

**Cover Letter**

Dear members of the selection committee,

I am writing to apply for the EOM Dissertation Completion Award at the University of Toronto. As a PhD candidate in Centre for Comparative Literature at the same institution with a co-supervisor from NMC, Professor Tavakoli-Targhi, I have been actively involved in the initiatives of Iranian Studies as early as my entry in 2017. I have been benefiting from and contributing to programs and events in Iranian Studies at U of T both before and after the establishment of EOM, the summit of which was my collaboration with the Encyclopedic project on women poets of the Persianate world, headed by Prof. Tavakoli-Targhi, as a volunteer during the 2020-21 academic year. The dynamic of various involvements with projects, programs, and events of this Centre made me quite familiar with the lively atmosphere of the EOM. This experience paved a solid ground for a much more fruitful collaboration of mutual contribution as hopefully an official fellow of EOM.

As you will see in the dissertation synopsis section, my study is comparative at base, which targets the reception and dialogical relations of the Persian mystic self in two frameworks in making modernity: among the British Romantic writers and poets to construct a new concept of the self in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and the Iranian intellectuals, involved in forming a modern nation, engaged with Persian mysticism when constructing modern Iranian selfhood in the early to mid-twentieth century. As an academic and creative artist in different areas, I believe I can contribute to the EOM aims regarding the enhancement of Iranian studies in areas related to my endeavor, both to the academic and public audience in various forms of academic and artistic productions. I am confident that the mutual dialogue of my benefiting from world class scholars, events, and talks, and, in return, my contribution to the works of like-minded individuals at EOM, and even beyond that, to the larger public audience, will be flourishing and highly fruitful.

Sincerely,

Mahdiah Vali-Zadeh *Valiz*

Aug 14, 2022

## **Synopsis of Dissertation**

### **I AM NOT I: The Reconfigurations of the Persian Mystic Subject and Modern Selfhood**

“I AM NOT I” offers a non-Eurocentric, non-essentialist, and historical genealogy of the modern subject. I do this by focusing on the Persian mystic self as dynamic, engaged, and active. This dynamic self was figured into the construction of modern selfhood in two different contexts and geographical regions. As studies reveal, British Romantic writers referred to Persian mystical poetry as part of their quest to construct a new concept of the self in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. In addition, in the early to mid-twentieth century, Iranian intellectuals, involved in forming a modern nation, found it necessary to address Persian mysticism when constructing modern Iranian selfhood. In both cases, British Orientalist scholarship proved influential. This scholarship made Anglophone readers aware of Persian mystic poetry and established an understanding of Persian literature that mattered for Iranian thinkers. My dissertation explores how the self of Persian love mysticism was figured into a new concept of the self in the case of British Romanticism and Iranian modern national identity. Enacting a more dialogical relation between these contexts, the project critically reassesses how they activated some potentials of the Persian mystic self and omitted others. Exploring Rumi and other Persian mystic poets’ works, this project critically reassesses the reception of Persian mysticism in its modern and Orientalizing or self-Orientalizing contexts.

The relation between literature, culture, imperialism, and Orientalism was most famously theorized by Edward Said, who drew attention to the employment of culture and literature for Orientalist and imperialist purposes. Although Said’s works changed the face of the academy in a wide variety of fields, they were later critiqued for being ahistorical and monolithic (Clifford, Ahmad) and not taking into account the ways literary works may undermine as well as reinforce Orientalizing tendencies (Porter). These claims call for a more nuanced reading of Orientalist scholarship and the literature and discourse influenced by it. This is the mission of the current project, exploring the dynamic that exists between Orientalism and modern forms of selfhood. I explore the dialogical relation between Persian mystic poetry and modern selfhood in British Romantic writings and Iranian national discourse. I consider the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime as a dialogical construct with the Persian mystic self and the tendency for Iranian thinkers to self-Orientalize, evaluating Persian literature and Iranian self with British touchstone.

