

Mentor's Introduction to Elham Hajesmaeili

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Many immigrants experience an identity crisis in the displacement from their lives in their home country to their new lives in a country foreign to them. Elham Hajesmaeili was born to a semi-traditional family in Tehran. I have learned through Elham's sharing of her own identity crisis and her interviews with Iranian women in the U.S. how the patriarchal environment of Iran is imprinted on their lives in which women are considered property of men. Further, with the U.S.-Iranian tensions and unrest escalated in 2020, harassment toward people of Iranian descent in the United States continues based on beliefs that equate people of Iranian descent with terrorism. Responding to the issue of immigration and migration, which is defining the 21st century with prolonged global flight on a massive scale, Elham's dissertation focuses on developing augmented reality portrait painting research methodology to convey the themes that emerged from dialogic interviews with Iranian women in the United States. Elham Hajesmaeili Nooghi's courageous and innovative dissertation study is emotionally gripping and inspiring.

In September 2022, devastated by the brutal death of a young woman in Iran, Mahsa Amini (her name became a call for freedom for the Iranian people from the violent Islamic Republic Regime), Elham turned to her creative power

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to bring Iranians and non-Iranians together in working toward women's equal rights. Through a performance conceptualized and choreographed by Elham, who also performed, viewers learned of the atrocities in Iran, particularly targeting women, and the collective power calling for *Women, Life, Freedom*. The call is for women's rights to make decisions about their bodies and lives and freedom to a life without fear and oppression.

The heroic action of grieving women at the gravesite of Mahsa Amini—chanting “jin, jivan, azadi” (Woman, Life, Freedom) as they took off and waved their head coverings—started a global revolution for women's rights to self-determination. It is from this September 2022 *Women, Life, Freedom* context that Elham's dissertation turned its explorative attention of augmented reality dialogic portrait painting as research inquiry methodology on Maryam's story of Iranian diaspora organizing global protests. Maryam's story is one of the four narratives critical to her development of an arts-based research methodology, the overarching focus of her dissertation.

Elham analyzed the dialogic data from four participants through the process of painting portraits of the women in a way that conveys their stories but not their identities. She layers the paintings with augmented reality animations that include viscerally impactful sounds and audio excerpts from her conversational interviews with Iranian women in the United States. Her research analysis considers how the Iranian women's upbringing might exacerbate the difficulties encountered in the inequitable power dynamics many Iranian women face in the United States. Further, her study focuses on painting and augmented reality as an inquiry process, which provide insights through a layered qualitative analysis. The form of the data, analysis, and presentation are visual, interactive, and dynamic, which offers visceral entry into lived experiences that have been self-censored and socially unacknowledged.

As a key aspect of her dissertation, Elham created a website at <https://hajesmaeilhelham.wixsite.com/mysite> as data visualization of her research about arts-based methodology. On the website, alongside each painting, is a video of augmented reality audio and animations layered on the canvases of portraits that Elham painted with acrylic paints. The website is intended as a platform for Iranian immigrant women to speak their truth to power. The augmented reality dialogic portrait paintings provide depth of insight into the Iranian women's complicated challenges and their strength to persevere for equity and justice.