Persian identity of the landscape can be categorized into several groups. One group of studies, with an architectural and physical approach, has examined the structural and formal systems of the Persian landscape (Okhovat et al. 2010). Another group has focused solely on specific types of Persian landscapes, such as the Persian garden, one of the most prominent examples, or the urban landscape of Iran; such as studies on the physical identity-giving factors in the structure of the Iranian-Islamic city (Donboli et al., 2019). Some studies have also examined the essence of the Persian landscape; among them, Mansouri & Javadi (2018) consider the Persian landscape to be derived from the juxtaposition of three elements: water, trees, and chahartaq, which create a unique type of space.

The Concept of Landscape

Given the complexity of the nature of the landscape, providing a precise and clear definition has always been a challenge for experts in various related fields. The breadth of the landscape concept on the one hand and the constant changes in dominant intellectual paradigms in the world on the other hand have led to numerous and sometimes inconsistent definitions of the landscape. The transition from Cartesian philosophical dualism and the separation of subject and object, the subjectivism of the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century, and the emergence of postmodernism are some events that have transformed the concept and consequently the definition of the landscape (Masnavi et al., 2021, 22-37). In the present era, single-dimensional definitions of the landscape focused on limited aspects have given way to holistic definitions that consider both the objective and subjective dimensions of the landscape.

Among efforts to refine the definition of the landscape, what is important is understanding the concept of the landscape in terms of its ontology and existential nature. It is agreed that although the landscape has been defined with different approaches influenced by specialties in various fields such as geography, environmental design, architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, and sociology (Mahan & Mansouri, 2017), all definitions concur on the essence of the landscape and view it as the result of the interaction between humans and the environment. The environment, meaning what surrounds humans and forms their living context, and humans, who with their worldview and perspective seek to interact with the environment, are the two fundamental components of the landscape. The landscape has a place-based nature, influenced by human experience in space (Mansouri, 2010); in other words, it is an objective-subjective,

dynamic, and relative phenomenon that is the product of the interaction between humans and the environment, and society with history (ibid., 2015).

Elements of the Landscape

The landscape, as a product of the human perception process, comprises a “perceiver” system that interacts with the “perceived” system to form the perception process. Although there are differences in theories about the concept of landscape, the existence of a perceptual pattern is agreed upon by most experts. The perception of the landscape occurs through mental processes that stem from the interaction between humans and their surrounding environment. Humans, either individually or as a group in society, are the perceivers of the landscape (Hemmati & Saboonchi, 2021). In line with the objective of the present study, the focus will be on the perceivable components of the landscape. These components can be considered the building blocks of the landscape, creating its subjective and objective dimensions, and the perception process is formed through their combination and juxtaposition.

The landscape is influenced by humans and their way of life on one hand, and it impacts civilization, culture, and lifestyle on the other. It is seen as independent of culture in one sense, yet each person has made interventions in the landscape based on their historical, cultural, and climatic conditions (Mansouri, 2005). As Swaffield (2011, 137 & 143) notes, the landscape is both nature and culture; humans are not the only creators of the landscape, as natural forms and processes also play a role in its formation. The reviewed concepts highlight that two main elements are recognized as components of landscape creation: the environment, with all its natural and artificial elements, and humans as the agents of change in the environment. These two groups contribute to creating both the objective and subjective aspects of the landscape (Fig. 1). Each element of the landscape will be discussed further.

• Environment

Understanding the concept, production, and perception of the landscape is impossible without sufficient knowledge of its relationship with the environment. As mentioned earlier, the landscape is formed within the context of the environment. In addition to the objective aspect of the landscape, which is inherently dependent on the physical structure of the world, the subjective aspect of the landscape also requires an objective background to be processed and personalized in the mind of the viewer. One of the debated topics in this

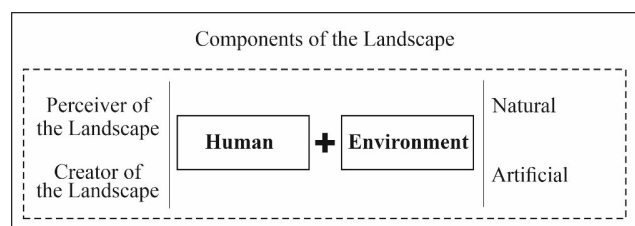


Fig. 1. Components of the Landscape. Source: Author.

context is the distinction between the concepts of “nature” and “environment.”