As Benedict Anderson argued, literary texts have provided a privileged site for imagining new models of constructing the self for modern individuals and nations. It is also the case that “how we formulate or represent the past shapes our understanding and views of the present” (Said, *Culture* 4). Accordingly, my dissertation critically reassesses Persian mysticism not only in its modern reception but also in its historical formation. Congruent with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s objection to “the master narrative” that is “the history of Europe” overshadowing all the “other histories” as its “variations” (28), my project conducts a critical analysis of one of these “other histories” – Persian mysticism – in its literary context via a dialogic approach that goes beyond a simple binary of East and West. My dissertation thus sets up the study as a contribution to what Charles Taylor identified as the need to develop a more pluralized understanding of “multiple modernities” (*Modern* 2). This project illustrates how the ontology that includes Rumi may be drawn more fully to enrich our understanding of modern notions related to personal and national selfhood.

I have thus far written, received feedback, and revised the dissertations’ first two chapters of the total main three chapters. The first chapter pursues subjectivity, free will, and individuation as definitive factors by Taylor that constructs the modern self as agential (*Sources* ix). Chapter one explores these concepts in Rumi and ‘Aṭṭār’s poetry as the peaks of Persian love mysticism throughout the inward and dynamic journey that actively constructs the self, *sulūk*. Following the argument of chapter one of the Persian mystic self to be agential and active, chapter two pursues the genealogy of the Persian mystic self and its transfigurations historically with regard to engagement and socio-political/communal influence. I am now starting my third main chapter, which seeks the formation of the Romantic sublime in a dialogue with British Orientalist scholarship of the Persian mystic self. This chapter studies the reconfigurations of the Persian mystic self when transferred to the British context and the Romantics’ dialogue with it when making the Romantic subject in the aesthetic of the sublime. Ultimately, a long conclusion targets making the Iranian modern self in the self-Orientalist early-twentieth century Iranian context and asserts the necessity of future studies in this domain. I plan to finish and defend my dissertation by the end of spring 2023.

The EOM Dissertation Completion Award will help ground my work in one main domain of the areas of my studies, i.e Iranian Studies, and connect with likeminded individuals, benefitting from their works. In return, I am confident that my project will contribute to a

multicultural view of our modern shared society in form of talks, articles, monographs, and creative productions in multiple areas of scholarship and art.

### Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso books, 2006.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press, 2003. Print.

Ahmad, Aijaz. "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 27, no. 30, 1992, pp. PE98–PE116. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4398691](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4398691). Accessed 22 June 2020.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2008. Print.

Clifford, James. "On Orientalism." *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England, 1988, pp. 255–276. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjf9x0h.14](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjf9x0h.14). Accessed 22 June 2020.

Mawlavī, Jalāl Aldīn Muḥammad (Rumi). *Kullīyāt-i Shams-i Tabrīzī*. Ed. by Niẓām Aldīn Nūrī. Tehran: Ābān Publication [Intishārāt-i Kitāb-i Ābān], 2009 [۱۳۸۸]. Print.

Porter, Dennis. "Orientalism and its Problems." *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf (1983): 150-161.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978. Print.

— — —. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print.

Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2004. Print.

— — —. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.

## CV

### *Academia*

#### Academic History:

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-PhD Candidate of Comparative Literature, Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Toronto (2020-current)

Dissertation title: “I AM NOT I: The Reconfigurations of the Persian Mystic Subject and Modern Selfhood”– Co-supervised by: Prof. Ann Komaromi and Prof. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, in collaboration with Prof. Daniel White as the third committee member.

-World Literature, Summer Program, Harvard University, Boston-US 2019

Focus: Translation Studies and World Literature, attended intensive seminars offered by Prof. Lawrence Venuti and Prof. Gisèle Sapiro.

-Master of Art in Humanities / Comparative Perspectives, Comparing Persian Sufi and English Romantic poetry on the matter of the Sublime, York University, Toronto-Canada 2016

Thesis: A Hegelian Approach to Rumi vs. A Kantian Approach to Wordsworth on the Matter of the Sublime – Supervisor: Prof. Ian Balfour, Reader: Prof. Susan Ingram

-A full year studies in English Romanticism, York University, Toronto-Canada 2013-14.

