

Táhirih A Portrait in Poetry*

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Abstract

Most accounts of Táhirih have been either adulatory and hagiographic, vituperative and condemnatory, or facile and distortive. She has been depicted either as a saintly martyr, a cunning vixen, or a fiery feminist. If the truly heroic dimensions of her life and her character are to be appreciated, she must be viewed as she saw herself and within the context of her own culture. It is her poetry that both reveals the layers of her complex motivations and makes her accessible. The aim of this essay is to allow her own voice, through her poems, to speak for herself, her time, and her motivations.

One hundred and fifty years ago, in an obscure corner of Persia, a woman removed the veil from her face in a public gathering of men. This courageous act, which ultimately led to her martyrdom, had an unprecedented impact on some outstanding men and women in Europe, India, and America. But in her own society most of what has been said and written about her was intended to cover her over again with many layers of veils. The reasons for all the obfuscations are easy to detect. Initially the guardians of the order against which she rebelled did their utmost to deny her existence by accusations of heresy, slander, and vilification. Subsequent generations, who may have been free of religious dogmatism and fanaticism, have tried to make a fairer judgment. They have been, however, often ignorant of the historical facts and have neglected the underlying values and the prevailing culture of their own society. They have forced alien and ill-fitting ideological preconceptions upon her life and times. The results are invariably incomplete and inaccurate.

The aim of this lecture is to allow her own voice to speak for herself, her time, and her motivations. The woman who was born in Qazvín in 1817 has come to be known by many names. She was given the names Fátimih Zarríntáj but is remembered by the beautiful appellations Qurratu'l-'Ayn (Solace of the Eyes) addressed to her by Siyyid Kázim Rašhtí, the leader of the Shaykhí School, and Táhirih (The Pure) given her by Mírzá Husayn-'Alí Núrí, Bahá'u'lláh, a leader of the Bábí community and the subsequent founder of the Bahá'í Faith.¹

She lived an eventful, rebellious, tumultuous, and heroic life and was killed at the age of thirty-six for her deeds and words. What has survived of her writings is a number of theological discourses, doctrinal disputations, and polemical tracts in affirmation of her new faith, written mostly in Arabic prose, and a very small number of poems, mostly in Persian. A clear distinction is implied, in this lecture's focus, between her words and her voice. She was, insofar as her family provenance, her education, her social interactions, and her social position defined her, a scholar of religion. A full account of her philosophical, doctrinal, and intellectual positions must include a painstaking and judicious examination and analysis of all her prose treatises. But it is her poet's voice that provides us with a portrait of her passion and her person.

She was, first and foremost, a woman of action. Her words alone, were they not limned against the dramatic deeds of her short and stormy life, give ample evidence of her revolutionary and pioneer character. But it is the resonance of deeds and words that brings into focus the heroic figure of Táhirih. Of her extant words, the prose writings in Persian and Arabic are works of religious scholarship too arcane and abstruse for the general public. A handful of poems, however, reveal her tempestuous temperament and make her accessible to all people at all times. The present lecture is an attempt to provide a portrait of Táhirih through her poems. That is not to say that she was deliberately autobiographical in her poems, or that any narrative scheme can be detected in her verse.

Her historical identity and the events of her life are well documented and have been recorded by friend and foe. And there is the rub. The foes have reviled and slandered her, and the friends have defended and sanctified her. Except for a few recent treatments, all the writing about her is either hagiographic or vituperative.² She is depicted either as a saintly martyr, a cunning vixen, or a fiery feminist. The pious treatments—true enough so far as they go—underplay elements of her social and personal power struggles and gloss over profoundly meaningful private

choices in her life. The vituperative attacks are nothing more than the fanatical rantings of a patriarchal religious hierarchy startled and enraged by her encroachment on their monopoly of the domain of learning and her unveiled threat to their power. The strictly feminist revolutionary accounts, while bringing out an essential dimension of her historical impact, do so at the cost of compartmentalizing her personality, ignoring the context of her struggle, and distorting her motives. Only with the help of her poems can one hope to see through the layers of her profoundly complex and remarkably single-minded motivations:

He has come to strip all veils away
And show the face of prophecy today . . .
His spark has filled the world with wild delight
Man he has made a being of pure light
Táhirih, lift the veil that has concealed
Let that hidden mystery stand revealed . . .

