

Narrating Self, Depicting the Other: Self-Realisation and Trauma, Belonging and Diaspora in the Works of Shamsia Hassani and Keyvan Shovir

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Abstract

The American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler believes that 'our capacity to reflect upon ourselves, to tell the truth about ourselves, is correspondingly limited by what the discourse, the regime, cannot allow into speakability' (Giving an Account of Oneself). This review analyses how Shamissa Hassani (b.1988), the first female graffiti artist of Afghanistan, and Keyvan Shovir (b. 1985), the first postrevolutionary graffiti artist of Iran, manifest Butler's view of giving an account of one self. I argue that Hassani and Shovir have used their arts as a means of speakability and self-reflection in the restricted discourses of their home countries. I conclude that art manifests the possibility of self-revelation and reclaiming one's voice beyond the restricted social discourses or diaspora.

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Introduction

According to Judith Butler, 'Our capacity upon ourselves, to tell the truth about ourselves, is correspondingly limited by what the discourse, the regime, cannot allow into speakability' (Butler 2005, p. 132). Extending Butler's views, in this essay I analyse how Shamsia Hassani (b. 1988), one of the female pioneers of graffiti in Afghanistan, and Keyvan Shovir (b. 1985), one of the pioneers of graffiti in Iran, use their artworks as means of self-revelation.

I argue that by narrating their lives in a pictorial form of dialogue, each artist steps beyond repression and trauma and affirm their agency. One of the reasons for selecting a male Iranian graffiti artist instead of a female one was to challenge many gender assumptions; there is no shortage of female graffiti artists. My aim is to survey how each artist envisioned a liberated self, regardless of gender and to analyse how patriarchy and restrictions affect the artists.

To better understand the role and impact of dialogue in a pictorial form and the impact of trauma, alongside the work of Butler, I employ the theories of the Dutch psychologist Hubert Hermans (b. 1937)—namely, his theory of the Dialogical Self. A basic assumption of that theory is that the self consists of a multiplicity of positions and each of these aspects maintains a voice. However, when the person is immersed in one position, or when one aspect is suppressed, the self is unbalanced and fragmented. In this case, first I argue that the fragmented self is the result of internalising sociocultural restrictions and that, by finding a new voice through the sense of agency and accountability gained by creating their art, the artists developed a liberated voice and inner harmony.

Introducing the Artists

Born in April 1988 in Tehran to Afghan parents who lived in Iran at the time, Hassani's family moved back to Kabul in 2005. She holds a BA degree in painting and an MA in visual arts from Kabul University, Afghanistan. Inspired by the British graffiti artist Chu (b. 1971), who held a workshop in Kabul in 2010, Hassani pursued graffiti as her main medium and became the first female graffiti artist in Afghanistan. As an associate Professor of drawing and anatomy drawing, at Kabul University she also gave lectures at her university on fine arts.

Hassani argues that ‘image has more effect than words, and it’s a friendly way to fight.’ In 2013 Hassani initiated the first Graffiti Art Festival in Kabul. Hassani’s graffiti works have been showcased around the world and received various awards. Her last murals abroad were created in Wide Open Walls of Sacramento and for Eugene’s mural project in Oregon. As an Afghan immigrant, Shamsia Hassani spent her teenage years in Tehran. Due to the limited rights of Afghan immigrants in Iran during that period, she was deprived of the right even to attend art classes. Despite being far from the traumas of the war in Kabul, like many other immigrants, Hassani faced a new set of challenges. She was socially marginalised in Iranian society and faced a society that was highly patriarchal and retained its own restrictive sociocultural discourse and infrastructure against migrants, women, and artists. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 Hassani returned to Afghanistan. Hassani and her parents belong to a generation that witnessed the inexorable upheavals inside Afghanistan, during the first Taliban rule of 1997–2001, followed by the reality of being foreign refugees abroad. Despite the ravages of continued bombing and public harassment by men on Kabul’s streets, Hassani’s distinct graffiti testifies to a fearless dedication to Afghan women who kept silent for decades.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Hassani says, ‘I am from Afghanistan, a country famous for war. Let’s change the topic, let’s bring peace with art’ (2019). For Hassani, art is a medium of imagination and also a reflection of her desired self, both as an individual and as a member of a collective. Primarily, Hassani’s words manifest her belief in the need to adopt a reconstructive approach toward restrictive regimes. Hassani not only stands against destruction but also seeks remedies for its traumatic effects. For Hassani, art is the means of reclaiming one’s voice.

