



Analysis of the Transformation in *Nahj al-Balāgha* Studies from the Post-Safavid Period to the Threshold of the Iranian Islamic Revolution

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Abstract The tradition of writing commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāgha* is

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a mirror reflecting the intellectual, political, and social transformations of Islamic societies. Despite numerous bibliographic studies, a systematic analysis of this trajectory in relation to its discursive contexts remains absent. Employing the "Social history of knowledge" approach and drawing on Skinner's contextual hermeneutic method, this study investigates the metamorphosis of this tradition during the neglected period from the fall of the Safavids to the eve of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. The findings indicate that this trajectory experienced two clearly distinct stages. First, the "Period of stagnation," (post-Safavid to the eve of the Constitutional era) during which, under the dominance of Akhbārism and political despotism, *Nahj al-Balāgha* shifted from a comprehensive text to a "Mirror for princes," serving the function of "Consolidating power" and advising rulers; second, the "Period of renaissance," (from the Constitutional era to the Revolution) in which, with the emergence of the Samarra School and the encounter with modernity, an "Epistemic rupture" occurred. In this era, *Nahj al-Balāgha* became a tool for the "Delegitimization of despotism" and the "Foundation of political theology." Methodologically, there was also a fundamental shift from "Sequential-lexical commentary" to "Systematic analysis" aimed at extracting a coherent intellectual school from *Nahj al-Balāgha*. The study concludes that developments in commentary writing constitute a key indicator for tracing the transition of Shi'i thought from "Individual ethics" to "Political jurisprudence" in the modern period.

Keywords: History of Thought, Commentary Writing, Samarra

154 School, Constitutionalism, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Post-Safavid.

Introduction, Problem Statement, and Significance

Writing commentaries on foundational and classical texts is less a purely explanatory or scholarly activity than a hermeneutical act reflecting the intellectual horizon and epistemic needs of each era, linking the "Horizon of the text" to the interpreter's "Horizon of meaning." In this context, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, as a text encompassing theological, ethical, political, social, and literary dimensions, has been subject to diverse readings throughout Shi'i history. The central problem of this study is a fundamental "Functional shift" in how *Nahj al-Balāgha* was read, reviewed, and consulted between the fall of the Safavids and the eve of the Iranian Islamic Revolution.

The present study examines the evolution of *Nahj al-Balāgha*'s use and the writing of commentaries on it during this sensitive and neglected period, from the fall of the Safavids (around 1135 AH) to the threshold of the Islamic Revolution. Since this era marks Iran's transition from a traditional society to approaching modernity, amid decisive historical events, studying the transformation in the understanding of a classical text in this context gains added importance.

Unlike earlier studies that have mainly adopted bibliographic or descriptive approaches, this research focuses on an analytical gap: how key concepts of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, such as justice, governance, and the rights of the people, were redefined in the commentators' mentalities across these two periods.

Accordingly, the main hypothesis is that the tradition of commentary writing on *Nahj al-Balāgha* underwent a "Functional

metamorphosis" during the period under discussion. In the post-Safavid period, up to roughly the mid-Naseri era, under the dominance of the discourse of monarchy, *Nahj al-Balāgha* was largely reread within the framework of individual ethics and "Mirror-for-princes" literature, functioning as *Nasihāt al-molouk*, advice to rulers aimed at softening their conduct (i.e., changing their behavior). However, in the Renaissance period (from the eve of the Constitutional era onward), driven by the Samarra School and the encounter with modernity, the reading of the text shifted from a purely ethical-individual model toward an applied model within political theology. In this transition, *Nahj al-Balāgha*, through political agency, became a source for "Producing constitutional legitimacy" and "Delegitimizing despotism." (structural change) The study shows that, contrary to common assumptions, this politicization of the text did not arise solely from secular intellectual movements but was rooted in the "Social Ijtihad" emerging from the Samarra and Najaf schools, which activated the latent potentials of *Nahj al-Balāgha*.

1. Research Methodology

In terms of purpose, this paper is fundamental; in nature, it is historical-analytical, organized within the framework of the "Social history of knowledge." In this approach, historical texts (here, commentaries and related works on *Nahj al-Balāgha*) are analyzed as "Responses to the crises of their time."

1.1. Data Collection and Selection

156 The research population may include all commentaries, translations, and

annotations on *Nahj al-Balāgha* and related works accessible during the period from 1135 AH (the fall of Isfahan) to the threshold of the Islamic Revolution (early 1970s). However, given the abundance of manuscripts, purposive sampling was employed. The selection criteria for works of the stagnation period were the comprehensiveness of the text and its authoritative status; for the later period, the degree of citation and social impact, as well as representation of the dominant discourse, guided selection. Thus, works that merely reproduced earlier material or were unavailable were excluded, while those containing interpretive innovation or reflecting the political orientation of their time (such as Lahiji's commentary, *Khūṭ'at Minhāj al-Barā'a*, 'Abduh's commentary, and Motahhari's *A Journey through Nahj al-Balāgha*) were chosen as units of analysis.

1.2. Data Analysis Method

To examine the texts, the study employed the technique of "Contextual thematic analysis." Accordingly, particular attention in some works was given to their introductions and conclusions, as well as sections related to political sermons and the letter to *Mālik Ashtar*. The methodological assumption is that in a book's introduction and in the choice of key vocabulary for explaining political concepts, the commentator, consciously or unconsciously, reveals his "Horizon of expectations" and the needs of his time (such as demands for justice, rule of law, or advice to rulers).

1.3. Theoretical Framework (Skinner's Contextual Hermeneutics)

To provide a deeper analysis of the transformation in commentaries on

Nahj al-Balāgha, this study draws on the methodological framework of the Cambridge School, particularly Quentin Skinner's ideas. In explaining his method, Skinner emphasizes the distinction between "Lexical meaning" and "Illocutionary force." From his perspective, understanding a political thought text is not achieved merely by reading it; rather, the researcher must discover what action the author was performing, within his historical context, by writing the text (Skinner, 2002: 1, 82).

Based on this approach, historical texts such as commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāgha* should not be viewed as collections of timeless truths detached from their context; rather, they are "Speech acts" written to intervene in a specific debate or respond to a political crisis (Skinner, 1969: 48). Skinner emphasizes that to understand any political statement, one must identify the author's "Intention" in its practical sense, not in a psychological sense, and namely whether the author is affirming the status quo, criticizing it, or proposing an alternative (Skinner, 2002: 1, 99).

Accordingly, the application of this method in the present research treats the shift in the approach of commentators on *Nahj al-Balāgha* and those who consulted it during the two periods of "Stagnation" and "Renaissance" as a change in "Strategies of agency":

- 1) In the period of stagnation, the dominant act of commentators and readers was "Admonition," within the tradition of mirror-for-princes literature, aimed at softening the power of rulers.
- 2) During the Renaissance, the study of *Nahj al-Balāgha* (influenced

158 by the Samarra School and constitutionalism) shifted toward the

"Delegitimization" of despotism and the establishment of new theoretical foundations.