The use of the term “nature” in the context of landscape concept is contentious due to its natural and non-human essence. Nature, meaning what existed before humans or what humans did not directly create, has a limitation in the landscape concept because it only encompasses a specific type of landscape. For instance, “natural landscape” refers specifically to landscapes where no human impact is recognized (Doroodian, 2015). In contrast, the term “environment,” as derived from definitions, can refer to all-natural and artificial elements of the context (Hemmati & Saboonchi, 2021). The environment, meaning everything that surrounds us, speaks of a totality that aligns more closely with the various aspects of the landscape.

According to landscape definitions, the environment, whether natural or artificial, can be involved in the construction and perception of the landscape. Therefore, these components of the landscape can be categorized into two groups: natural environment and artificial environment.

- Natural elements of the environment

Natural elements of the landscape are components that are naturally found in the external environment and contribute to the formation of landscapes. These elements include geological features, climate and weather conditions, natural resources such as water, vegetation, and biological species. Generally, it can be envisioned that natural elements influence the construction of the landscape in three different ways:

- **Pristine Nature and Existing Conditions:** The unique identity of the environment and its specific landscape is represented by the pristine nature and existing conditions of each environment. This includes landscapes found in rainy climates, hot and dry areas, coastal regions, plains, and forests. Plant and animal species, as characteristics of the existing ecosystem, can also independently be constituent elements of the landscape of any environment.

- **Natural Elements as Symbols:** Natural elements can also become symbols with secondary values assigned by humans, facilitating the creation of landscapes. As Abarghouei Fard & Saboonchi (2020, 31) state, “Individuals organize the natural elements of their surrounding environment into meaningful images and attribute their viewpoints to them”.

- **Facilitating Human Activities:** Natural elements and phenomena can provide the context for certain human activities. The natural environment, by offering opportunities and services that humans utilize for their welfare, can play a role in creating the unique landscape of its setting. Examples include landscapes created by agriculture in fertile lands or activities such as water transport and fishing along the coasts.

- Artificial elements of the environment

The artificial nature of something implies alterations to its natural and original conditions. An artificial environment is essentially a type of environment that has been created through intervention and modification of its initial and natural state. If

nature encompasses elements, phenomena, and processes, then artificiality also applies not only to elements but also to phenomena and processes. For example, not only are artificial elements like buildings and industrial objects present in the environment, but terms such as “artificial lake” also refer to altering natural conditions to create a new context for various purposes. These elements can range in scale from objects (such as urban elements), masses (such as buildings and structures), and spaces (such as urban open spaces and parks), to urban infrastructure.

• Humans

The role and presence of humans in the concept of the landscape encompass two intertwined yet distinct aspects. Humans not only perceive the landscape as an audience, acting as the perceivers of the landscape, but they also play a role as creators, contributing to the production of the landscape. This aspect of humans as perceivers of the landscape has consistently been the focus of researchers and experts in this field. However, the role of humans as creators of the landscape has been overlooked (Fig. 2). In line with the objectives of this research, the emphasis is on understanding the role of humans and their impact on the creation of the landscape.

A review of the theoretical foundations and concepts regarding the relationship between humans and the landscape shows that the aspect of this relationship which considers humans not as perceivers but as creators of the landscape is generally expressed through three concepts: “cultural landscape”, “social landscape”, and “ritual landscape” (Table 1).

Despite various interpretations and differences in details, all three aforementioned concepts share common roots in the main concept of the landscape. The existing differences arise from focusing on specific aspects of human interaction with their surrounding environment, which are more prominent in each of these types of landscapes. By reshaping their living environment and creating connections between natural elements such as air, land, and water, and what they produce, such as settlements and buildings, humans ensure their survival and create landscapes that possess functionality, meaning, and artistic aspects (Spirn, 2005, 34). As mentioned, humans play a role in producing both the objective and subjective aspects of the landscape; in other words, humans intervene in nature and create physical and objective changes, while the subjective aspect of the landscape is born from their perceptual and mental processes (Fig. 3).