Keyvan Shovir (b. 1985) is an Iranian-American multi-disciplinary artist and muralist. He was born in Tabriz, Iran, and is currently based in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. Shovir received his BA in painting from

Azad Tabriz University in Tabriz, Iran, and his MFA from California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2018. He has received many awards, including the Art of Peace Award from the obby Poblete Foundation, and Creative Activism awards from Culture of Resistance. He has exhibited nationally and internationally at numerous venues, including Seyhoun Gallery in Tehran, Crewest Gallery in Los Angeles, the i.d.e.a. Museum of Mesa, Arizona, SOMArts Culture Center, and Minnesota Street Project in San Francisco.

Once they moved to diaspora communities in the United States, both artists found the opportunity to work without censorship and restrictions. Hassani and Shovir have each tried to highlight the significance of art for depicting the traumas caused by restrictions, realising a liberated voice for themselves and crafting an emancipating identity for their generations. Although both worked and produced artworks in their respective countries, the majority of their works were produced in the United States and not shown in their home countries. Shovir and Hassani's artworks are entwined with their cultural roots and the barriers that have affected their neighbouring countries, Iran and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, by taking art as a hybrid medium and a universal message, both artists have been able to step beyond their geographical borders.

Graffiti breaks free from norms and remains a non-conformative style, especially in that Middle East. This is one of the many reasons why Hassani chooses to work in this style of art, which allows her to rebel both in form and content and to challenge restrictions through this style of art. For the artist, graffiti thus stands as the means reach beyond the brutality of the reality in which they and their compatriots exist and move towards an ideal imagery. Shovir and Hassani have each used public buildings and mural graffiti instead of canvases or the polished walls of galleries to

engage and encourage their viewers in their daily lives. Graffiti thus becomes a public platform to assert the gravity of the situation imposed on the young generation of Iranian and Afghans striving for liberty.

Shamsia Hassani



Figure 1: Shamsia Hassani at work. (Photo courtesy of the artist)

Inspired by a workshop hosted by Chu, a graffiti artist from the United Kingdom, Hassani began to practice street art on walls in the streets of Kabul in 2010. One of Hassani's murals in Kabul's Cultural Centre depicts a burqa-clad woman seated below a stairway with an inscription, 'The water can come back to a dried-up river, but what about the fish that died?' In 2013, she told *Art Radar*, 'I want to make Afghanistan famous for its art, not its war.' As her art proclaims, despite their hardships, the women she depicts carry a hopeful spirit. Hassani still believes in the possibility of a liberated life for Afghan women and in creating a new identity rather than continuing to see themselves as victims of the war.

By taking this stance in her art, Hassani depicts what Hermans defines as the '*I position*,¹ expressing her emotions and concerns. The artist can then engage with viewers of her work who are not familiar with the reality of Afghan women's lives. As a pictorial form of dialogue, the artwork permits the artist to step outside of the suppressed zone of trauma and to liberate herself. This approach further correlates with Hassani's wish to depict her country and culture as more than just victims of wars. As an artist in the diaspora, Hassani's symbolic works reveal her wish to create a new sense of belonging and peaceful life.