1.4. Operational Definitions of Key Concepts

To avoid semantic ambiguity, the core concepts used in this research are defined within the selected theoretical framework (contextual) as follows:

- Epistemic rupture: Borrowing loosely from Gaston Bachelard's conceptualization, this refers to a sudden and fundamental change in the "System of questions." In other words, commentators in the Renaissance period not only offered different answers but posed fundamentally different questions compared to the previous period (for example, shifting from 'How should a ruler be advised?' to 'From where does a ruler's legitimacy derive?').
- Functional shift: This concept refers to a change in the "Social function of the text." Here, it denotes the transition of *Nahj al-Balāgha* from an "Intra-communal and ethical" text (for the spiritual refinement of elites) to an "Outward-oriented and political" text (for mobilizing the masses and shaping constitutional law). This shift encompasses not only commentators in the strict sense but all users and interpreters of *Nahj al-Balāgha*'s concepts.
- Systematic analysis: This term refers to the transition from a "Reductionist" method, explaining the text, sermon by sermon, in isolation, to a "Holistic" approach. In systematic analysis, the commentator attempts to assemble puzzle-like pieces from different parts of *Nahj al-Balāgha* (sermons, letters, and aphorisms) to extract a coherent intellectual school or an "Ideology" on a specific subject.

2. Literature Review

Despite valuable bibliographic studies that introduce and describe works related to *Nahj al-Balāgha*, most remain at a descriptive and cataloging level, typically answering the question ‘What works have been written?’ The question of "Why" and "How" these writings evolved, namely, the relationship between the structure and motives of these texts and the political-social discourses dominant in each era, remains a significant analytical gap.

Research on works related to *Nahj al-Balāgha* can be classified into three main categories: First category: Bibliographic and cataloging works.

This group includes works such as "*Masādir Nahj al-Balāgha*" (Sayyid ‘Abd al-Zahrā al-Husaynī al-Khaṭīb), "Commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāgha*," (Husayn Jumu‘a ‘Āmilī) "*Nahj al-Balāgha* Bibliography," (Reza Ostadi) "Sun Fountain," (Mostafa Delshad Tehrani, 2013 AD/1392 SH) and "*Nahj al-Balāgha* through the Centuries." (Abd al-Aziz Tabatabaei) These works introduce manuscripts, commentators, and authors. They form the foundation of historical research but, by nature, generally lack content-based and discursive analysis of the contexts in which commentaries emerged.

Second category: Studies focused on a single commentary or commentator.

These investigations offer in-depth analysis of a specific work (such as the commentaries of Lahiji, Khū‘ī, or ‘Abduh). However, this

160 approach does not provide a comprehensive and continuous picture of

the tradition's "Evolutionary trajectory" as a whole.

Third category: Historical-analytical studies.

These works attempt to analyze the commentary tradition within a specific historical context. The thesis, "The Place of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in the Political Thought of the Safavid Era," (Maryam Amouei) and the article, "Analysis of the Development of Commentary Writing on *Nahj al-Balāgha* in the Safavid Period," (Ranjesh et al.) are examples that focus on the Safavid era. While these studies confirm a functional transformation in the use of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, the research gap addressed by the present study remains, since both limit their analysis to the Safavid period.

The blind spot in existing research is the absence of a continuous analysis of the "Transitional period" (from the fall of the Safavids through the Qajar and Constitutional eras to the eve of the Islamic Revolution). Many studies overlook the post-Safavid period due to the scarcity of works and, after mentioning major commentaries such as *Khū'ī's Minhāj al-Barā'a* in the Qajar period, jump directly to the Islamic Revolution. By focusing on this "Missing link," the present study argues that understanding contemporary *Nahj al-Balāgha* scholarship is impossible without recognizing the "Discursive turn" that occurred in the Samarra School and the Constitutional era, namely the shift from individual ethics to political interpretation.

3. Commentary Writing from the Post-Safavid Period to the Pre-Constitutional Era

Commentary writing up to the Safavid era passed through three major phases:

- First phase: Formation and early stage, from the compilation of *Nahj al-Balāgha* until the early 7th century AH (around 610 AH).
- Second phase: Flourishing of classical commentary writing, from the early 7th century to the 9th century AH (610–900 AH).
- Third phase: Transformation in the style of commentaries, roughly concurrent with the Safavid era (906–1135 AH) (Ranjesh et al., 2025 AD/1404 SH).

After the fall of Isfahan (1135 AH), Iran entered a period of political instability (Afsharid and Zand dynasties), followed by Qajar despotism. In this context, the commentary tradition declined, a stage that may be termed the fourth phase: the period of stagnation. The following sections examine this phase and the subsequent period up to the eve of the Iranian Islamic Revolution (the fifth phase).

3.1. Cultural-Social Context of the Stagnation Period and Major Commentaries

Politically, this era was marked by weak and unstable governments, insecurity, economic disorder, the despotism of certain rulers, policies of fear and intimidation, and external pressures, producing a difficult situation in Iran (Ravandi, 1975 AD/1354 SH: 2, 438-582). Religious and scholarly centers also experienced decline and, with few exceptions, lacked vitality (Paktachi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 9, 763).

This unsettled condition, marked by fluctuations, persisted until the late Naseri era (1275 SH/1313 AH). In the present study, this

162 historical span, sharing general and similar characteristics, is treated as

a distinct period, and commentary writing on *Nahj al-Balāgha* is examined independently within it. Within this setting, the tradition of commentary on *Nahj al-Balāgha* entered a phase of relative decline and functional shift lasting roughly 180 years (from the fall of Isfahan to the eve of the Constitutional movement), which can be termed the period of stagnation. Although the limited commentaries produced reflected the social needs of their time, they did not bring about a major transformation in the field.

Some of the most important commentators of this period, whose works represent its general features, are listed below.

Table 1. Typology of commentaries and notable works of the stagnation period (post-Safavid to Naseri)

Dominant feature: reproduction of tradition, selective writing, and the dominance of the "Mirror-for-princes" paradigm

No.	Commentator / Author (Death)	Title of Work	Typology	Discursive Function and Distinctive Feature
1	Mirza Muhammad Baqer Lahiji (1832 AD/1248 AH)	Commentary an translation of Nahj al-Balāghah	Comprehensive Commentary (Persian)	Legitimizing the monarchy; written by order of the Qajar Shah with Mirror for Princes (<i>Andarznamah</i>) approach and promoting kingly ethics.
2	Sayyid Abdullah Shubbar (1817 AD/1232 AH)	<i>Nukhbat al-Sharhayn</i>	Summary and Selection	Imitation and repetition; a selection from two classical commentaries without specific discursive innovation.
3	Mirza Ibrahim Dunbali Khoei (1907 AD/1325 AH)	<i>a-Durrah al-Najafīyyah</i>	Interwoven Commentary (Arabic)	Facilitation; summarizing complex theological discussions for the traditional seminary audience (influenced

No.	Commentator / Author (Death)	Title of Work	Typology	Discursive Function and Distinctive Feature
				by the <i>Akhbārī-Uṣūlī</i> atmosphere).
4	Mirza Ahmad Waqar Shirazi (1881 AD/1298 AH)	<i>Rumūz al-Imārah</i>	Poetic Translation (Letter 53)	Court literature; translation of the Covenant of <i>Mālik Ashtar</i> to be presented to Qajar princes for teaching the etiquette of leadership.
5	Muhammad ibn Husayn Hamadani (1891 AD/1308 AH)	<i>Hidāyāt al-Ḥusām</i>	Thematic Commentary (Letter 53)	Traditional statecraft; focusing on the Covenant of <i>Mālik Ashtar</i> as a text for "Regulating the relationship between the King and the Subject."