Written papers on: Keats' “Ode to a Nightingale” and Rumi and Keats (a comparative study).

-Master of Art in Teaching English, Tehran PNU – Iran 2011

Thesis: Using Mother Tongue to Enhance Noticing – Supervisor: Prof. Manouchehr Jafarigohar

-Bachelor of Art in English Literature, Iran 2004

## Research Interest and Experiences

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- Classical and modern Persian poetry
- Romanticism and Romantic Poetry
- Sufi thought/Persian Mysticism
- Orientalism
- Translation Studies
- Modern European thought and philosophy on theology and aesthetics
- The intersection of philosophy and the sublime aesthetics
- The Oriental sublime
- Poetry and/in visual/textual/auditory materials (the multimedia expression of poetry)
- Gender Studies (especially female/feminine poetic expression)

## Publications:

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- Vali-Zadeh, M. "Agency of the Self and the Uncertain Nature of the Beloved in Persian Love Mysticism: Earthly, Ethereal, Masculine, or Feminine?". *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam*, vol. 12, no. 1, May 2022, Available at: <http://jurnalfuf.uinsby.ac.id/index.php/teosofi/article/view/1868>
- Vali-Zadeh, Mahdiah. "The Aesthetic of Desire and the Feminine Path of Individuation: The Case of Forough Farrokhzad." *Anthropology of the Middle East* 16.2 (2021): 110-127. Available at: <https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/ame/16/2/ame160206.xml>
- “Timeless Joy: Rumi’s Poetry and the Praxis of the Transcendental” in *Timepieces*, University of Toronto: Forthcoming.
- “Multimedia, Agency, and Subjective Interiority: A Critique of Hegel’s Account of Rumi’s Oriental Sublime.” *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*: Forthcoming.
- “Dance of the World, Dance of the Words: Neoplatonism and Rumi’s Poetic Dance of Return”, *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition*: Submitted.

Papers in progress (being revised for submission):

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- Wordsworth: Recollection of the Sublime Movement in a Beautiful Manner. For submission to *Studies in Romanticism*.
- Uncertainty and the Art of Translation: A Case Analysis of the Intersemiotic between Persian Poetry, Persian Calligraphy, and their English Translations. For submission to *Iran Namag*
- “Bark’s Rumi: A Hermeneutic Approach”. For submission to Harvard *Journal of World Literature*.

Conference Invitations and Presentations:

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- “Subject’s Agency: A Synthesis of Microscopic and Macroscopic Approaches to Rumi’s *Qazals*”, 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Digital Humanities Conference at the University of Toronto, October 2021.
- “Earthly or Ethereal? The Beloved of Persian Classical Poetry”, Department of Asiatic Studies, University of British Columbia, May 2021.
- “Barks’ Rumi: A Hermeneutic Approach”, ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association), April 2021.
- “Dance of the World, Dance of the Words: Untranslatability and Rumi’s Poetic Dance of Return”, World Literature Program, Harvard University, July 2019.
- “Timeless Joy: Rumi’s Poetry and the Praxis of the Transcendental”, Centre for Comparative Literature’s 29th Annual Conference: Timepieces, March 2019.

Employment History:

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- Teaching Assistant at the University of Toronto, 2017-present.
- Grant writer, bibliographer, and website aesthetician at *Poetess Iranica*: an exceptional and current Encyclopedic project on the women poets of the Persianate world, University of Toronto, 2020-2021.
- Research Assistant at York University, 2015-16.
- Graduate Assistant at York University, 2015-2016.

### Language Skills:

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- Persian, multi-skills, native proficiency.
- English, multi-skills, native proficiency.
- Tabarī (a language of Northern Iran), native proficiency.
- French, multi-skills, intermediate proficiency.
- Classic Arabic, intermediate reading knowledge.

### Grants, Awards, and Scholarships:

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- University of Toronto internal funding for graduate students, \$112000, 2017-2022.
- University of Toronto, Linda Hutcheon Award, \$5000, 2017.
- York University internal funding for graduate students, \$18000, 2015-16.