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Come look at us with keen seeing eyes
That you may see God's face unveiled

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O lovers, lovers! The Lord's face at last is visible!
Look! Creation's veil is stripped off by His will!
Arise! for God's face shows itself in all its Glory³

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God's bright face, purity, and charm—how they dazzle
He who made the universe makes all earth green again.
Resurrection Day is here, O noble ones! Gone, the night so terrible
The time for truth has come, and deceit withers away:
The justice you hoped for, order and law are possible.
The despot's iron fist destroyed, and gentle grace restored
With nurturing support, not endless woe and trouble.
Ignorance flees the world, true knowledge shines clear:
Tell the priest to shut his book and quit the temple.
Though doubts and difference turned the world awry,
Milk, not blood, flows now, and the new cup's delectable.
The lord of all reveals himself and warns the nations,
Everlasting grace shall free them from chain and shackle.

Clearly what these verses proclaim, leaving no room for ambiguity, is the rolling up of an old and decaying order replete with ignorance and injustice, and the coming of a new age of social and spiritual vigor. They signal the end of the era of expectations, the advent of the Promised One, and the arrival of the Beloved. This code of renewal and resurrection—to come out of stagnation, to become young and fruitful again, to get over the past and to believe in the future, to uproot tyranny and to lay the foundation of justice, to end conflict and to spread love—is embedded in the myths of every human culture that has the stamina to survive and endure. It is a creative energy which manifests itself from time to time, causes great upheavals in society, shakes and frightens the worn-out established order, and opens up new horizons.

The ebb and flow of trendy literary critical theories notwithstanding, the poems of Táhirih cannot be understood and appreciated outside their cultural and historical context. In the more than two and a half millennia of Persian cultural history, that impulse of renewal has been deeply encoded with spiritual yearning and religious fervor.⁴ Nearly every movement of note and consequence, ranging in origins and motivation from profoundly sacred impulses to expressions of social and economic protest and even urban or peasant uprisings, has appeared in the garb of a religious expectation or return. The worldview and the climate of thought of Persia are permeated by a religious outlook.

To approach Táhirih as a crucial figure in the unfolding Movement of the Báb is the authentic view from within the texture of Persian society at mid-nineteenth century. This is a movement that rapidly emerged from the matrix of convictions and expectations of the Shaykhí school of the Shí'í sect of Islam. Through the leadership of the Báb it broke out of its Islamic cocoon with revolutionary energy, and under the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh it achieved its true radical potential and became a world religion.

Thus it is impossible to isolate Tahirih from the context of a religious movement. She was a leading actor in a grand passion of faith, a drama that at mid-nineteenth century occupied the center stage of the Persian world. The birth of a new religious movement from the roots of an established traditional faith is never calm and peaceful. Vehement denials, pronouncements of anathema, cries of heresy, torrents of outraged abuse and vilification issued from the guardians of the old order are to be expected. They are commonplace in the comparative history of all religions. From the outset of the Bábí Movement in 1844, for a full hundred years everything that was said or written in Persia about Tahirih, except for the adulatory and hagiographic accounts by Bábís and Bahá'ís, was nothing but fanatical condemnations of an outraged orthodoxy. In the last half century, however, a new vogue of writing has come into being among Persian intellectuals based upon naive application of borrowed analytical preconceptions to the events and personalities of their own society. They are primarily rooted in Marxian thought.