3.2. Characteristics of Commentary Writing in the Stagnation Period

Commentaries of this period shared common dominant features, often rooted in the historical and socio-cultural context. Among the most important:

3.2.1. Noticeable Decline in Commentary Writing (Quantity and Quality) and the Emergence of a Stagnation phase

During this period, there was a clear reduction in the production of commentaries and works on *Nahj al-Balāgha*. A general survey of bibliographies indicates that fewer than 30 commentary-related texts were produced over roughly two centuries, most of them selective works or focusing on specific sections of the text. Bibliographic analysis shows that, in addition to previously mentioned works, about eleven commentaries were devoted to the letter of *Mālik Ashtar*

164 (Jafari, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 4, 504-505), two to the *Shiqshiqīyya*

sermon, two to Letter 31, and two critical studies of earlier commentaries, while the remainder consisted of selected texts, brief or abridged commentaries, and free translations. Therefore, the lack of producing fresh and strong content, reliance on multiple or selective abridgments of earlier commentaries, and less commitment to writing commentaries are considered among the characteristics of this period. Analyzing this relative hiatus cannot be completed merely by "Counting the small number of works"; rather, one must ask why, in the interval between the fall of Isfahan and the emergence of the Samarra school, the production of distinguished commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāgha* (unlike the Safavid era) stopped or became greatly diminished. This research considers two main factors involved: first, the political instability, disordered atmosphere, and social turmoil in Iran previously mentioned; second, the "Dominance of *Akhhbārī* thought" over scholarly centers in the 11th and 12th centuries AH.

During this period, the *Akhhbārī* current, following prominent figures such as Mirza Muhammad Amin Astarabadi (d. 1036 AH), regarded rational and Ijtihadi interpretations of religious texts as forbidden or at least undesirable and emphasized "Pure textualism." Since *Nahj al-Balāgha* is a text rich in metaphors, complex theological sermons on divine unity, and rational discussions, commenting on it required the tools of "Reason" and "Ijtihad." The dominance of *Akhhbārī* thinking, which considered the "Apparent meanings of narrations" sufficient, effectively closed the door to analytical commentary writing. By framing the debate as

"Reason/transmission" and rejecting the "Rational and philosophical sciences" in favor of strict textualism, the *Akhhbārī* approach led to a kind of "Intellectual stagnation" in scholarly circles. By discrediting "Ijtihad" and emphasizing "Caution" in understanding texts, this current practically blocked any interpretive innovation (including analytical commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāgha*) and directed scholars solely toward collecting narrations (hadith compilations) (Kermaninasab and Abutalebi, 2024 AD/1403 SH: 54-55).

Thus, it is observed that in this period the scholarly efforts of scholars shifted, rather than toward "Commentary and explanation" (which flourished in the revival period under the *Uṣūlīs*), toward "Narrative compilations," completing hadith encyclopedias, or producing "Literal translations." Therefore, the "Hiatus" of this period did not mean neglect of the words of Imam Ali; rather, it was the product of a "Macro-level outlook" that confined understanding of the text to its transmission and did not permit entry into the spheres of "Political critique" or "System-building." In fact, the dominance of *Akhhbārī* discourse, by promoting a kind of "Superficiality" and "Avoidance of rational reflection," also cast its shadow over the broader cultural and artistic life of society, shifting audience taste from "Deep analysis" to "Literalism." This, in turn, compelled commentators on *Nahj al-Balāgha* to produce simpler, narrative works rather than argumentative commentaries in order to gain visibility (Alizadeh et al., 2023 AD/1402 SH: 560).

166 After a long time, this epistemic lock was broken with the victory

of the *Uṣūlī* school (through Vahid Behbahani and later Shaykh Ansari in Najaf), and subsequently in the Samarra school.

3.2.2. Abridgment and Selective Writing

As is evident from statistics on concise commentaries of this period, writing abridged works and selectively explaining passages of *Nahj al-Balāgha* was the prevailing trend of the era. Thus, commentaries that selectively addressed sections of *Nahj al-Balāgha* constituted the dominant form of writing related to it. The commentary of Nawab Lahiji, one of the notable commentaries of the period, although written by royal command and by a distinguished scholar, in many instances sufficed merely to translate the phrases of *Nahj al-Balāgha*; his reliance on translation in Letter 53 serves as clear evidence of this claim (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 270-281).

This approach may have stemmed from a "Change of audience," "Social difficulties" (which shifted priorities across social strata), and the commentators' and writers' concern for "Deliberate simplification" in produced texts. Such a tendency paved the way for transforming the text's function from a specialized theological source into a general moral-ethical text.

3.2.3. Imitation, Extensive Use of Earlier Commentaries, and a Lack of New Content Production

In this period, commentators and researchers of *Nahj al-Balāgha* drew on the legacy of the 7th and 8th centuries, especially the two commentaries of *Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd* and *Ibn Maytham*, through abridgment, translation, combination, and critique. An example of

such works is *Nukhbat al-Sharḥayn* by Sayyid ‘Abdullāh Shubbar (Ostadi, 1980 AD/1359 SH: 43).

Lahiji likewise sometimes used the opinions and statements of *Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd* and *Ibn Maytham* in his commentary, quoting or critiquing them in accordance with his Shi‘i perspective (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 26, 132, 290).

Similarly, the commentary *al-Durra al-Najafiyya* by Dunbuli Khuei, which abridges and selects from *Ibn Maytham*’s commentary to facilitate understanding of *Nahj al-Balāgha* (Dunbuli Khuei, n.d.: 2), represents another instance of reliance on earlier commentaries and summarization during this period.

These approaches show that the hiatus was not an era of producing new thought or extensive content in *Nahj al-Balāgha* studies, but rather a period of rearranging and simplifying the legacy of the past for new audiences.

3.2.4. Political Patronage of Commentaries on Nahj al-Balāgha

A number of well-known commentaries of this era were written at the suggestion of rulers or to gain their favor. Mirza Muhammad Baqir Lahiji composed his commentary and translation in the name of Fath Ali Shah Qajar and by his order (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 2). Nasr Allah Dezfuli wrote the book "*Mazhar al-Bayyināt*" (a translation of *Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd*’s commentary) by the order of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (Aqa Buzurg Tehrani, 2024 AD/1403 SH: 21, 168). Muhammad Ibrahim Nawab Bada’i Negar (1299 AH) wrote a commentary and translation of the

168 Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* in the name of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar.

Likewise, Muhammad b. Abdullah Nuri sent "*Hidāyat al-Sulūk*," together with the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, to Naser al-Din Shah (Jafari, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 4, 505). Mirza Ahmad Vaqar (1298 AH) translated and commented on the covenant under the title "*Rumūz al-Imāra*" for Ehtesham al-Dawla and Farhad Mirza; in its introduction, after verses on divine unity and praise of the Prophet, he devoted several pages to praising the king, Mo'tamad al-Dawla, and Ehtesham al-Dawla (Vaqar Shirazi, 2014 AD/1393 SH: 11-18).

When numerous works are produced in this manner, by command or patronage of rulers, it indicates that the text was defined within the structure of power (for example, as advice to the king), rather than formed against that structure.

3.2.5. The Dominance of the Advice-literature Approach

The reduction in comprehensive commentaries in this period did not mean a complete halt to reflection on *Nahj al-Balāgha* or to writing about it; rather, the orientation of these reflections shifted in accordance with the needs and conditions of the time. The turbulent period after the Safavids was marked by political instability and despotism. In such an atmosphere, the tradition of "Mirror-for-princes" literature or "Statecraft manuals," rooted in the late Safavid era, was produced in forms suited to contemporary needs. In this context, the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, being the most complete and coherent Shi'i text on governance, justice, and the rights of subjects, became a focal point. The large number of independent writings on this covenant in this period (comprising about one-third of all writings

related to *Nahj al-Balāgha*) shows that *Nahj al-Balāgha* was increasingly reread by thinkers as a "Practical charter for reforming government" through selective interpretation.

