



University of Toronto

Centre for Comparative Literature

Ann Komaromi

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Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies
Faculty of Arts & Science
University of Toronto

Dear Members of the Selection Committee,

I am writing to offer my enthusiastic support for Mahdieh Vali-Zadeh's application for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Dissertation Completion Award. Mahdieh's thesis, "I AM NOT I: The Reconfigurations of the Persian Mystic Subject and Modern Selfhood," undertakes a critical reassessment of the role of Persian mystical literature in modern thinking about selfhood and agency. This project aims to enrich our understanding of the relationships among modernity and its cultural and temporal others.

The starting point for Mahdieh's analysis is lyric poetry by Rumi and other Persian mystical poets. Mahdieh aims to trace the translation of concepts of the self from Persian mystical poetry to British Romantic poetry, on the one hand, and to modern Iranian discourse about nationhood and the literary tradition, on the other. This project promises to be ground-breaking. The field chosen by Mahdieh is one of significant current interest, as discussions of the recently published book by Reza Taher-Kermani on *The Persian Presence in Victorian Poetry* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020) show. However, Mahdieh has staked out her own distinctive approach: her critical perspective on the translation of Persian selfhood highlights the nuances of orientalism. As we know from the lively scholarly discussions that have taken place since Edward Said's groundbreaking book on the topic, works may involve counter-hegemonic tendencies that contradict their orientalizing effects. Moreover, applying this critique to new areas like Iranian discourse may reveal surprising instances of self-orientalism, as Mahdieh has discovered. The ambivalence of both cases points toward the possibility of more informed and productive discussions of the relationships between modernity and pre-modernity, and between east and west, as Mahdieh's work aims to show. Mahdieh casts her project within the larger discussion of "multiple modernities," an urgently needed shifting of our modern imagination called for by numerous theorists including Dipesh Chakrabarty and Charles Taylor. Mahdieh's project will contribute significantly to this discussion, expanding our notions of selfhood and agency for the sake of a broader sense of a varied and shared modernity.

Mahdieh has shown tremendous diligence and resilience in her work on the thesis project. She has also demonstrated great commitment to the field of Iranian Studies, having published articles on the poet Forough Farrokhzad and on the Agency of the Self and the Beloved in Persian Love Mysticism. "Despite some setbacks during the pandemic, Mahdieh has now submitted the revised versions of two chapters. She has more precisely formulated her approach and is on track to finish

her thesis in the coming months. The Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Dissertation Completion Award would be meaningful support that would help her bring to a successful conclusion her exciting thesis project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ann Komaromi', with a stylized, cursive script.

Ann Komaromi, PhD

Associate Professor and Associate Director, Centre for Comparative Literature and the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures