

Commentary/Commentaire/Comentário

ṬĀHIRIH: A RELIGIOUS PARADIGM OF WOMANHOOD

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Ṭāhirih's role in severing Bábís from Islam cannot be underestimated; this story is one of the best to use when teaching Christians that the Bahá'í Faith is not Islam. Her model of courage, eloquence, and service in the Faith is, of course, inspirational. It is important to note, however, that Ṭāhirih was only thirteen years old when she was married off in an arranged marriage to a cousin. Any mother will say how difficult it would be to leave her children; that act has a lot to say about the wrongfulness of marrying a child of thirteen in an arranged manner, a practice still prevalent in the Third World. It should also be emphasized how pure, as testified by her father, Ṭāhirih remained both during her arranged marriage as well as after she felt compelled to leave in order to serve God best.

As Bahá'ís, we should also consider Navváb, the wife of Bahá'u'lláh, and his daughter Bahíyyih as models. Navváb was so loving and supportive. Think of her making a cake in the dark, children hungry, cold wind and snow swirling, and her using salt instead of sugar and how she cried. One can feel her love and anguish and even identify with her because we cannot all be as brilliant as Ṭāhirih, but we can strive to be as loving and yet not feel we have failed when there is salt in the cake. Sometimes women just cannot meet a man who is spiritually right for them, and they remain as Bahíyyih, who kept the Bahá'í Faith and family together at many times and was greatly respected though she had no husband. There are times in most women's lives (such as before we have children) when we can strive to model Ṭāhirih; other times when we are following in the steps of Navváb, struggling for the survival and spiritual development of our children; and others when we are a sisterhood of gentle, humble, loving support.

Perhaps most important for those of us who are not endowed with the talents of Ṭāhirih or Navváb or Bahíyyih is to note how faithful all three were to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, particularly chastity, and how they all tried to participate in development. They did not say, "It is easier to do nothing. I will not make mistakes. I will not be criticized that way." Rather, they remained faithful while still trying to improve things.

I emphasize chastity because we have been working overseas for about ten years in three different countries in the developing world. Among the local village people there is little idea left about the sacredness of caring for young children *after* marriage. In some countries, it is good to prove fertility first. The frequent consequence is a twenty-two-year-old woman with four starving children and four different absent fathers, trying to farm, fetch water and firewood, and prepare an enticing meal so as to have someone to share sweet dreams with after the horrific reality of daily life. Few men want or need to get

married, and there is no striving to compete for a woman's favors by showing what he can make of himself. Men may spend their time drinking local brew and gossiping. Children watch them and learn bad ways. In some cases of happy marriages, the wives have told me their men gave up drink because of the wife's refusal to sleep with her husband if he drinks.

Fearing I have brought the lofty article on Ṭáhirih down to a base level, let me hasten to say there are mothers, sisters, and courageous innovators in the villages we have visited. There are heroines among the women I meet, such as those who keep family, farm, and business together while remaining faithful to husbands on overseas studies for years at a time or to husbands who are themselves not faithful. I think I feel compelled to write this letter as an appeal for more articles and information about the lives of other heroic women in the Bahá'í Faith so that the poorest, illiterate but spiritual girls have role models. Also, I write to thank heroic teachers of children's classes who are awakening their "spiritual embryos"¹ from the darkness of ignorant following the crowd, so they can grow to be the guiding stars of our new world order. And I would like those women who are struggling through "Seven Valleys and Four Valleys" in the effort to right their lives and fit their form to the flow of God to know that we are praying for you and sending our love to help you reach the top.

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1. See Barbara Hacker, "Montessori and the Bahá'í Faith," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 1.2 (1989): 19-33.