These commentaries and translations, often dedicated to kings, princes, and government elites, represented efforts by scholars and literati to present an Alavid model of just governance to contemporary rulers in a manner suitable to the closed and authoritarian climate of the time. This approach prepared the ground for the emergence of a broader socio-political reading of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in the following period. The "Advice-oriented" reading of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in this era is not based merely on quantitative data (the frequency of commentaries on the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*) but on analysis of the "Interactive context between commentator and ruler." Unlike the Constitutional period, when commentaries were written to critique the structure of power, in the hiatus period most texts, especially prominent commentaries (such as Lahiji's commentary, *Mazhar al-Bayyināt*, and *Rumūz al-Imāra*), were produced within a patronage relationship.

Content analysis of these works, particularly their prefaces, shows that commentators, assuming the "Legitimacy of monarchy," reread *Nahj al-Balāgha* as a "Charter of the ethics of governance." In this interpretation, the aim of the text and its commentary was not to change the structure of government but to "Educate a just ruler" and "Stabilize power." For example, in Lahiji's commentary, he explicitly states that he wrote it not from personal motivation but by "Order of the ruler." While offering abundant praise of the Qajar shah and using

laudatory expressions such as the "Sultan of Islam, God's shadow over mankind," "...May God strengthen the pillars of his rule...", he interprets the words of Imam Ali as instruments for "Strengthening the kingdom," "Care of subjects," and benefiting that era (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 2, 169). This approach is also evident within the commentary itself. For instance, in translating the wisdom "*Man Malaka Ista'thara*," he writes: "Whoever becomes king should choose everything, that is, select the best of all things." (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 308) Likewise, in translating the wisdom "*al-Sultān Waza'atu Allah fī Ardih*," he writes: "Kings are God's restrainers and overseers on God's earth." (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 322)

The frequent use of the word "King" in translating and explaining the phrases of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, alongside terms such as "Imam," "Governor," and "Ruler," clearly demonstrates this approach. Examples include: "...Appointed by the Imam and the king...", (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 48) "Among those rights is the right of the governor and king over the subjects, and the right of the subjects over the governor and king, a duty that God has made obligatory...", (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 193) and so on.

Lahiji's translation in explaining one of the famous phrases of Sermon 216 "The subjects will not be righteous except through the righteousness of the rulers, and the rulers will not be righteous except through the uprightness of the subjects"¹ is noteworthy in this regard: "So the condition of the subjects cannot be set right except by the rectification of the king's affairs, and the king's affairs cannot be

1. This Sermon in the Lahiji Commentator is Sermon 207.

rectified except by the correctness and uprightness of the subjects' condition; that is, the condition of the subjects, agriculture, cultivation, trade, and the like, will not prosper except through the king's just governance, fairness, adjudication, authority, repelling enemies, and the king's supervision of the subjects; and the army will not be complete except through the obedience and compliance of the subjects with the king's commands and prohibitions." (Nawab Lahiji, n.d.: 193)

This tendency is also evident in Muhammad ibn Husayn Hamadani's commentary titled "*Hidāyāt al-Hussām*," written in 1308 AH (Hezar, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 147). In the introduction, he explicitly states that the book's purpose is to present the etiquette of governance for the ruling sultan of Kermanshah. After recounting a dream connected to the idea of writing the book, the author writes in the preface: "...I inferred that a book on the etiquette of governance, containing sound principles and firm regulations, should be written and presented to his joyful presence, so that, God willing, it may serve as a model for the governors of the ages and the rulers of lands..." (Hamadani, 2003 AD/1382 SH: 11-13)

From this perspective, the focus on the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, alongside a small number of relatively complete commentaries on *Nahj al-Balāgha* in this period, should not be seen as accidental; rather, it was a conscious attempt to reproduce the Iranian-Islamic tradition of "Mirrors for princes," in which "Justice" and "Respect for the rights of subjects" were defined as ethical virtues necessary for the

4. Commentary Writing in the 14th Century: The Era of the Renaissance (From Roughly the Constitutional Period until Before the Islamic Revolution)

The earliest signs of change in the thoughts and behavior of the Iranian people had already appeared during the reign of Naser al-Din Shah, before the Constitutional Revolution (Shamim, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 310), and gradually expanded and deepened due to various political, domestic, and foreign factors. The emergence of reformist ideas in the mid-Qajar period, encounters with the Western world, exposure to the Industrial Revolution and its advances through foreign contacts, resistance to foreign colonial influence that had long overshadowed Iran (Madani, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 1, 64), and struggles against internal despotism all contributed to these changes. The occurrence of major national movements, such as the Tobacco Protest and the Constitutional Revolution, which highlighted the role of the people and religious scholars, and the subsequent decline of the Qajar dynasty created a new, tense discursive environment in Iran. Consequently, in the late 13th and early 14th centuries AH, Iranian society and the Islamic world underwent profound intellectual and political transformations unlike those of the earlier period. In this dynamic context, *Nahj al-Balāgha* also emerged from the stagnation of the hiatus period and, through new intellectual readings, acquired an entirely new function and renewed attention.

4.1. The Samarra school and the transformation in attention to *Nahj al-Balāgha*

After the *Uṣūlī* School, through the efforts of Wahid Behbahani and

Shaykh Ansari, succeeded in overcoming the rigidity of *Akhbārīsm* and reopening the door to *Ijtihad* and rationalism, the ground was prepared for the emergence of the Samarra school. The first signs of a “renaissance” in attention to *Nahj al-Balāgha* cannot be found solely in the fervor of the Constitutional Revolution; rather, their roots must be traced to pioneering intellectual centers in the late 13th century. Among these, the “Samarra school,” under the leadership of Mirza Muhammad Hasan Shirazi (d. 1312 AH), played a key yet often overlooked role. Until the late 13th century AH, Samarra essentially had no Imami seminary for religious education. Mirza Shirazi’s migration in 1291 AH from Najaf to Samarra turned the city into a base for Shi‘i scholarship and the teaching of Shi‘i jurisprudence and legal theory. The transfer of Mirza’s scholarly circle, along with other prominent scholars from Najaf and Karbala, to Samarra over roughly twenty years, nearly a generation, transformed Samarra into a major center of attention for scholars and clerics (a serious rival to Najaf) as well as for domestic and foreign political actors (Paktchi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 9, 763).

The personality and political ideas of Mirza Shirazi, as well as Samarra’s position, reinforce the view that he and the Shi‘i clergy of Iraq sought to play a more active role in the region’s political developments rather than confining their activity to traditional areas of influence in southern Iraq (Paktchi, 2006 AD/1385 SH: 9, 763). In this context, after several years of consolidating Mirza’s position in Samarra, the issue of the tobacco monopoly concession (the Régie
174 contract) granted by Naser al-Din Shah and the subsequent tobacco

prohibition fatwa in 1309 AH, occurred.

The issuance of the tobacco prohibition fatwa and its impact on Iranian society, an example of the presence and influence of religious scholars (at that time centered first in Samarra and then Najaf) in Iran's political affairs (Madani, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 1, 64-76), elevated Mirza Shirazi's socio-political standing. The Shi'i religious authority in Samarra, previously regarded mainly for its scholarly and juristic prestige, after this event became a powerful socio-political actor, even in the eyes of colonial powers (Goli Zavarah, 1996 AD/1375 SH: 73). Consequently, his actions and programs in Samarra received increasing attention.

Mirza Shirazi, who stood at the center of public attention and domestic and foreign sensitivities, devoted special attention to *Nahj al-Balāgha*, and it is possible that his political ideas and conduct were influenced by its teachings. By his order, each day before the beginning of lessons in jurisprudence and legal theory, portions of *Nahj al-Balāgha* were read by one or two students. Over time, this practice led to the book being more widely discussed and increasingly emphasized in seminary settings (Educational System of the Samarra School, 1992 AD/1371 SH).