## **Teaching English as a Second Language: Educational History and Experience**

### ***Education***

#### Certifications, and Memberships

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- TESL Ontario Association (Teaching English as a Second Language) / Internationally certified English instructors association 2012-present
- Master of Art in Teaching English, Tehran PNU – Iran 2011
- TTC (Teachers Training Courses) – Iran, Soroush Language School 2010

### Employment History:

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- English Instructor (both as private tutor and class instructor in Iran and Canada), 2003-present.
- ESL Instructor – Volunteer Position – at University Settlement, 2011-2012.

### ***Art***

#### Art Instructors:

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- Gholamhossein Nami and Fariborz Zarshenas (Painting) – Yadollah Kaboli and Mohammadreza



## Khosravi (Calligraphy)

### Art-Related Courses:

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- The Beautiful, the Sublime, and the Rest / York University 2015
- Retreating Aesthetics / University of Toronto 2017

### Film and Cinema

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- Co-director of the feature film, Un Étranger À Paris (A Stranger in Paris) 2020-21. Available at: <https://astrangerinparis.godaddysites.com>
- Director of the short film, Death 2021. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/542889271>
- Scenarist, director, and narrator of “Rumi and Tāvus: Rhythem and Romance” — an experimental musical documentary in the preproduction stage.

### Awards and Recognitions:

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- Runner up for “A Stranger in Paris” in the 2021 Zurich International Iranian Film Festival

### Exhibitions:

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- Solo Abstract Calligraphic Painting Exhibition, Art Square Gallery, Toronto/ON/Canada 2017.
- Solo Abstract Calligraphic Painting Exhibition, The House of Art and Culture, Toronto/ON/Canada 2013.
- Abstract Calligraphic Painting Exhibition, Seyhoun Gallery, Los Angeles/CA/US 2013.
- Solo Abstract Calligraphic Painting Exhibition, Zar Gallery, Amol/Iran 2010.
- Solo Calligraphy Exhibition, University of Culture and Art, Esfahan/Iran 2002.
- Group Exhibitions since 1999.

### Memberships and Certifications:

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- Iranian Canadian Visual Artists Association (ICVAA), 2016-present.

- Iranian Calligraphers Association, 1999-present.
- Certification of Excellence in Calligraphy from the Iranian Calligraphers Association, 1999.

#### Employment History:

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- Independent filmmaker, January 2020-present.
- Independent Visual Artist, 1999-present.
- Calligraphy instructor, The House of Culture, Amol – Iran, 1999-2001

#### Collaborations:

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- Illustrator and calligrapher of the Intro of *Dirafsh- Kāvīyānī*, a video musical album composed by Farid Elhami and performed by the renowned Iranian vocalist, Shahram Nazeri 2016.  
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tj6-nqPwq4&feature=youtu.be>
- Stage designer for the Salar Aghili and Hamnavazan Band concert in Toronto 2013. Available at: <https://www.mahvali.com/collaborative-works/>

#### Interviews – Broadcast:

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- Persian Mirror Media, Persian Mirror Online Broadcast, Interview with Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh, 2017. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7INtN24CDQ>
- Taak Pictures, Independent, Exhibition Report and Interview with Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh, 2017. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDJTKytBEFg>
- VOA Persian, Shabahang, Interview with Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh, 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IolcFJeKjiw&t=34s>
- Andisheh TV (ATV Broadcasts) International, Ziafat, Exhibition Report and Interview with Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh, 2013. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y\\_UCMJX1Ggc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_UCMJX1Ggc)
- “In Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh’s Seclusion”, Shahrvand - Canada (Weekly Magazine), 2017. Available at: <https://shahrvand.com/archives/90179>
- Bahar Daei's Interview with Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh, in Negarestan (Monthly Magazine), 2014.

- “The Interplay of Poetry and Paint”, Shahrvand - Canada (Weekly Magazine), 2013. Available at: <https://shahrvand.com/archives/42760>