Inspired by her passion for music and graffiti, activities that remained banned for Afghan women during the Taliban takeover in 1997–2001, Hassani's works touch upon women's daily struggles from a new perspective. Through highlighting the extreme brutality against women and indicating the decline of women's fundamental rights to determine their own image and voice, Hassani's works affirm the possibility of self-expression and the ability of the arts to surpass such restrictions. However, Hassani's women are not just victims, nor are they nearly broken. Despite the bitterness of the events portrayed by the young artist, the simplicity of her art instantly speaks to the viewer's heart. Hassani's graffiti still shows the innocence and strengths of the young generation of Afghan women, while the tragedy of their lives rests in the corners of the works. Her palette guides the viewer's emotions, as each colour indicates a certain sentiment. By highlighting the contradictory sentiments, each work reveals the ambiguities faced by Afghan women. Their figures are mostly dressed in light turquoise blue, reminding the viewer of the burqa, the obligatory covering of Afghan women. However, the body of the woman and her dress are drawn transparently, indicating clarity. As a result, the women's

¹ Hermans argues that 'When the person does not experience any space beyond the limiting emotion, leaving the emotion is not possible, consequently, a dialogue between the emotions cannot evolve.'

visages or bodies are revealed, and the light blue seems clear and bright. It should be highlighted that the women are not exposed. Still, the images convey a sense of looking through them.

Another characteristic of Hassani's art, as shall be seen below, is the thematic visual reference to the role and importance of music: her figures mostly hold an instrument, or their images are entwined with musical notes. Whether depicted in partial or deformed shapes, musical instruments and the music they make empower the women in her art, even though playing an instrument and singing are prohibited activities for women in Afghanistan.²

In the first section of this article, I argued that by drawing inspiration from her life, Hassani manifests Butler's ideology that 'in the making of the story, I create myself in a new form, instituting a narrative, the "I" superadded to the "I" whose past life I seek to tell' (Butler 2005, 50). By declaring and externalising all the traumas and restrictions imposed on women, and later by reconstructing them and revising the image and identity of the woman, not only does Hassani confront restriction, and transcend trauma, she also crafts a new account for herself.

Working in exile, Hassani includes symbols in her art that refer to her past as well as her current state. One of these symbols is the chain of

² It should be noted that more than four decades after the Iranian Revolution, in a country that was known for its remarkable divas, Iranian women are still not allowed to sing, solo or with others, or to play an instrument in public. The only exceptions are for women who play in an orchestra or sing as backup musicians along with male singers or in a chorus. Only for an entirely female audience are women permitted to sing solo. Courageous women broke those rules in 2022 during the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, and the battle with the authorities over such issues continues to this day.

dandelions that often appears in her works. The dandelions suggest a sense of transition, an ongoing trajectory, losing one's roots, diaspora, homesickness and uncertainties, as well as transforming one's emotions and thoughts into a new form. Additionally, the dandelion is universally regarded as a token of hope and dreams, in Farsi (Persian) and Frasi-Dari the word means, *ghasedak* or a 'little messenger.' Hence, we could argue that Hassani is portraying her hopes and feelings for her homeland, while each work encodes a message for the viewer. Along with the feminine figure, the dandelions in her works remain their most fragile embellishment.

The dandelion is a fragile yet resilient flower. Despite its vulnerable structure, the dandelion is known in the botanical field for its deep and strong roots. The same thing is true of immigrants and artists in exile who still hope to grow roots in their new homeland. Hassani's women are surrounded by a flux of small dandelions that accompany them through their transparent bodies and across their works. They highlight the never-ending transition of diaspora and the artist's quest and hope for liberty. Like her dandelions, I would argue that Hassani's women are elegant yet resilient social agents in transition. For Afghan women, however, hope for an social equality remains far-fetched. Thus the dandelions might also represent the artist's secret message to her peers back home, encouraging them to remain resilient, while she is striving to find her roots in the new homeland and reflect their voices.