This approach represented a significant shift at a time when *Nahj al-Balāgha* was largely viewed as a source of advice to kings or limited to specialized theological discussion. The attention of a leading Shi'i authority to this work signified recognition of its social, political, and educational potential to shape a generation of aware and responsible scholars. In effect, the Samarra school, by linking

jurisprudence, politics, and Alavid ethics, prepared the ground for the transition from the concise, advice-oriented *Nahj al-Balāgha* of the Qajar period to the "Revolutionary *Nahj al-Balāgha*" of the Constitutional era, serving as a bridge between the two.

The students and disciples of Mirza Shirazi soon spread the attention of Mirza, and the method learned in the Samarra school throughout the regions where they were present. As a result, *Nahj al-Balāgha* was raised on a broader scale in the seminaries of Lebanon, Qom, and Isfahan, and its influence continued. This attention reached its peak during the Constitutional era, transforming *Nahj al-Balāgha* into an inspirational source for limiting despotism and articulating the nation's rights. With its numerous transformations, this era brought an end to the long previous period of stagnation and reshaped the historical trajectory of commentary writing.

4.2. Introducing Commentators of the Renaissance Era

Some of the commentators of this era and the types of their commentaries are introduced in Table 2.

Table 2. Typology of influential commentaries and works of the Renaissance period (from the Constitutional era to the Islamic Revolution)

Dominant features: pluralism, emergence of "Political Theology," consolidation of textual authenticity, and the beginning of "Systematic Analysis"

No.	Commentator / Author (Death)	Title of Work	Typology	Discursive Function and Methodological Innovation
1	Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905 AD/1323 AH)	<i>Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah</i>	Lexical-Literary Commentary	Unitarianism and Civilization-building; consciously transcending historical conflicts and introducing <i>Nahj al-</i>

No.	Commentator / Author (Death)	Title of Work	Typology	Discursive Function and Methodological Innovation
				<i>Balāghah</i> as a common Islamic heritage for the awakening of the Ummah.
2	Mīrzā Ḥabīb Allāh Khū'ī (d. 1906 AD/1324 AH)	<i>Minhāj al-Barā'ah</i>	Comprehensive Encyclopedia	Revival of Specialization; returning to the tradition of precise and <i>Ijtihādī</i> commentary with an engineered structure against superficiality.
3	Ākhūnd Khurāsānī (d. 1911 AD/1329 AH)	Commentary of the first Sermon	Seminary Lecture	Educational Formalization; introducing <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i> into the Najaf seminary curriculum and linking jurisprudence with Alawid teachings.
4	Mirza Nā'inī (d. 1936 AD/1355 AH)	<i>Tanbīh al-Ummah wa Tanzīh al-Millāh</i>	Political Treatise (Applied)	Establishing Constitutional Law; citing <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i> to "Delegitimize despotism" and prove the principles of Constitutionalism.
5	Nāzīm al-Mulk Ḍiyā'ī (d. 1933 AD/1352 AH)	<i>Si'yāsatnāmah</i> (Poetic)	Political Translation (Contemporary)	Bureaucratic Reforms; translation of the Covenant by a diplomat to present a "Manifesto for modern state administration" (transition from advice to law).
6	Shaykh Ismā'īl Maḥallātī (d. 1924 AD/1343 AH)	<i>al-La'ālī al-Marbūṭah</i>	Jurisprudential-Political Treatise	Changing the Nature of Power; legal interpretation of the Covenant of <i>Mālik Ashtar</i> to prove the transformation of the "Owner-Ruler" to the "Trustee/Agent Ruler."

No.	Commentator / Author (Death)	Title of Work	Typology	Discursive Function and Methodological Innovation
7	Javād Fāḍil (d. 1961 AD/1340 SH)	‘Alī Speech (AS)	Free and Literary Translation	Public Literature; simplifying concepts for the general audience and the urban middle class with fluent and non-specialized prose.
8	Fayḍ al-Islām (d. 1985 AD/1364 SH)	Translation and commentary of <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i>	Persian Interwoven Commentary	Popularization; making the complete text of <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i> accessible to the general Persian-speaking public and removing it from the monopoly of the elite.
9	George Jordac (d. 2002 AD)	<i>Ṣawt al-‘Adālah al-Insānīyah</i>	Thematic Analysis (Trans-denominational)	Humanistic Approach; rereading <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i> based on modern concepts of "Human Rights" and "Social Justice" (influential on Iran's intellectual sphere).
10	Sayyid ‘Abd al-Zahrā’ Ḥusaynī (d. 1993 AD/1414 AH)	<i>Maṣādir Nahj al-Balāghah</i>	Documentary Research	Defense of Authenticity; scientific response to doubts regarding the attribution of <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i> and consolidating its narrative status.
11	Shahid Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979 AD/1358 SH)	Journey on <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i>	Systematic Analysis	School-based System-building; transition from sequential commentary to "Extracting a worldview" and presenting <i>Nahj al-Balāghah</i> as a coherent socio-political "Ideology."

The data in Table 2 indicate a "Functional pluralism" in the history of commentary writing. In this period, *Nahj al-Balāghah* is

simultaneously active on several fronts:

- 1) Political front: (Naeini, Mahallati, Ziaei) that transforming the text into "Law."
- 2) Public front: (Fayḍul Islām, Javad Fazel) that bringing the text to the masses. Dozens of minor and selective commentaries were also produced, with the printing industry playing a role in their spread.
- 3) Scholarly-research front: (Khu'ī, 'Abd al-Zahrā Khaṭīb, Maadikhah) that strengthening documentary and thematic foundations.
- 4) Ideological front: ('Abduh, Jordac, Motahhari) that extracting from the text a "School of thought" for the modern world.

This diversity shows that in the Renaissance period, *Nahj al-Balāgha* shifted from a "Sacred shelf book" to a "Vibrant source of social knowledge."

4.3. Characteristics of Commentaries in the Renaissance Period (Transition from Traditional Methods to Modern Approaches)

This phase of commentary writing, reaching the threshold of the Iranian Islamic Revolution (early 1970s), should be described as a period of transition from traditional commentary methods to modern approaches. It has notable features, among the most important of which are the following.

4.3.1. Revival and Renewed Life of *Nahj al-Balāgha* and Its Commentaries and Translations

The Constitutional era up to the eve of the Islamic Revolution should be considered the era of "Revival and renewal" of *Nahj al-Balāgha*. **179**

This conclusion derives from preliminary statistical and geographical analysis of the commentaries produced in this period.

Abundance of works: After a period of relative stagnation, this era, lasting about 110 years (half the previous period), witnessed a surge in the number of commentaries, translations, selections, and studies related to *Nahj al-Balāgha*. According to available sources, roughly 150 commentaries, translations, and abridgments, partial, complete, or selective, were produced during this century-long period. Considering the shorter duration compared with the previous period, the increase is even more striking, indicating a "Return" and "Rediscovery" of *Nahj al-Balāgha*.

Geographical diversity: Writers and commentators from various parts of the Islamic world engaged in explaining and interpreting *Nahj al-Balāgha* in ways suited to their contexts. Linguistically, the works of this era also displayed greater diversity than earlier periods. Altogether, this demonstrates widespread geographical attention to *Nahj al-Balāgha* during the Renaissance.

4.3.2. Responsiveness to Contemporary Needs and a Socio-political Orientation

Commentaries of the Renaissance period were strongly influenced by the social issues and political approaches of their time.