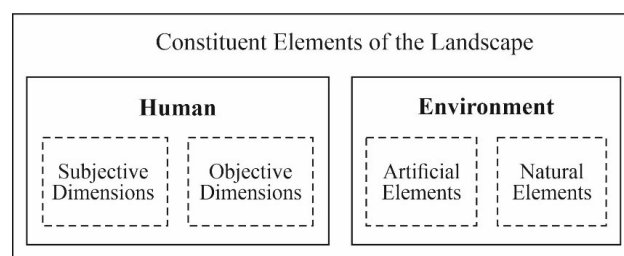


Fig. 2. Creative Elements of Landscape. Source: Author.

National Identity

National identity is one of the most important factors in creating unity and forming the collective spirit of a nation, distinguishing one nation from another. It is the greatest factor in creating social cohesion and stabilizing the foundations of society, something that every nation needs even without a long historical background

(Rabani, 2002; Hassanifar & Abbaszadeh Marzbali, 2020). A nation refers to a group of people with their own unique and shared land, culture, language, and history (Ahmadi, 2009). By examining the views of experts, we can identify the main and frequently mentioned components of national identity. The seven main components of national identity are reviewed in Table 2.

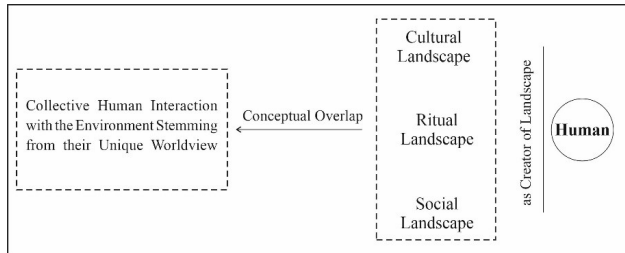


Fig. 3. The Role of Humans as the Primary Element in Landscape Creation. Source: Author.

National Identity Elements of the Landscape

As previously mentioned, the presence, absence, and quality of the national identity of any entity should be examined in terms of the aforementioned components. In line with the research objective and to understand the concept of the Persian identity in the landscape, the identity of the constituent elements is now discussed for the seven identity-forming components.

-Natural Elements of the Environment: Each geographical area has unique conditions in terms of climate, biodiversity,

Table 1. Types of Landscape with Emphasis on the Role of Humans as the Primary Creators. Source: Author.

Title	Characteristics and Key Aspects	Researchers
Cultural Landscape	Emerges from the interaction between humans, living beings, customs, and rituals with nature over time; consciously designed and created by humans; depicts intertwined layers of history and nature; a product of tangible or intangible human intervention in the environment; represents different ways humans utilize environmental capacities; results from group interaction with the environment rather than individual relationships; influenced by the main factors of culture and nature; not merely the initial setting but a quality created from the landscape.	Aalen et al. (1997); UNESCO World Heritage Centre (2009); Eshrati & Hanachi (2015); Danaeinia & Eilbeigipoor (2018); Mansouri & Atashinbar (2014)
Ritual Landscape	A branch of cultural landscape; may have physical forms or lack them; rooted in nature and embodies beliefs, customs, and traditions. Beyond the physical form, it is influenced by human behavior and interaction around meaningful and sacred centers; widely accepted by its community; solidified over time; unique and suitable to the culture of its environment; and signifies the community's history and antiquity. Creates distinctive and identity-rich spaces in the environment; manifests through three ways: symbols and myth-making, physical forms and structures, and traditions.	Alalhesabi & Paykan (2013); Mansouri (2014, 5); Naghizadeh (2010); Habibi (2008); Khakzand & Teymouri Gerdeh (2015); Khoramrouei et al. (2019)
Social Landscape	A branch of cultural landscape; directly influenced by humans; human communities are the main factor in its creation; results from collective living and interactions among people and their environment; dynamic in nature; its continuity depends on maintaining internal community connections; a treasury of people's behaviors and beliefs throughout history.	Hemmati (2019); Abarghouei Fard et al. (2022); Schatzki (2011)

Table 2. Components of National Identity. Source: Author based on Hassanifar & Abbaszadeh Marzbali, 2020.