In many of Hassani's works, the setting is sombre, but the amount of destruction is not evident. In her art, fantasy becomes a sanctuary for Afghan women, similar to Butler's point in *Undoing Gender*, when she says, 'Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality (Butler 2004b, 28). Whether

through the background of bombed walls or red splashed pigments symbolising the blood of innocent people, each of her compositions manifests the sheer agony and the catastrophes the artist has witnessed. Yet, the colour palette of her designs seems uplifting and light rather than pessimistic or dismal, and in this way the colours counterbalance the reality. Hassani's women are depicted in a tranquil manner. They are neither agitated nor desperate. Their facial expressions are always minimalistic, perhaps because Middle Eastern women are taught to hide their emotions and are denied the liberty to protest or express them fully. In Hassani's works, the eyes of a woman are always closed, as in figure 1, yet her abundant black eyelashes—characteristic of young Afghan girls—and rosy cheeks, resonate with hope and present a rather juvenile charm in contrast to the grey soldiers, tanks, and traces of blood. Here the art is the source and vessel of life empowering the woman to confront trauma and restrictions. As a coping mechanism, closed eyes would resemble the act of self-reflection and meditation. Therefore, it is through fantasy that both the artist and the women she depicts are delving into a new and safe dimension.

In many of her works, the traces of music bring solace to the woman. We never see her lips. They are sealed, but she is not silent; music, like blood, runs through the figure's body. As a result, the women's urge for liberty and their suppressed feminine energy seek a new means of expression. By eliminating the lips and the direct gaze, as the primary means of expression, Hassani highlights how Afghan women are still fighting to retrieve their rights. Just as the transparency of the women's fabric in her art exposes their vulnerability, Hassani empowers women with the musical instrument and the pigments that surround the woman. Yet, it is still through their vulnerability that women prove to be the warriors of their society.



Figure 2



Figure 3

In figure 2 the heart is cracked, while the only shield she has against the brutality of an army, depicted in sombre charcoal behind her, is her keyboard. In figure 1 the heartbeat itself is within the musical staff, keeping the figurine calm and serene, while her collarbones are embellished with a necklace with the word *Azadi* (freedom) in Persian/Dari. Notably, in most of her works, armed men are depicted in grey or black and without any concrete facial expressions, signifying a sense of brutality, trauma, and terror. But the women appear as individuals. In contrast to the tragic ambience of war and destruction, it is the woman who embodies the source of life and colour.

The artist manages to break the boundaries, to reconstruct the sociocultural norms and to depict both her trauma and her dreams at the same time. A review of Hassani's work in the *Los Angeles Times* points out

that her aim is to rearticulate the destruction that has dominated her nation with the beauty of art. The reviewer remarks, 'Part of her mission, is to beautify the city with colour amid the darkness of war' (Vankin 2022), which also explains why the armed men in her art are always grey, and the woman and the music are the sources of life and colour.

The very nature of street art and graffiti is to rebel against norms, while its platform as a part of public space gives the artist a chance to correlate her vision with the viewers' day-to-day activities. By using public space, the artist is also urging her viewers to reflect on the social injustice imposed on them and to externalise the fears and traumas that have been embedded in them both in the private and public spheres. The simplicity of Hassani's works instantly speaks to the viewers and confronts them with the gravity of women's situation. Hassani's mural art stands as the her attempt to express the unspeakable through a public medium.



Figure 4

As discussed earlier, a basic assumption of the Dialogical Self theory of Hubert Hermans is that the self consists of a multiplicity of positions. However, when the person is immersed in one position, or when she is not able to leave it, this position can be experienced as an 'I-prison.' When the person feels imprisoned in only one emotion, the notion of space becomes particularly important. This space is necessary for exploring what is going

on between the emotion and other parts of the self (Hermans 2010, 306). Through her art and her choice of a public and rather controversial form of art, Hassani is manifesting the externalisation of the suppressed self, liberating the 'I' from what Hermans regards as the 'I prison.' In figure 3, the girl is running away from the judgmental eyes that appear to be hunting her, but the figure is at peace. She is fleeing, yet her movements reflect a flow (ironically, the direction is toward the west side of the canvas). Her closed eyes indicate she is no longer affected by this inevitably plural gaze, while the composition and place of the woman in the corner highlight both the degree and influence of this intrusive gaze as well as the necessity of avoiding it. She is in motion and taking action. One can say the feminine is relying on herself, in a moment when the system of punishment or justice also loses its value. Her closed eyes indicate her superior stand and counterbalance the multiple gazes on her. Accordingly, she is her own saviour from patriarchy, dogma, and other social norms imposed on her. She ignores their validations. It is the artist who is accountable. Confronted with war and diaspora, each of her collections corresponds to the artist's experiences as an immigrant and a woman who is looking for her identity and a sense of community.