Influence of political and social transformations: This period coincided with political and social movements, including constitutionalism in Iran, anti-colonial struggles in Arab countries, and the growth of social and political awareness across much of the

of *Nahj al-Balāgha* received particular attention, reflecting widespread concerns across the Islamic world. For example, in his commentary on Sermon 25, 'Abduh emphasizes the importance of unity and unified leadership, viewing attention to these as a cause of strength and reform of current affairs ('Abduh, n.d.: 1, 60). Similarly, Fayḍul Islām, in part of his commentary on the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, writes:

"For this reason, whether a ruler is Muslim, like 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, or non-Muslim, like Anushirvan, every leader of a people must act so that a good name and noble remembrance remain as a legacy, so that people pray for him and thereby he may attain everlasting felicity." (Fayḍul Islām, 1989 AD/1368 SH: 5, 994)

Emphasis on practical concepts: This period should be seen as the beginning of greater attention to the practical application of *Nahj al-Balāgha*'s teachings, especially in its political and social dimensions. Social justice, the rights of the people, the duties of rulers, Islamic unity, and the necessity of Muslim awakening were recurring themes in the introductions and texts of the commentaries of this era. The writings of 'Abduh, Motahhari, and numerous monographs, particularly on the commentary on the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*, manifested in socio-political transformations, and their themes were transformed into revolutionary slogans or directives for governance. Even the choice of titles with political and modern connotations for such works in that period indicates a conscious effort to replace traditional monarchical models of rule with Alavid models of

governance. A look at the titles of some works related to the Covenant of *Mālik al-Ashtar* in this era clearly confirms this trend:

- "Book of Politics": Mirza Jahangir Khan Nazem al-Molk Zia'i (1973 AD/1352 SH);
- "Manual of Government": Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1934 AD/1314 SH);
- "The Foundations of Politics in Establishing Leadership": Shaykh Muhammad ibn Isma'il Vaezi Kajuri (1974 AD/1354 SH);
- "Manual of Government": Shaykh Muhammad Ali Vaez Tehrani Hemmat Abadi;
- "The Title of Leadership": Sayyid Ali Akbar, son of Sultan al-Ulama (1944 AD/1324 SH);
- "The Blessed Decree": Javad Fazel Amoli (1961 AD/1381 AH);
- "Muqtabas al-Sīyāsa wa Sīyāq al-Rīyāsa": Muhammad 'Abduh;
- "The Shepherd and the Flock": Tawfiq al-Fikiki, etc. (Ja'fari, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 4, 506).

As an example, the following verses from the introduction to "Book of Politics" by Mirza Jahangir Khan Nazem al-Molk Ziaei clearly illustrate the aims and concepts intended by the commentators of that era:

"For this purpose, he composed it,

So that the rulers of the world; may learn the art of governance; from that preface of statecraft; the world is adorned with justice and fairness, delivering humankind from oppression; fortunate is that wise sovereign; who hangs this jewel upon his ear? He cherishes the

subjects by this measure; and thus excels over other kings." (Ja'fariyan, 2001 AD/1380 SH: 207–208) Moreover, the themes and concepts of *Nahj al-Balāgha* became central to the discussions and speeches of the Constitutional revolutionaries. In a passage reported by Nazem al-Islam Kermani about the content of one revolutionary gathering, it is stated: "Look at the book *Nahj al-Balāgha*, where *Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Ṭālib* (AS) in conversation with his son Imam Hasan says: "O! My son, do not be the slave of another when God has made you free, that is, my son, do not be enslaved by anyone else, for God has created you free, and he also said [...] How long shall we wretches remain bound in servitude to the king, rulers, and ministers?" (Nazem al-Islam Kermani, 2005 AD/1384 SH: 1, 183)

Nahj al-Balāgha as a charter for movement and reform: Many commentators of this era viewed *Nahj al-Balāgha* as more than a purely historical text, considering it a living and inspiring book for solving contemporary societal problems, especially political reforms and revolutions confronting corruption and social stagnation. Thus, studies of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in this period clearly reveal reformist current and socio-political influences in its reinterpretation. On the one hand, many commentators and researchers of *Nahj al-Balāgha* were themselves revolutionaries and advocates of political and social reform, such as *Muhammad 'Abduh* in Egypt, *Ṣubḥī Ṣāliḥ* in Lebanon, and Martyr Motahhari in Iran. On the other hand, monographs (particularly during the Constitutional era) strongly reflected this orientation. The influence of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in Constitutional

literature extended beyond formal commentaries. For example, Mirza Na'ini's book "*Tanbīh al-Umma wa Tanzīh al-Milla*" (written 1327 AH), though not outwardly a commentary on *Nahj al-Balāgha*, made extensive use of its teachings and emphasized the practical application of its concepts in constitutionalism and the limitation of the ruler's authority. Drawing on the teachings of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, he stressed the necessity of justice (Naeini, 1999 AD/1378 SH: 55); presented the ruler's position as one of trusteeship rather than ownership, which would lead to the predation of subjects, and defined limits for it (Naeini, 1999 AD/1378 SH: 31, 33); and therefore described such a government as "Constitutional," "Responsible," and "Legal." (Na'ini, 1999 AD/1378: 35)

In this treatise he wrote: "It is self-evident that preserving order and safeguarding the domain and integrity of Islam is impossible except through organizing security and administrative forces and preparing internal and border capacities; and all these arrangements depend on correcting and regulating taxation, preventing its waste and misuse, and avoiding its expenditure on personal desires and tyrannical wills. The Master of the Successors, in the blessed decree issued to *Mālik Ashtar* when entrusting him with the governorship of Egypt, which contains general directives, stipulated regarding taxation: "Attend carefully to the matter of taxation in a way that benefits its people..." (Na'ini, 1999 AD/1378 SH: 122-123)

Another scholar of this era, Shaykh Isma'il Mahallati, in his **184** influential treatise "*al-La'ālī al-Marbūṭa*," clearly depicts the role of

the ruler using *Nahj al-Balāgha*. Whereas commentators of the period of stagnation read *Nahj al-Balāgha* and the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* as means of consolidating royal power, Mahallati, in discussing the necessity of consultation by the ruler, explicitly presents the letter of Amir al-Mu'minin to *Mālik Ashtar* as "The best evidence and document" proving the ruler's need to consult specialists and the limitation of his authority (Urvati Movaffaq and Raha'i, 2023 AD/1402 SH: 1016).

Citing the passage "Increase your study with scholars and your discussions with the wise," Mahallati shifts the nature of government in *Nahj al-Balāgha* from ownership to trusteeship and representation. Inspired by Alavid governance logic, he argues that the ruler is merely a trustee and guardian of people's rights, not their owner; therefore, if he departs from consultation and law (explicitly stated in the covenant), his legitimacy falls (Urvati Movaffaq and Raha'i, 2023 AD/1402 SH: 1021). This argument shows that within the paradigm of renewal, *Nahj al-Balāgha* is recognized as a tool for limiting power rather than justifying it, and thus stands in contrast to readings such as Lahiji's in the previous period, which regarded government as a divine gift and obedience as absolute.

4.3.3. Efforts to Universalize and Facilitate Access to *Nahj al-Balāgha*

Commentators of this era made special efforts to ensure public access to the teachings of *Nahj al-Balāgha*. Simplification of language: "Writing commentaries in clear, accessible language for broader audiences (in Iran, in Persian), a trend that had begun in earnest since

the Safavid period, became a common feature of this era. The book "Sayings of Ali" by Javad Fazel (1381 AH) and the translation and commentary of *Fayḍul Islām* (1405 AH) were among the works of this period that, with fluent prose and elegant style, attracted public attention and saw repeated printings. In addition, abridgements and selections of *Nahj al-Balāgha* passages were widely published and distributed.