There is no denying the efficacy and the penetrating power of some Marxian analytical tools for the understanding of social history. The dialectic process and the importance of the notion of class are indispensable tools that a social historian can neglect only at the risk of impoverishment of the analysis. But a facile, unrigorous, and uncritical recourse to vulgar Marxism,⁵ which has been discredited even in the Western, European societies from whose historical experience it was constructed, is doubly ludicrous when it is enforced upon the fabric of a Persian Muslim society with a radically different set of dynamics. It leads to gross distortion of the dynamics of social movements and misreading the motives of their prime movers.

In the heyday of the Stalinist era in 1938, M. S. Ivanov, a Russian historian in Moscow, published a short book called *Bábí Uprisings in Iran (1848–1852)*. In it he subjected the Bábí Movement, the personality and role of its founder, Siyyid Alí-Muhammad of Shiraz, and a number of his early followers including Tahirih Qurratu'l-'Ayn, to a rudimentary vulgar Marxist analysis. Shortly after that, the course of the Second World War led to partial occupation of Iran by Soviet troops and the rapid political rise of the Tudeh Party with its massive appeal among the so-called intelligentsia. It must be acknowledged that, from that time forward, nearly everything that has been written by this new group of intellectuals about the Bábí Movement and the personality and historical role of Tahirih is traceable to Ivanov's book and its thought system. It is in principle a distorting approach.

The character of Tahirih, her mindset, her worldviews, her motivations, and the depth of her passion cannot be examined detached from her deep faith in spiritual renewal, her eagerness to abrogate the Islamic law, and her willingness to sacrifice everything for the establishment of a new order. She must be viewed as she saw herself and within the framework of her own culture if we are to appreciate the truly heroic dimensions of her life. No doubt there have been other women of sharp intellect, bold resolve, eloquent tongue, and charismatic power in the Persian society who have felt the deep pain of tyrannical inequality, but seldom have the circumstances of their age allowed them to assert themselves and to leave an indelible mark upon history. The unique distinction of Tahirih is that she not only had all those qualities in superlatives, but that with all her natural gifts and innate abilities she set upon acquisition of knowledge and was quick to realize that knowledge is power.

She encompassed the traditional learning of her culture, which was theology with all its attendant disciplines of logic, rhetoric, and literature. In debates and disputes with turbaned patriarchs who looked upon religious learning as their monopoly, she outshone them all and henceforth was not willing to forgo the exercise of power that was the right of the learned. Throughout her short and adventurous life she courageously fought for her own rights and those of her fellow women and fellow humans. She never feared or wavered, and although she paid for her convictions with her life, she ultimately triumphed. The example that she has left for all struggling, justice-seeking, and liberating women—although in her native land it has been suppressed under covers of ignorance and prejudice—has not escaped the attention of outstanding men and women throughout the world. In the second half of the nineteenth century, her name and her feats of heroism were known among poets, artists, intellectuals, and progressive groups in Europe and North America. Her name was inscribed on the list of pioneers for emancipation of women in the first Congress for the Rights of Women held in America nearly a hundred years ago. Poems and homages were written to her in Italian, German, French, English, and Russian. Sarah Bernhardt, the best known French actress of the late nineteenth century, asked two of her contemporary authors, Catulle Mendès and Jules Bois, to write a play about Tahirih and the Bábís for her to portray on the stage. The Russian poet Izabella Grinevskaya actually wrote such a play, which was staged at St. Petersburg. It was after seeing this play and reading other accounts of Bábís and Bahá'ís that Leo Tolstoy became curious and sympathetic.⁶ Nor has all the attention and interest in Tahirih been confined to the Occident. In his visionary epic poem *Javídnámih* depicting a journey to the heavenly realms inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Iqbal of Lahore, the foremost Muslim poet of the Indian subcontinent, identifies Tahirih Qurratu'l-'Ayn as one of his three guides. Indeed the interest and admiration for Tahirih has remarkably persisted among the literary and intellectual Muslims of India and Pakistan, where dissertations, articles, and publications about her continue to proliferate.⁷