Hermans points to a close and intrinsic connection between emotions and movements, as expressed by their etymological connection. The English word *emotion* is based on the Latin *emovere*, where *e-*, a variant of *ex*, means 'out,' and *movere* means 'to move.' In this sense, the bond between emotion and movement lies in the form of bodily movements. For example, joy broadens the experienced space and induces the body to make upward movements (e.g., jumping playfully). Anxiety is related to the Latin word *angustus* which means 'narrow,' and in a wider sense is oppressive (Hermans 2010, 266). Thus, by crafting a new set of surreal settings, not only does Hassani manifest Herman's shifts in emotions, she also extends Butler's first-person perspective and affirms that 'Fantasy is

what allows us to imagine ourselves and others; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home' (Butler 2004, 30). In this light, as a Dialogical Self, it is through art that the artist is embracing and extending her emotions and giving a new account of herself.



Figure 5

Hassani's women are confronting the armed men, by offering them a dandelion, as in figure 4, or having their backs to them, as in figure 2. In doing this, they express their strength. Despite trauma or fear, by narrating the events of women's lives and summarising them in symbols, Hassani is binding herself to this narrative. Notably, it is the woman who is also the source of light while the army is depicted in dark, faded shades. She is not neglecting or avoiding the hardships, or the very presence of the armed men. Instead, by holding to her keyboard or dandelion, she aims to heal the ulcers that are depicted through her broken heart. In figure 5 the woman is rising above the blood, tanks, and war itself, seeking the sky. She is the bold and graceful ballerina who perseveres through the tragedy and the serenity of life.



Figure 6

Keyvan Shovir

Shovir's passion for the arts started when he was ten years old and participated in a school painting contest in Tehran. He was the only student who drew an airplane and a dinosaur along with the flower model in front of him. These elements revealed the impact of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) on his psyche, along with the power of children's imagination and their ability to express their feelings through the arts. Considering that, as a small child, Shovir had witnessed the bombings of the war, the airplane and the dinosaur signify at first the passions of a little boy. However, the combination of the two also suggests a sense of fear, especially since neither of these elements were in the model in front of him, but emerged from his thoughts. The flower stands as the tenderness of nature in contrast to the two aggressive, external elements. Initially, while completing his classical art training in Iran, Shovir believed that a good artist should portray reality. But the trauma he had experienced as a child moved him to challenge the rigidity of his classical training in order to work through his traumas and retrieve peace.

Shovir came to San Francisco in 2011 to pursue his interest and education in the arts and enrolled in an MFA program at California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco. After residing for a decade in the Bay Area, Shovir felt that ‘the term diaspora itself has changed in my view.’ Soon he began to merge his traditional background in the art of Iranian patterns with Western styles. Shovir says, ‘Now, I think of home in a more complicated way—it is as a landscape of cultures, languages, and arts.’ For Shovir, diaspora is a much larger concept than what he originally understood it to be. ‘It’s far more diverse, and not just a matter of Iranians who undergo this journey of moving from one country to another.’

While in the United States, an aviation display over the Bay Area made Shovir realise how deeply the Iran-Iraq war had traumatised him. He remarks, ‘I felt immediate terror and remembered the deep fear I had during the bombings of Tehran in the war’. Similar to Hassani’s depictions of blood and tanks that appear in many of her works, Shovir used images from his memories as a source of inspiration to overcome this trauma. Shovir’s *Ascension Series* (2017), a sculptural installation of warplanes and drones adorned with an Iranian flag, Islamic patterns, and calligraphy, reflects the complex and paradoxical history of each of these symbols and how the young artist aims to change the dynamics of his memories of the war through them. Notably, Shovir’s works allow us to unpack both gender and class categories and to see the various kinds of social formations and power relations that constitute those categories.