National Identity Component	Description
Land	National identity arises from and depends on the geographical environment and territory of a specific land, formed by the bond between the individual and the land.
History	The continuity and persistence of a society's identity are tied to the historical continuity of individuals in a territory. A nation's history reflects shared experiences and sentiments that lead to the creation of its unique identity.
Religion	The existence of a shared religion and adherence to religious teachings, as well as the continuity of religious traditions, play a fundamental role in forming national identity and differentiating societies from each other.
Government System	The preservation of national cohesion and identity is significantly dependent on the people's loyalty to the government and its values and functions.
Culture	Culture, comprising shared values, feelings, attitudes, customs, and art among a nation, is transmitted through generations and influences individuals, consciously or unconsciously, marking historical signs of each nation.
Language	Language is a fundamental element of national identity, crucial for the survival of any society, and acts as a link to a nation's past. All national identity elements are shaped and find meaning around a common language.
Myths	Myths represent the culture and worldview of people and symbolize the continuity of a nation's cultural life and history.

geology, and other natural world components, which distinguish the natural elements of that land from other parts of the world. This subject is discussed in the field of climatology. These differences can result in variations in climatic features, plant species, animal species, topography, natural resources, etc., in different areas. Thus, the identity of natural elements can be derived from the identity-forming component of “land,” representing the unique identity of its specific context.

- **Artificial Elements of the Environment:** “Land” influences the type and quality of natural resources available for human construction and utilization to achieve their goals. The “governing system”, in line with its nature and objectives, can promote specific styles and patterns of buildings and physical elements in society. It also affects the structure of the city and, consequently, urban infrastructure. In an interconnected relationship, “religion” and “myth” also impact the artificial elements present in the environment; religious rites and rituals, as well as the worship and reverence of myths, often require physical structures, artifacts, and tangible items that reflect the identity of their context. The “culture” of each nation, influenced by various factors such as history, literature, art, religion, language, customs, and so on, has a significant impact on the artificial elements of a nation. This impact can be seen in various fields such as architecture, design, handicrafts, painting, etc. Therefore, culture can create artificial elements in the form of different and diverse symbols and patterns that showcase the identity of each nation.

- **Human:** The landscape created by humans, in both its tangible and intangible aspects, can serve as a vessel for the national identity of a society. “Land”, as the environment in which humans live, plays a significant role in shaping their identity. Through interactions with their land, individuals experience social and ethnic connections, individual and group identities, and even shared ideas and values. Cultural and artistic works, language, rituals, and customs are all influenced by the living environment and impact identity.

As a collection of past events, processes, ideas, and experiences, “history” helps shape individual and collective identity. History can define individual and collective values and, through the remembrance of past eras and the examination of old experiences, reinforce the sense of belonging to a national community and individual identity.

“Religion and myths” also significantly influence values, beliefs, behaviors, and people’s perceptions, contributing to the formation of individual and collective identity. Religion, as a belief and cultural system, plays a crucial role in shaping human identity. Myths, from ancient times to the present, help shape cultural values and reflect the fundamental values, ideas, and principles of a culture and society, strengthening the national identity of those who believe in them (Hassanifar & Abbaszadeh Marzbali, 2020).

The “Government System” determines factors such as political, legal, and social actions of the state, the extent of citizens’ freedom, the distribution of power and resources, and human and social rights. All these factors interact to help shape or limit human identity.

As an inherently human phenomenon, “culture” has the most significant impact on human identity. Culture determines values, beliefs, worldviews, lifestyles, and ways of interacting with the world, helping shape individual and collective identity. Culture can create a sense of belonging to the society in which an individual lives.

“Language” also profoundly affects human identity. As the primary tool for expressing emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and individual and cultural values, each language has unique patterns that reflect the culture, beliefs, and values of a society (Fig. 4).

