

Tahirih: A Theology in Poetry

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see http://irfancoolloquia.org/137/lee_tahirih

She is known universally to Baha'is as Tahirih (1814-1852). But she was given the name Fatimih at birth. She is also known as Umm Salamih, Zarrin-Taj (Crown of Gold), and most commonly as Qurratu'l-Ayn (Solace of the Eyes). She is certainly the most well known woman in Baha'i history, and the most controversial. 'Abdu'l-Baha recognizes her as a saint by introducing her with these words in *Memorials of the Faithful*: "A woman chaste and holy, a sign and token of surpassing beauty, a burning brand of the love of God, a lamp of His bestowal, was Jinab-i-Tahirih."¹

Yet, Tahirih stands in stark contrast in Baha'i history and Baha'i imagination to the other women who are thought of as holy figures in Baha'i history. Perhaps, the premier woman in Baha'i theology would be Bahiyyih Khanum (1846-1932), the daughter of Baha'u'llah, known as the Greatest Holy Leaf. She played a crucial role in the Baha'i community after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921). But yet, she remained for most of her life in traditional, gendered roles, overshadowed by her brother, 'Abdu'l-Baha, and by the Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), her grandnephew. Similarly, Khadijih Bagum (d. 1882), the wife of the Bab; Asiyyih Khanum, Navvab (1820-1886), the wife of Baha'u'llah; and Munirih Khanum (1847-1938), wife of 'Abdu'l-Baha—all regarded as holy women—are revered, but remain confined to traditional roles in Baha'i history and in Baha'i imagination.

¹ 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Memorials of the Faithful* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1971), 190.

Tahirih stands apart from these other holy women, since she discarded her traditional roles as daughter, wife and mother, invaded male space, and became an actor and a leader of the Babi community in her own right. As Susan Maneck has noted, she presents the Baha'is with a paradigm of the ideal woman who is "assertive, intelligent, eloquent, passionately devoted to causes, and yet, still beautiful."² But this paradigm is problematic because Tahirih was also rebellious, transgressive, liberated from husband and children, deliberately outrageous, and confrontational. As a result, Tahirih remains something of an enigma. Her public actions, radical as they were, are celebrated by Baha'is. But her family life and personal choices are ignored. Her radical theology remains unexplored.

Tahirih was born into a prominent clerical family in Qazvin, in Iran. Her father was the head of a religious college in that city. She was formally and highly educated, as was her mother, and her grandmother. She obtained a considerable reputation for learning and scholarship, even as a young student. Married to her cousin at the age of 14, Tahirih continued her studies after their move to Karbila. She pursued and obtained a full education in higher Islamic studies, though she was unable to receive the customary certificates of completion (*ijazih*) that a man of her level of learning would have received.³

As a Babi, Tahirih wrote many learned treatises in defense of the Bab and Babi doctrines. In these she makes use of the traditional conventions of Islamic jurisprudence and theology. Amin Banani, in the preface to his translation of a selection of Tahirih's poems, makes a distinction between Tahirih's learned dissertations and her poetic voice. He writes:

Tahirih was—insofar as her family, her education, her social networks, 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 writings. But, it is her poet's voice that provides us with a portrait of her person and her passion. Of her extant works, the prose writings in Arabic and

² Susan Maneck, "Tahirih: A Religious Paradigm of Womanhood," in *Tahirih in History*, ed. Sabir Afaqi (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2004), 197.

³ See Moojan Momen "Family and Early Life," *passim*.

Persian are works of nineteenth-century religious scholarship that are 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.⁴

This distinction between Tahirih's *words* and Tahirih's *voice* is useful and instructive. An examination of her poems will reveal the structure of a mystical theology that is both startling in its modernity and astonishing in its radical implications. Her poems inhabit a structure that does not rely upon Muslim scholarship for its arguments, but rather insists on the inspiration of the spirit for its power and legitimacy.

Tahirih did not understand her own knowledge to be dependent on academic learning alone. Though she made use of academic arguments extensively, she also understood her own mystical experiences to be a source of truth. She relied on inspiration alone to justify some of her boldest acts and most radical breaks with Islamic tradition. Abbas Amanat observes and quotes Tahirih:

Passionately, Qurrat al-'Ayn argues that she herself came to recognize the Bab when in a moment of intuitive insight she grasped the unceasing necessity for divine revelation:

With insight free of intruders, I observed God's power and omnipotence [and realized] that this great cause most definitely needs a focus of manifestation, for after God made His Fourth Pillar and His encompassing sign and His manifested locality known to people, and [thus] brought them close to His presence and showered them from His high exalted Heaven with His [spiritual] nourishment, then by proof of wisdom it is incumbent upon Him, whose status is high, not to leave the people to themselves. . . .⁵

Bearing this in mind, the poetry of Qurratu'l-'Ayn may take on an unexpected significance. It might be argued seriously that these poems represent Tahirih's mystic theology more clearly than does her prose. Her poems are the product of her inspiration, uncluttered by academic conventions, and "free of intruders." These poems, after all, require no proof or justification. They are simply the promptings of her inner spirit. Those promptings guided her theology.

⁴ Amin Banani, Jascha Kessler, and Anthony A. Lee, trans., *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry: Selected Poems of Qurratu'l-'Ayn* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005), 3.

⁵ Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 302.