Inspired by the liberty and rebellious essence he found in the street art of Tehran, Shovir decided to take his cultural heritage and bring a modern spirit to the classical form of Persian miniature and painting art. Aside from developing his art, in his teenage years in Tehran, Shovir took up skateboarding as a way of exploring the metropolis and gathering with

friends to talk about sociocultural issues. But because the sport was never supported or established in Iran, the essence of the gatherings became a rebellious quest for liberation. He refers to that period in his life as a kind of 'diaspora itself—in terms of personal interest and feeling alienated and out-of-place', along with the others of his generation who grew up during the eight years of the Iran-Iraq War (Hosseinioun 2021). Shovir's sense of being out of place or living in diaspora even when residing at home correlates with Butler's sense that 'when we are dispossessed from a place or a community, we may simply feel that we are undergoing something temporary' (Butler 2004a, 42). Is this Butler 2004a or b?

Fascinated by Persian calligraphy, and admiring the boldness and spontaneity of graffiti, Shovir merges the two styles to craft a new voice. Like Hassani, Shovir worked on his murals in Tehran incognito and tried to finish them as swiftly as possible. As he says, 'My only materials were markers and a minimal amount of time to create; you never have the support or the occasion to relax. You are engaged in a kind of guerrilla art project' (Hosseinioun 2021). Unlike Hassani, however, who had to cope with the restrictions and the dogma imposed on women, as well as the ongoing civil war in Kabul, Shovir was a male artist in the dominant patriarchal setting of Iran. He had much more freedom and a greater sense of mobility. In contrast to Kabul, Tehran in the 1990s was a safe place, and Shovir did not have to deal with war or bombings as Hassani did.

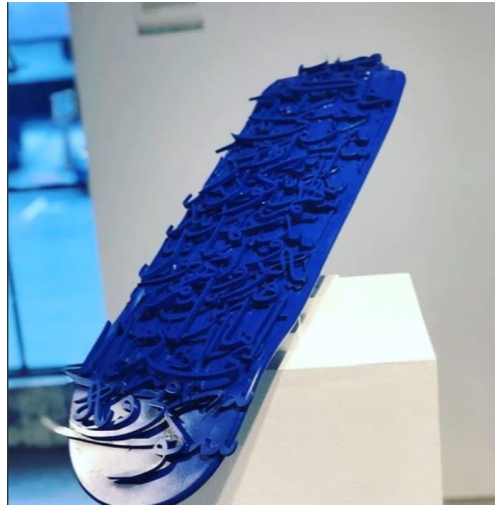


Figure 7

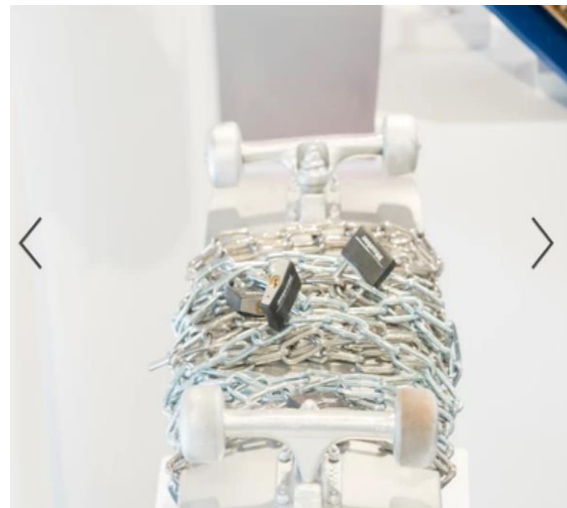


Figure 8

In his 2009 *Messenger* collection, Shovir uses laser-cut acrylic skateboards as a kind of oracle suggesting the emerging social transitions that were part of his generation in Iran and in diaspora. By engraving laser-cut lines from Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi's poetry on the back of his azure skateboards (figure 6), Shovir creates a new context for classical Persian poesy and the colour azure, which is also known as Persian blue. By using a skateboard to symbolise the 'uninhibited and daring energy of youth' (Hosseinioun 2021). Shovir's art manifests a tangible platform for navigating his trajectory in diaspora. As the images of music and instruments empower Hassani, it is poetry that empowers Shovir. He notes