Discussion: Persian Identity of the Landscape

The landscape is a complex concept with multiple layers; attributing a quality like “Persian” and adding a Persian essence to it further increases its complexity. However, utilizing its constituent elements to define and elucidate the concept of the Persian landscape can help clarify its dimensions and characteristics. According to various theories, such as Gestalt, the whole of something is more than the sum of its parts (Shapourian, 2007). This notion is particularly relevant to the phenomenon of the landscape due to its inherent nature. Nevertheless, this approach allows us to identify the Persian landscape.

To possess a national identity, each element and component of the landscape, as well as its entirety, must be Persian. The identity of the landscape elements has already been discussed; this section will focus on the Persian aspect of each of them.

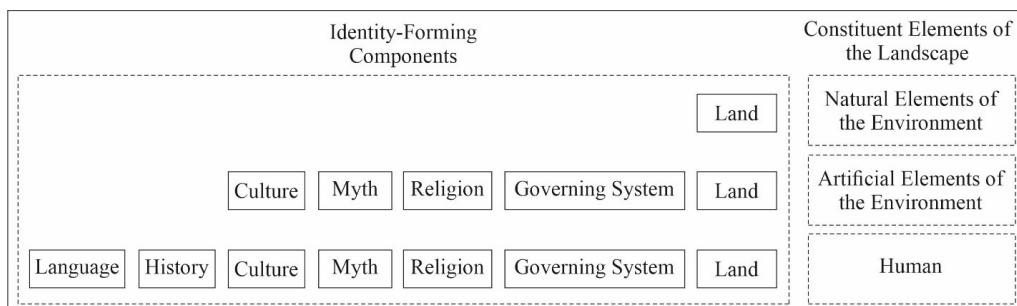


Fig. 4. Components Influencing the Identity of Each Element of the Landscape. Source: Author.

• **Land**

The identity of natural environmental elements that contribute to the formation of landscapes is often influenced by the land itself. The “Persian-ness” of natural elements means that their manifestations, such as plant and animal species, climate, soil type, etc., are specific to the geography, climate, and land of Iran and are native to it. This distinctiveness sets them apart from those found in other climates, lands, and locations. Earthen materials like adobe and brick, construction techniques such as arches and domes, traditional water systems, and iconic plants like pines, cypresses, and plane trees, which shape the urban fabric of traditional cities and various forms of Persian gardens, are all influenced by the geography and climate of this land.

• **Government system**

In one of the most important types of landscapes, namely urban landscapes, those created during various Iranian regimes differ. In the pre-Islamic period under Sassanian rule, the city’s organization consisted of a citadel, a fire temple, and administrative centers in the city’s core, aristocratic neighborhoods in the next layer, and finally, the craftsmen’s neighborhoods (Soltanzadeh, 1983). In contrast, cities under Islamic rule in Iran comprised elements like the central mosque, market, square, and neighborhoods formed based on residents’ ethnicity or profession, creating a different urban structure and landscape (Mansouri, 2007, 55-59). Government systems, by determining a unified religion in their territory and also by their adopted policies, influence how people interact with their environment. For example, the Qajar kings’ trips to Europe and their influence by European art and architecture had a direct impact on the urban landscapes of their time (Ghobadian, 2013).

• **Religion**

Religion, through the necessity of places of worship, rites, and religious rituals, directly influences the creation of uniquely Persian landscapes. Spaces and buildings constructed in pre-Islamic Iran, such as the grand buildings and palaces of the Achaemenids and Sassanians or Zoroastrian fire temples, were all rooted in the religious beliefs of their times (Zandieh, 2019). After the advent of Islam, the Persian landscape also changed in terms of meaning, space, and structure, becoming dependent on Islamic principles. The role of mosques in shaping the structure and identity of Iranian cities is undeniable (Welzbacher, 2017). Although the interaction of Persians with their surrounding nature has historically been influenced by predominant religious guidelines, there has been a coherent and unified overall approach that, despite differing details, has been maintained. In ancient Iran before Islam, the sanctification of nature and natural elements, along with a focus on tree planting and garden construction, stemmed from religious beliefs and were foundational to human behavior. After Islam’s arrival, the belief system of Iranians regarding nature and its sanctity continued.

