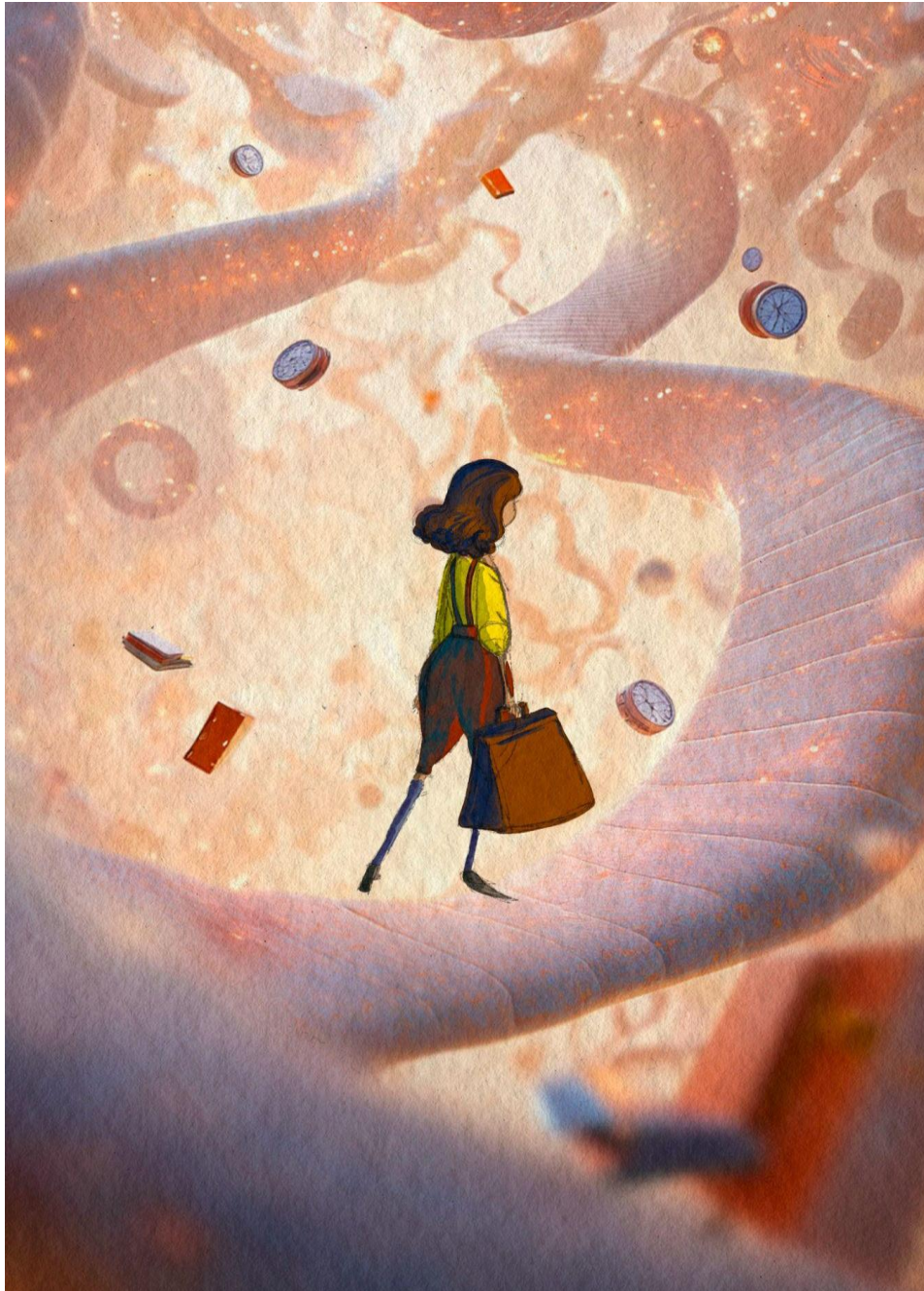


The Illuminated Traveller: A Methodological framework



Authors' names

Zohreh K.M.Shirazi & Tatiana Tavares

Abstract:

The *Illuminated Traveller* is a practice-oriented project that employs Artificial Intelligence (AI)-driven visual storytelling to explore concepts of Iranian mystical wisdom. The central narrative follows Mana, a young woman seeking a sense of belonging. Throughout her journey, she encounters Farhang, a magical figure who guides her through the intricate layers of Iranian culture, provoking deep inner conflict and reflection as she negotiates her place within it. In this article, we will outline the methodological aspects that inform this work. Grounded in Suhrawardi's Illuminationism and Sufi philosophies, the project bridges ancient cultural archetypes with contemporary technological narratives.

Methodologically, the research employs self-search techniques, combining personal experience with cultural reflection, while using AI to reimagine Persian mystical traditions in the digital age. The philosophical foundation draws parallels between heuristic research and Illuminationist philosophy, synthesising intuitive knowledge with rational inquiry. The iterative development process, guided by artistic intuition, informs the creation of an authentic cultural narrative. Ultimately, this research seeks to reimagine Persian mystical traditions, resonating with contemporary audiences while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Keywords:

Artistic Research, Illuminationism, Heuristic Inquiry, Practice-oriented, AI Storytelling.

Research Questions:

How might an Iranian storyteller develop a contemporary framework to engage the audience with ancient mystical wisdom and spirituality using immersive and captivating visual narratives?

Heuristic Inquiry and Sufi Approaches to Journey as Methodology

The Illuminated Traveller is a practice-led project concerned with the potentials of AI-powered imagery to create a culturally aligned narrative. The work comprises a practical component that engages in a dialogue between contextual ideas and practice, with a progressive alignment that results in a dynamic and multi-layered research design. As Borgdorff (2012) notes, artistic research operates at the intersection of theory and practice, providing fertile ground for new knowledge to emerge. As Barrett and Bolt (2010) explain, artistic inquiry is not merely an adjunct to theoretical research but a vital way of engaging with the world, particularly when exploring transdisciplinary fields.