that ‘the imprinted poetry on the skateboard empowers the rider to overcome feelings of alienation and to move from tradition into modernity’ (Hosseinioun 2021). In Hassani’s art, the shift from tradition to modernity as part of a woman’s journey is also a dominant motif. However, this transition is only evident in her later works, which were created in diaspora. Hassani’s primary works focus on the missing sense of safety, freedom of speech, and women’s rights.

When a person feels imprisoned in only one emotion, the notion of space becomes particularly important, and also necessary for exploring what is going on in different aspects and parts of the self. In contrast to Shovir’s reliance on a sense of motion and transition, the static state of Hassani’s figures resonates with Hermans’ “I-prison” state of the self and the state of Afghan women, surrounded by uncertainties. Following this line of thinking, the artworks embody the artists’ attempts to step outside of the external restrictions and the internal, limited self. Notably, the experience of transition and the transmission of energy initiated by the individual are featured in the work of both artists. However, in Shovir's work, the energy moves outward, while in Hassani’s works, it remains inward, which correlates with the different degrees of liberty and self-expression experienced by the men and women of each culture. While both Iran and Afghanistan are essentially patriarchal, we could argue that the enormously oppressive dogmas of the Taliban regarding Afghan women make the outward transition much harder for the subjects of Hassani’s art.



Figure 9

Remarkably, both artists worked on collections inspired by birds and the mythological narratives that deal with moving away from one's home and with undertaking an inner journey. These are common motifs among artists of their generation, who have witnessed wars and have had to choose self-exile in order to follow their dreams. Inspired by *The Conference of the Birds* of Farid al-Din Attar of Nishapur (1146–1221), Shovir provides a new interpretation of the mythological story at the centre of that tale, which describes the journey of hundreds of birds who travel together to an unknown destination in order to find their sovereign. The hoopoe, the wisest of them all, suggests that their sovereign would be a legendary bird called Simorgh. Si-Morgh is the mighty and immortal bird of knowledge in Persian literature and language. The words *si* (thirty) and *morgh* (bird) also mean 'thirty birds.' In this philosophical poem, each bird represents a human flaw that prevents humans from attaining enlightenment and peace. The journey takes the birds through the Valley of the Quest, the Valley of Love, the Valley of Knowledge, the Valley of Detachment, the Valley of Unity, the Valley of Wonderment, and the Valley of Poverty and Annihilation, where the self disappears into the universe. In the end, when the birds look around, they see that only thirty of them have survived. They thereby understand that they themselves,

after this arduous journey, have become the Si-morgh, which now represents unity and harmony.

Notably, this journey and the self-realisation at its conclusion also frame the artistic trajectory of Shovir and Hassani. Shovir's *Simurgh* installation (figure 9) is comprised of thirty birdhouses in a spiral form, each one producing an individual bird sound. The installation thus signifies individualism as well as the plurality and the polyvocality of the collective voices. In Hassani's works, however, though her women have no lips, and the focus is on Afghan women, music represents this universality of voices. In her collection titled *Birds of No Nation* (2015), Hassani focuses on the scattered state of young Afghans around the world, striving to find and craft a new home for themselves.

Shovir's 2022 collection is entitled *Gol-o Morgh* (Flower and Bird). It is based on flowers and birds, a common motif in traditional Persian paintings. Here again, Shovir refers his viewers to Attar's *Simurgh*. Yet, each bird is embellished with Persian miniature, one that represents the new generation of Iranians in diaspora, individuals who still carry part of their cultural heritage. In Attar's saga, each bird represents certain virtues or vices of individuals through self-revelation. Likewise, Shovir's collection represents the plurality behind individual voices.