At the outset of the Bábí Movement, and especially after the incarceration and, ultimately, the execution of the Báb Himself, it was not fully clear to the rapidly growing number of His followers what the advent of the promised Day meant. Even with the clear claim of being the return of the expected Qá'im of Shí'í Islam, which occurred at the midpoint of the short and tumultuous six years of His ministry from His declaration in 1844 to His martyrdom in 1850, the perceptions and expectations of most of His followers did not go beyond the walls of literal fulfillment of Shí'í traditions and prophecies. They thought of the new movement as the means for revival of Islam, not as an instrument of abrogation of Islamic law, freedom from its dogmas, and the dawn of a new dispensation and new order. Among the Bábís it was Táhirih who was absolutely the most active and eventually triumphant exponent of a radical break with the past and a far-reaching progressive outlook.

In every age when the tempo of change and the pulse of social transformation is accelerated, the gravitational pull of the past and the resistance of the old order are also increased. A dynamic force is required to free the movement for the new from the grip of the past and to thrust it into the new space. Táhirih was the most outstanding personification of this prodigious dynamic force. Her role at the Conference of Badasht in 1848 was a masterpiece of combining signal with symbol, reality with drama, and the secret code with the open message. With one ploy she accomplished two feats. By removing her veil in an assemblage of men she did at once proclaim, by word and by deed, both the abrogation of the law of Islam and the emancipation and equality of women in the new Faith. That such a radical and momentous principle as the breaking of the old law and the advent of a new order was proclaimed by a woman, albeit confirmed and upheld by the Báb Himself, as well as the fact that the first signal of the new order was an act which was clearly nothing less than an affirmation of emancipation and equality of rights of women, were not accidental. These two facets of Táhirih's dramatic and courageous act were mutually affirming and inseparable. Any attempt to focus on them separately or out of balance distorts the face of Táhirih and obscures her true historical role.

Some historians have chosen to dwell on the substance of her doctrinal dissertations and dogmatic disputations and point to the absence of any explicit statement on the rights of women, and have concluded that she was nothing more than a heretically inclined theologian. Others have portrayed her as a fiery feminist pioneer, discounting her profound spiritual motivation and her religiously integrated worldview. The statement attributed to her at the hour of her death—"You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi 75)—was probably never uttered, just as Louis XIV probably never said "L'état c'est moi" (I am the state). But they both *should* have done so, for every act of their lives was a testament to the truth of those statements. Táhirih's indomitable will; her forthright claim to equal power based on learning; her uncompromising defense of her beliefs in the face of opposing men; her implacable refusal to bow to domestic pressure; her painful choice to abandon home, husband, and children rather than submit to injustice; and, above all, the dramatic gesture of public unveiling are more eloquent than a thousand tracts on the rights of women. In the context of nineteenth-century Persian Shí'í society—or indeed this late in the twentieth century—what more could a woman do that would mark her a greater champion of women's rights?

Táhirih is indeed a heroine and pioneer model of emancipation, equality, and power of women because the Movement of the Báb prepared the ground for the inception of those struggles, and the Bahá'í Faith made their ultimate victory possible. And the Bábí Movement and Bahá'í Faith can justify their progressive claims because equality of rights of women is a fundamental tenet of their belief.

When Táhirih proclaims that:

New friendship must from ancient hatred spring
And far and wide the seeds of kindness sow,

we instantly recognize the acute and compassionate vision of a forward-looking woman who is painfully aware of the ancient hatreds that have been heaped upon her half of the human race, and she sees her own emancipation in liberation of the whole of humankind and seeks the remedy for ancient hatreds in friendship and kindness. Her truly revolutionary outlook and her clear vision of the new world which she struggled to bring about are revealed in a short poem of unusual power and forceful diction. It is the closest thing to a manifesto that can be found in all the literature of the Bábí Movement:

Look! our guiding dawn breathes even now
The world with all its peoples is aglow

No canting priest now raves from the pulpit
No mosque hawks sanctimony to the crowd