• **Myth**

Myths have historically influenced how Iranians interact with nature and create landscapes. Ancient Iranian myths, often derived from nature and natural elements like the sky, sun, and plants, led to meaningful interactions between Iranians and their surroundings, resulting in identity-rich landscapes (Farrahi Farimani & Haghghatbin, 2016). These myths contributed to the creation of ritualistic landscapes such as praying near various water features or venerating sacred trees, the construction of sacred sites like Anahita temples across Iran, and decorative elements and motifs such as the cypress tree motif in numerous ancient architectural works

• **Culture**

Features like privacy, introversion, permeability, and interactiveness are often rooted in and derived from the culture of Iranian society, manifesting in various aspects of the landscape. With their unique worldview and perspective, Iranians create different landscapes in response to the conditions of the time and environment. Aesthetics, quality of interactions in public spaces, the elements and compositions present in physical structures, approaches to nature, and many other factors are among the influences of Persian culture on the people, playing a role in landscape production.

• **Language**

The Persian language has been a unifying factor in Iranian civilization and culture, influencing the creation of literary and artistic works (Modarresi, 2015, 12). This language also plays a role in transmitting customs, rituals, and cultural heritage, and maintaining the connection between values across eras.

• **History**

Iran’s history has significantly shaped the attitudes and character of Iranians, being one of the main components of national identity (Ahmadi, 2009). Landscapes inherently bear traces of history on nature, narrating previous patterns, events, and, in a word, the history of their context. Examples include ancient sites and traditional cities of Iran.

Conclusion

Defining the concept of the Persian landscape significantly aids in understanding its quality and examples. Although a landscape, as an integrated whole, is more than just the sum of its components, its identity can be sought within the identity of its constitutive elements. As previously stated, and in response to the research questions, the Persian-ness of a landscape is influenced by the extent to which the natural and artificial elements of the environment and human culture, as the creators of the objective and subjective dimensions of the landscape, are Persian. This Persian identity is manifested in the seven components of land, history, religion, governing system, culture, language, and mythology within the landscape elements (Fig. 5). As reviewed, humans, as the creators of the landscape, have the greatest capacity and influence

in imparting a Persian identity to landscapes, with all identity-forming components applying to them. Thus, if examples of landscapes, such as Persian gardens with non-native plant species and a non-Persian identity, are imagined, then that landscape is not Persian. If traditional Iranian cityscapes are imagined with buildings having non-Persian identities and non-native forms and decorations, this landscape is not Persian. Even if in landscapes with an authentic Persian form, such as the squares of traditional cities, human presence and interaction with the surrounding environment reflect a worldview and lifestyle different from that of Persians, that landscape is also not considered Persian. The Persian landscape expresses its unique identity in all its dimensions and components. It is also essential to note that the degree of Persianness of a landscape, like other qualities and features that can be envisioned for a landscape, is not absolute or binary but rather spans a spectrum dependent on the role of each element in representing the Persian identity.

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Identity-Forming Components of the Persian Landscape

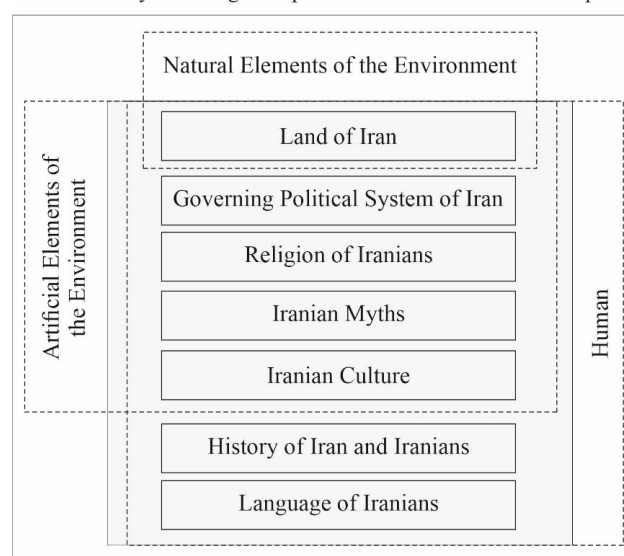


Fig. 5. The Nature of the Iranian Landscape Based on Its Constituent Elements. Source: Author.

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