In *The Illuminated Traveller*, artistic research served as an introspective journey in which I, as the researcher, reflected on the world of the narrative. In the initial stages, the storyline appeared as a vague concept, just beyond my grasp. I engaged in deep reflection on my personal experiences, particularly my journey from my homeland to Aotearoa, envisioning an illuminated traveller in search of growth.

During these introspective journeys, I not only rekindled my cultural identity but also connected profoundly with the ancient narratives I encountered during my upbringing. Over time, my belief in the potential of these narratives expanded into a desire to use digital means to inspire and engage contemporary audiences. To visualise these worlds, I began employing AI as a supportive tool to retell and preserve my insights into Persian mystical traditions.

As Giuliano (2020, para. 3) notes, AI emerged as a means of identifying parallels between mythical language and the “lore surrounding AI research.” He argues that the early developments of AI reflected both ancient and modern narratives, highlighting the deep-seated human motivations underpinning these systems. While artificial intelligence is a relatively new medium, it provides a framework for generating imaginative and complex visual content. In utilising AI to create illustrations for this project, I aimed to integrate personal interests with the process of 'myth-making' (Artamonov et al., 2021). Through this approach, I sought to critically engage with, adapt, and reinterpret the generated imagery, facilitating a deeper exploration of narrative construction and creative critique.

To cultivate a high level of personal reflection and cultural sensitivity in my work, I sought foundations rooted in Persian teachings, particularly the Suhrawardi Illuminationist and Sufi philosophies. The Illuminationist framework emphasises synthesising intuitive knowledge with rational inquiry, harmonising classical philosophy with mystical thought (Najafi, 2022; Ziai, 1990). Moreover, the Sufi concept of spiritual refinement underscores the importance of inner persistence through trials and errors. As Rumi expressed, “silence the voices within yourself; the mysteries may be revealed,” which highlights the significance of inner silence and reflection as pathways to uncover deeper truths.

As I delved deeper into these teachings, I discovered parallels between these philosophical approaches and heuristic inquiry and the pursuit of inner clarity. This heuristic process, which encompasses phases of immersion, introspection, and illumination, mirrors the inner journey of growth central to Persian mystical traditions.

Heuristic research, as articulated by Clark Moustakas (1990), is inherently personal, reflective, and exploratory, characterised by high levels of originality and discovery. A fundamental

aspect of this approach is its emphasis on tacit knowledge—an understanding that cannot be easily articulated or quantified but is instead felt or experienced. Polanyi (1966) captures this notion, asserting that “we can know more than we can tell” (p. 4).

In developing the narrative, I reconnected with my Iranian culture, sourcing knowledge both culturally and professionally through embodied wisdom and experience. During the process of notation, fragments of the story began to emerge, in what Moustakas refers to as ‘indwelling,’ a state in which the question becomes absorbed into the researcher’s being, facilitating a “dialogue with the phenomenon, [that] speaks directly to one’s own experience” (1985, p. 47). In producing a visual wall map, I integrated notes, sketches, keywords, and conceptual ideas, creating short abstracts to support story development and character creation (Figure 1).

Moustakas (1990) emphasises that in heuristic research, the researcher becomes one with the question, engaging fully to allow new understandings to emerge. In character creation, I concentrated on the meaning of the story, immersing myself in the characters' feelings and emotions, which I aligned with my personal experiences (Figure 2). My goal was to convey a sense of transformation while also incorporating cultural and symbolic elements, such as light as an entity emerging from Illuminationist philosophy (Figure 3).

Figure 1. A visual wall map.



Note. Interconnect layers and ideas for the storyline.

Figure 2. Mana the female character.



Note. During character development, I utilised AI to envision an Iranian teenager. This character is shaped significantly by my personal experiences and physical appearance.

Figure 3. Mana and the unity with light.



Note. Towards the end of the story, Mana realises that it is now her duty to embark on her journey of enlightenment after Farhang merges with the light and becomes one with the greater whole.

Conclusion

This artistic, practice-led research project is concerned with a narrative that is culturally and personally resourced. By employing AI to generate visuals, I explore introspective journeys that connect personal experiences with cultural knowledge, resulting in a contemporary technological artwork. While AI offers significant possibilities for storytelling in the digital age,

it also risks oversimplifying cultural sensibilities. To preserve originality, I drew upon the teachings of Suhrawardi and Sufi philosophies, aligning them with heuristic research through immersion and self-reflection. This approach harnesses intuition and traditional wisdom to craft narratives that reflect Iranian epistemologies.

The project's methodology resonates with the journey undertaken by Mana, the main character. It is inspired by Saadi Shīrāzī's poem: "Journeys far and wide, till raw becomes ripe. Through trials and tests, even a Sufi must refine" (Saadi, 1257/2007, Ghazal 597). This quote underscores the significance of life experiences in the process of self-discovery and growth. It also suggests that the journey to becoming a better person is continuous, requiring perseverance and patience—principles that I believe are fundamental to creative exploration.

Acknowledgments

As I stand at the beginning of my PhD journey, I reflect on a path that has deepened my understanding of myself, my past, my culture, and Iranian philosophy. This journey would not have been possible without the people who shaped me—the ones who raised me, the friends and mentors who guided me, and most importantly, the person who held my hand and pushed me to reach my highest potential.

I have always believed that I am a reflection of the people I have encountered in my life—those whose books I have read, whose films I have watched, whose stories I have heard, and whose philosophies I have lived. Each person I have met has left their own unique imprint on me. Above all, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my better half, Ali, who has helped me pause, reflect, and recognise the light shining within my own culture.

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