No sheikh, no sham, no holy fraud prevails
The turban knot's cut to the root below
Freed from the fear of wicked whisperings
Mankind is rid of magic's foolish show

Ignorance is doomed by the search for truth
Equality's arm shall bring the tyrant low

Warring ways will be banished from the world
And justice everywhere its carpet throw

New friendship must from ancient hatred spring
And far and wide the seeds of kindness sow

Strictly speaking in terms of its meter, rhyme scheme, and length it is a *ghazal*, a form of lyrical love poem. But it is in every real sense as far from a *ghazal* as a poem can get. There is nothing lyrical, nothing amatory about it. It is a proclamation, epical, assertive, full of startling images and radical vocabulary not seen in Persian poetry before, and not to be encountered for another half a century until in the post-Constitutional Revolutionary poetry of men such as Farrokhi Yazdi and Lahuti. The abstract notion, “guiding dawn,” is depicted as an animate, awesome personification of nature that has begun to breathe. A sequence of deeply aspirated *h*'s—*hán subh-i-hudá*—creates an aural affirmation of this remarkable animation. Its exalted rank is underlined by the use of the honorific verb *farmúd*. The emphatic sibilant rhymes punctuate the triumphant and assertive statements. The open writ of dismissal handed to the clergy could not be more devastating. The unambiguous condemnation of cant and hypocrisy, of ignorance and superstition, and of fanaticism, all go to the root of what ailed her society. In its defiance of tyranny and cry for justice and equality, as well as its eloquent call for love and friendship, this poem bids well to be adopted as the anthem of Táhirih's future heirs.

No self-portrait of Táhirih in poetry is more revealing in its beautiful imagery of feminine charm and allure and its audacious self-assurance than these challenging lines:

Once let the wind my scented locks unravel
And I would capture every wild gazelle

And should I blue my flashing, blue-black eyes
I would condemn the world to darkest hell

At daybreak heaven lifts its golden glass
And gazes awestruck at my dazzling face

If I should chance to pass a church one day
Christian virgins would run to hear my gospel!

Here we are back in the tonal, metaphoric, and imagery world of classical Persian poetry, with its familiar tropes and strong vowel music. The “desert deer” (*áhuán-i-sahrá*), the “blue-black-eyes” (*nargis-i-sháhlá*) and “golden glass” (*á'íniy-i-mutallá*) create an aura of the known terrain, but it is inhabited by a woman of irrepressible passion and indomitable will.

It is not a face could be hidden in a veil and it is not a voice that could be choked to silence.

Notes

1. There is some uncertainty concerning when and by whom she was first addressed as Táhiriḥ. An undated letter from the Báb calling her Táhiriḥ is ascribed by some researchers as possibly dating from 1847. What is certain is that the appellation was used by Bahá'u'lláh at the Conference of Badasht in 1848 and thereafter it became her prevailing and preferred identity. She herself used it in some of her poems as a traditional nom de plume (*takhallus*). Two further strong pieces of circumstantial evidence must be taken into consideration in support of Bahá'u'lláh's initiative in the use of this title: (1) it was at Badasht where Bahá'u'lláh also gave new titles to a number of other Bábís present and took the appellation Bahá for Himself, and (2) in subsequent years the Bábís and Azalís, who naturally hold her in high esteem, overwhelmingly refer to her as Qurratu'l-'Ayn and refrain from using Táhiriḥ.
2. See Amanat, and Milani.
3. The word in the original is *Bahá*.
4. For the best treatment of this subject, see Bausani.
5. This term is not used in its popular pejorative sense. Vulgar Marxism is actually a term coined by more careful Marxist thinkers to denote the simplistic knee-jerk determinism of unsophisticated dogmatics.
6. For all early references to Táhiriḥ and Bábís and Bahá'ís in the West, see Momen.
7. For the impact of Táhiriḥ in the Indian subcontinent, see Áfáqí.

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