Figure 10: Acrylic and spray paint on canvas 30 × 40 inches

As Shovir notes ‘Attar’s poem is a mirror to see parts of ourselves and others. And Flying is a metaphor for walking on a spiritual path’ (Shovir-Hosseinioun 2022). Notably, for Shovir, diaspora is a transition that still carries traces of one’s cultural heritage. However, for Hassani, diaspora represents a new platform from which to delve into womanhood and let the neglected voices of the women of her country be heard.

In Hassani’s later series, the women are shown observing cities from the western rooftops, drawn with icy blue or gloomy shades. Their dresses are florescent yellow, indicating a sense of being alarmed or perhaps marked as outcasts. The yellow of the gowns is nothing like the warm, sunny, golden glow of the Middle Eastern sun; instead, it is fluorescent. In figure 11, the woman’s partial hair scarf shows the stars of the galaxy, suggesting the universality of her thoughts, which surpass all chronological frames. Here again, the woman is semi-covered, which perhaps indicates the artist’s view of restrictions imposed on women. In the iconic work of figure 10, the woman holds on to her keyboard and has broken through the wall, stepping into a new realm, toward the Lady Liberty herself. Here her art

manifests the ultimate sense of transition and diaspora for the artist. Additionally, for a mural graffiti artist, the act of stepping through the wall may indicate a new chapter and phase in Hassani's artistic career. We can see this better when we consider that the United States has been one of the pioneers and ultimate realms for this style of graffiti art.



Figure 11

The *Birds of No Nation* collection also shows Hassani's state of mind after this transition. In figure 10, the woman takes refuge in the overwhelmingly tall American skyscrapers, holding onto her keyboard. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Hassani explains:

I call my latest body of work Birds of No Nation. People in my country are all the time travelling somewhere to stay safe and find a peaceful life. And we are missing a lot of our friends and family who have left the country. Usually, birds are travelling all the time; they have no nation. And I thought maybe also we have no nation because everybody has moved to different countries. It doesn't matter what country that is;

the thing that is important is just feeling safe, and staying alive. Through Art — I can tell that story.

The lack of destructive elements in this work, in comparison to her previous ones, indicates a feeling of safety. Nevertheless, in this series the figure is still the solo outcast, observing from a distance, and is relying upon herself. As in Shovir's approach, the artist herself is the source of energy, and her art transmits a sense of rebellion. Whether by transforming trauma into musical melodies, or fragmented instruments, or skateboards rooted in poesy and cultural heritage, both artists turn to art to craft a sanctuary for themselves, to heal and to liberate. At the same time, as collections of symbolic images, their art also reflects the voices of their generation.

Shovir and Hassani adopt distinct approaches and styles, embedded in their home cultures. But they also extend cultural or regional binaries by adopting universal motives, such as poetry and music, and entwine them into modern approaches. As much as both artists take their personal experiences as sources of inspiration, they aim to criticise the decline of freedom for both men and women and provide the viewer with a detailed overview of the situations they have faced. Consequently, each of their collections stands as a pictorial self-narrative. Extending this view of self-identity and self-narratives, Shovir and Hassani highlight the importance of having the liberty to express themselves. Most importantly, however, they manifest the plausibility of liberating the suppressed or traumatised self through the arts, as their creative approaches lead to a new sense of accountability and voice for the self, a vision that encompasses the peace and liberation of the individual.

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project at Utrecht University, Hosseinioun has adopted several interdisciplinary narratives, to analyse the works of Persian female artists from 1960 to 2020. She draws from Gender Studies theories in French Psychoanalysis, the works of Judith Butler, Helene Cixous, and modern Russian literary philosophy, mainly Michael Bakhtin. She attempts to decipher artworks as pictorial dialogues and in the process hopes to surpass the sociocultural norms imposed on women. Hosseinioun aims to show the universality of the feminine in arts of contemporary female artists of the MENA region in the diaspora.

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