Spread of translations: The complete translation, or translation of selected sections, of *Nahj al-Balāgha* and its commentaries into Persian and into international, non-Arabic languages (Urdu, French, English) increased during this period, with the aim of conveying its message to non-Arabic speakers and global audiences. One reason for this development was the expansion of international relations and the facilitation of exchanges among nations and intellectual traditions. In this period, roughly 80 translations (selected, partial, or complete) were produced¹. Of these, eight were in Urdu, four in English, three in French, one in Sindhi, one in Gujarati, and the remainder in Persian.

Increase in selections and thematic commentaries on specific sections: "Selecting and commenting on the most important and practically relevant parts of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, to facilitate study and focus on key messages, experienced a notable surge in this era. Examples include the commentary on the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar* by Mirza Muhammad Hussein Isfahani, known as Forughi (1945 AD/1325 SH), and Muhammad Sadeq Tabrizi's commentary on Letter

31 of *Nahj al-Balāgha* titled "*Hudā al-Umam*." (Atardi, 2008 AD/1388 SH: 1, 554-555) The commentary of Akhund Khurasani on the first sermon of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, recorded by his student Abd al-Rasul Isfahani (Dirayati, 2023 AD/1402 SH: 214), should also be included in this category.

The abundance of thematic commentaries and selections had several causes, including: "The relevance of *Nahj al-Balāgha*'s themes to the needs and demands of the age; the political and social context; national awakenings and enlightenment movements; and the ease of publishing books due to industrial developments such as advances in printing and reproduction." Expansion of audiences and participation of diverse groups: "The writings of this period show that the audience of *Nahj al-Balāgha* expanded beyond seminarians and scholars. Numerous efforts were made to attract intellectuals, academics, and the general public to the text."

The production of commentaries or analyses by individuals with non-seminary expertise, such as in law and political science, demonstrates the entry of interested specialists from other disciplines into commentary writing, in line with their fields, thereby removing the book from the exclusive domain of religious academic centers. A prominent example is the work on *Nahj al-Balāgha* by Mirza Jahangir Khan Nazem al-Molk Zia'i, a diplomat. In addition to his poetic translation of Letter 53 under the title "*Siyasat Nameh*," he also versified Letter 31 under the name "*Haqiqat Nameh*." At the beginning of this poetic commentary, the following appears: "If you

are a man, heed this counsel, Strive to perfect your own being; know that from these counsels, good and evil, Refine all your morals thereby. Blessed is that noble youth who embraces this advice and discipline?" (Zia'i, 1952 AD/1331 SH: 14)

4.3.4. The Role of the Printing Industry in Generalizing the Use of *Nahj al-Balāgha*

Before this era, the general public mostly received its religious knowledge orally through sermons and speakers. However, the printing industry played an effective role in expanding literacy and raising the level of public thought and information. The growth of public literacy and printed works diversified the ways of acquiring knowledge and strengthened personal study in religious learning.

Printing, first widespread in Azerbaijan in Iran and later in Tehran, with lithography gradually replaced by typographic printing (Shamim, 2008 AD/1387 SH: 366), made the publication of works and books easier and broader possible. Naturally, this industrial leap led to greater abundance and accessibility of *Nahj al-Balāgha* commentaries and translations, as with other written works. Thus, the expansion of printing significantly contributed to the popularization of *Nahj al-Balāgha* and its commentaries among the general public, facilitating the spread of its teachings and concepts. Compared with earlier periods, when works were mainly manuscript-based and limited, this represented a major transformation brought about by industrial change in this era.

4.3.5. Diversity in Methodology and Approaches

188 The approaches and methods of commentary writing in this period

became highly diverse, moving beyond limited sequential or thematic commentaries. Continuation of the encyclopedic commentary tradition: Some commentaries continued the tradition of comprehensive works, producing detailed studies within a traditional framework including linguistic, literary, historical, theological, and philosophical discussions. An example is "*Minhāj al-Barā'a fī Sharh Nahj al-Balāgha*" by Mirza Habibollah Hashemi Khoei (1894 AD/1324 AH). Although the commentator passed away before completing it, the remainder was later finished by others. This work can be seen as representing efforts to revive the tradition of comprehensive commentary and scholarly specialization in the modern period.

Unlike the brief, translation-like commentaries of the Qajar era, Khu'ī presented a carefully structured methodology in the introduction to volume one, stating that each sermon would be analyzed across multiple layers, language, translation, grammar, subtle meanings, rhetorical truths, clarification of difficult concepts, explanation of structural complexities, grounding principles in Qur'anic verses, and embellishing chapters with narrations of the Imams, while also including many virtues and benefits absent from most previous commentaries (Hashemi Khoei, 2021 AD/1400 SH: 1, 6-9).

Emphasis on literary and rhetorical aspects: Some commentaries, especially in the Arab world, focused on the eloquence and rhetoric of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, the beauty of Imam Ali's speech, and the resolution of lexical difficulties. Examples include 'Abduh's commentary, "*Ḥall Lughāt Nahj al-Balāgha*" by Ejaz Husayn Badayuni, and the "Annotations

of *Marṣaʿfī*," who, like *ʿAbduh*, wrote notes and lexical explanations (Atarodi, 2009 AD/1388 SH: 1, 508, and 554). Such works treated *Nahj al-Balāgha* as a text beyond sectarian belief and sometimes as a literary classic, contributing to its spread in non-Shiʿi circles.

Reference to earlier commentaries (Shiʿi and Sunni alike): "Commentators of this period, like those before them, paid special attention to classical works such as the commentary of *Ibn Abī al-Ḥadīd* (Muʿtazili) and *Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī* (Shiʿi) from the golden age of commentary writing, sometimes critiquing, completing, summarizing, or translating them." The emergence of analytical-thematic approaches: "Efforts to categorize and analyze the teachings of *Nahj al-Balāgha* thematically became evident in this period through works such as *A Survey of Nahj al-Balāgha* by Martyr Motahhari (1979 AD/1358 SH), and studies focused on specific topics, such as governance in the Covenant of *Mālik Ashtar*." Motahhari, presenting new and contemporary perspectives, wrote a series of concise thematic articles that later formed *A Survey of Nahj al-Balāgha*, a brief yet profound work that marked a turning point in the transition from sequential commentary to systematic analysis. With a philosophical outlook and by outlining a coherent intellectual framework based on *Nahj al-Balāgha*, he paved the way for thematic and ideological studies of the text in the contemporary period.

4.3.6. A More Serious Focus on Textual Authentication and the Defense of the Authenticity of *Nahj al-Balāgha*

190 Toward the end of this period, because of the growing circulation and

relative fame of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, doubts about it, especially questions of its chains of transmission and documentation, whose roots lay in earlier eras, were reinforced. The need to address these issues became so pressing that Martyr Motahhari, in the introduction to A Survey of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, counted it among the essential tasks surrounding the text, alongside clarifying the intellectual system of Imam Ali (AS) on various subjects (Motahhari, 2001 AD/1379 SH: 17).

The abundance of such doubts and the need to address them led to the emergence of documented, scholarly research aimed at proving the reliability and attribution of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, marking important foundational steps in consolidating its academic standing. The book "*Maṣādir Nahj al-Balāgha*" by Sayyid 'Abd al-Zahra Husayni Khatib and "*Istinād*" by Imtiyaz Ali Khan Arshi are among the most successful and exemplary works in this field.

4.3.7. Using *Nahj al-Balāgha* as A Tool for Islamic Unity

One of the key reasons for the revival of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in this era was the special capacity and distinctive function that major reformers of the Muslim world attributed to it in promoting unity. At a time when the Muslim world faced the dual challenges of "Internal Decline" and "External Colonialism," thinkers such as Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi and his student Muhammad 'Abduh sought a return to Islam's authentic and rational sources to awaken Muslims and foster unity.

Although commentary writing by Sunni scholars was not unprecedented, the commentary of Muhammad 'Abduh, had a major

impact in introducing *Nahj al-Balāgha* to Sunni audiences and to non-Shi'i Arab countries, and after him the work continued to receive attention and further development (Amini, 1987 AD/1366 SH: 170). Likewise, the critical edition, research, and annotations of *Ṣubḥī Ṣāliḥ* influenced the spread of *Nahj al-Balāgha* to such an extent that today his edition is regarded as a standard text.

Perhaps one of the most important intellectual shifts of this period was the redefinition of *Nahj al-Balāgha* from a sectarian Shi'i text into a shared heritage for the entire Muslim community. Thus, 'Abduh's commentary was not merely a lexical explanation but a reformist project. In his introduction, he states that his goal was to acquaint the young Arab generation with their forgotten eloquence and wisdom so they could free themselves from blind imitation and intellectual decline ('Abduh, n.d.: 1, 11). He presents *Nahj al-Balāgha* as a supra-ethnic and supra-sectarian text embodying Islamic rationality, courage, and justice in their purest form, writing: "No seeker seeks anything but finds the best of it therein, and no aspiration crosses the mind but finds its most complete form within it." ('Abduh, n.d.: 1, 16) In his commentary, he avoids, as far as possible, entering sectarian disputes and explicitly notes that he does not attempt to Alavitate or criticize narrations concerning the question of the Imamate, leaving judgment to readers after considering known doctrinal principles and transmitted reports ('Abduh, n.d.: 1, 11). Where historical or disputed matters arise (Āli Kāsfīf al-Ghiṭā', 2012 AD/1433 AH: 11), he overlooks them, mentions the basic narrative

without judgment, or remains silent (cf. ‘Abduh, n.d.: 1, 25-32; 2, 17, 79). In practice, when possible, he interprets expressions in ways that relate to less controversial issues (Āli Kāsfī al-Ghiṭā’, 2012 AD/1433 AH: 43).

This approach transformed *Nahj al-Balāgha* from a specifically Shi‘i text into a shared heritage for the entire Muslim community and played an important role in intellectual rapprochement among schools of thought, using it as a tool to promote unity (cf. Hourani, 1983: 140-144). This reformist and unifying perspective had a deep and instructive impact on later researchers of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, both Shi‘i and Sunni, while also generating scholarly critique and discussion.

4.3.8. The Transition from Sequential Commentary to Systematic Analysis (The Systemic Approach)

One of the most important methodological breaks in this period was the shift from "Sequential, word-based commentary" to "Systemic, thematic rereading" (a holistic approach). In this perspective, *Nahj al-Balāgha* was no longer seen as a collection of scattered aphorisms but as pieces of a larger picture that must be assembled to form an intellectual school. This movement was not limited to a single figure but developed as an evolutionary process:

A) Political system-building: Mirza Na‘ini’s *"Tanbīh al-Umma"* may be considered an early step. Instead of line-by-line commentary, he conducted a comprehensive inductive reading of letters and sermons to extract the "Principles of Alavid governance" (such as supervision, equality, and consultation) in order to theorize

constitutionalism and a new political system (Na'ini, 1999 AD/1378 SH: 73ff.).

B) Human-social system-building (George Jordac): The well-known work Imam Ali (AS): The Voice of Human Justice although written outside Iran, belongs to the same period and re-reads *Nahj al-Balāgha* through broad concepts such as freedom, justice, and human rights; its translation gradually became well known in Iran.

C) Ideological system-building: This process reached maturity in Motahhari's A Survey of *Nahj al-Balāgha*. Motahhari sought to uncover a coherent "Social philosophy" and "Worldview" within the text. Instead of sequential commentary, he analyzed topics thematically and systematically, aiming to present an integrated picture of Ali's thought based on *Nahj al-Balāgha*: "Two tasks are now necessary regarding *Nahj al-Balāgha*: one is deep reflection on its content so that the school of Ali in the diverse issues raised in it becomes precisely clear, something the Islamic community greatly needs..." (Motahhari, 2000 AD/1379 SH: 17)

This systemic perspective laid the foundations of contemporary *Nahj al-Balāgha* studies and opened the way for extracting political, economic, and social theories from the text. Even within the same era, numerous early signs of this trend appeared, for example, Ayatollah Khamenei's lecture series in 1973–74 in Mashhad, where *Nahj al-Balāgha* was reread as a text for deriving the "General outline of Islamic thought" and principles of social struggle. The writing, compilation, and research of the large collection "Sun Culture" by Abdolmajid Mo'adikhah also began in this period (around 1972).

Therefore, the claim of "Systematic analysis" does not imply the disappearance of sequential commentaries; rather, it indicates the emergence of a new genre in the literature of engaging with *Nahj al-Balāgha*, aimed at uncovering the logic of governance, ontology, and other themes from Imam Ali's discourse. It can be seen as a methodological response to the era's need for "Establishing government" and "Administering society" based on the Alavid model. It should be noted that fully systematic commentaries are largely products of the post-Islamic Revolution period. Numerous works then appeared with titles such as Management in *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Economics in *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Sociology of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, and others, all rooted in the same systemic perspective. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that pre-revolution works planted the seeds of this type of scholarly research on *Nahj al-Balāgha*.

Conclusion

An examination of the evolution of commentary writing on *Nahj al-Balāgha* from the fall of the Safavid dynasty to the threshold of the Islamic Revolution reveals a trajectory closely intertwined with profound political, social, and intellectual transformations.

Discourse analysis and bibliographical study indicate a transformation in the relationship between "Text" and "Power." Moving beyond purely bibliographic approaches and employing a contextual framework, this research demonstrates that the history of commentary writing across these two and a half centuries was not a linear path but the scene of an epistemic rupture:

1. At the level of textual function (agency):

The findings show that during the period of stagnation (post-Safavid), amid widespread political and social weakness and under the dominance of *Akhhbārī* discourse and patronage structures, *Nahj al-Balāgha* functioned in a "Stabilizing" manner. Commentators of this era (such as Lahiji), by reducing the text to an "Ethical advisory manual," sought to "Soften despotism" rather than negate it. In the revival period (from the Constitutional era onward), however, with the emergence of the Samarra school and the entry of modern concepts, the text's agency changed. *Nahj al-Balāgha* raised from the positions of "Advice to the ruler" and "Stabilizing role" to a constitutive and revolutionary function, becoming a basis for "Judging the ruler," a source for producing political theology, and a means of delegitimizing structures of despotism.

2. At the methodological level:

The study reveals a fundamental transition from fragmented lexical interpretation to system-building and holistic analysis. The efforts of Mirza Na'ini (in extracting constitutional principles), George Jordac (in developing human rights concepts), and, ultimately, Martyr Motahhari (in articulating a worldview) all indicate attempts to transform *Nahj al-Balāgha* from a "miscellany of wisdom" into a "framework for governance."

3. Final implication:

The research concludes that the "Politicization" of *Nahj al-Balāgha* in the past century is not an intellectual innovation imposed from

196 outside but the product of a return to *Ijtihad* and an internal religious

response to the crisis of governmental effectiveness. This tradition of commentary writing serves as a mirror, showing how Shi'i rationality, when encountering modernity, sought not to reject it but to reread the Alavid heritage to formulate an indigenous model of justice and freedom suited to contemporary needs, thereby revealing the limitless capacities of Imam Ali's discourse.

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