In a celebrated episode, Tahirih relied on her personal inspiration to come to conclusions and to take actions of tremendous import, in the face of fierce opposition from the Islamic clerical establishment and from leading Babi clerics, as well. In Karbila, without any explicit instructions from the Bab (though she may have interpreted some of his verses very expansively, even esoterically) Tahirih decided to cast off the pretense of dissimulation (*taqiyyih*) and openly proclaim the abrogation of the Islamic law (that is, the *shari'a*). As shocking, as radical, and as dangerous as such a move was, Tahirih felt confident that she could ground such a theological stance on pure inspiration. Even other prominent Babis in Karbila were shocked. One of them, Mulla Ahmad Khurasani, argued with her vigorously. Denis MacEoin has describes the dispute:

In an account of a visit made to Qurrat al-'Ayn, apparently at this period, Mullā Aḥmad Khurāsānī gives, in her own words as he remembered them, an unequivocal statement of her intentions at this point, although even he does not seem to have realized how critical for the future development of Bābism these intentions were to be:

She asked me “Do you know why I summoned you?”. I replied “No”. She said, “I was previously given the responsibility for the authority (*wilāya*) of Mullā Bāqir, and I made it incumbent on all of you to accept it. Yet noone accepted it from me, with the exception of fourteen individuals, seven men and seven women. Now I shall present you with something else.” I said, “What is that?” She replied “It has come to me, through the tongue of my inner mystic state (*bi-lisān al-hāl*), not through physical speech, that I wish to remove all concealment (*taqiyya*) and to establish the proof of the remembrance and go to Baghdad.

An argument ensued, at the end of which Mullā Aḥmad left, maintaining that he had himself received no fewer than seven letters from the Bāb, all commanding observance of *taqiyya*.⁶

Of course, we might reasonably have argued at the time that Mulla Ahmad was correct, from a purely literal and academic perspective. The Bab had repeatedly admonished the Babis to strictly observe the Shi'i convention of *taqiyyih*. Tahirih's theology rejected those commands, however, or at least found that they were no longer binding. She would go on to make these same arguments at the Conference of Badasht (1848), where she removed her veil (*chadur*) and stepped into a company of

⁶ Denis Martin MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 244.

Babi men without it to demonstrate her categorical rejection of the *shari'a* (and now with the added astounding announcement that the entire dispensation of Islam had been abrogated). Of course, her mystic theology was successful and soon became the normative Babi position. Her theological position quickly propelled the Babis and the Babi religion beyond the boundaries of Islam. This was a unique event in Islamic history, a history which witnesses endless Islamic heterodoxies and reform movements. But none of these ever consciously intended to discard the religion itself in favor of a new divine dispensation. All heretics, for a thousand years, remained Muslims, if only in their own minds. Tahirih marks the break with this model, as she makes no appeal to Muhammad or the Imams⁷ in her poems, declares the *shari'a* null and void, and embraces a new Manifestation of God. She writes in one poem about the new Manifestation:

The arches of his eyes will make the feuds
Of warring faiths and creeds to disappear.

Moses and Jesus in heaven are stunned,
And all the holy ones are lost down here.

Two thousand Muhammads hear thunderbolts,
They wrap themselves in cloaks, tremble in fear.⁸

Theology in Poems

The volume entitled *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, translated and edited by Banani, Kessler, and Lee, is Banani's selection of the poems of Qurratu'l-'Ayn. This compilation includes the poems that Banani regarded as most likely to be authentic, most poetic from the perspective of literature, and most representative of Tahirih's spirit. He viewed other collections of poems attributed to Tahirih with suspicion, yet confessed that we are very far from a *divan* of Tahirih that can stand up to academic

⁷ Cf. A.-L.-M. Nicholas, "Qourrè-oul-Aïne" trans. Peter Terry in *Tahirih in History: Perspectives on Qurratu'l-'Ayn from East and West*, ed. Sabir Afaqi (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2004), 106-107.

⁸ From "Start Shouting!" in Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 58.

scrutiny.⁹ For some of these collected poems, Banani insisted that they were not intended as poetry at all. They were only rhymed letters of correspondence with fellow Babis. I was able at one point, and with some difficulty, to obtain a full manuscript of Tahirih's unpublished poems in the original language. This manuscript was some time later translated by John S. Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat (and also published in facsimile) as *Adam's Wish: Unknown Poetry of Tahirih*. After studying the manuscript, Banani insisted that there was nothing of literary value there. He refused to translate the verses, despite my repeated pleas to reconsider, because he did not feel that the work represented Tahirih as a poet. He regarded the verses as prose. (To my utter despair.)

As for the poems that Banani did choose for translation, many of them had already been translated in an earlier volume, *Poetry of Tahirih*, also by Hatcher and Hemmat. Banani's collection was more selective. He declined to translate a number of poems he felt were probably not by Tahirih. His judgments were based in part on the scant manuscript record that we have of the poems. But all of the poems attributed to Tahirih are of doubtful provenance. Mostly, he relied on the internal evidence of the poems themselves: the vocabulary, the words, tone, and style of each poem.

Universality and Justice

The most startling theological principle that emerges from Banani's selection of Tahirih's poems is that of universal love and her call for equality, social justice, and world peace. Since these are not common themes found in the writings of the Bab or of other Babi leaders, these poems stand out as prescient, prophetic, and almost miraculous. The first poem in Banani's compilation reads:

Look Up!

Look up! Our dawning day draws its first breath!
The world grows light! Our souls begin to glow

⁹ Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 4-5.

No ranting shaykh rules from his pulpit throne
No mosque hawks holiness it does not know

No sham, no pious fraud, no priest commands!
The turban's knot cut to its root below!

No more conjurations! No spells! No ghosts!
Good riddance! We are done with folly's show!

The search for Truth shall drive out ignorance
Equality shall strike the despots low

Let warring ways be banished from the world
Let Justice everywhere its carpet throw

May Friendship ancient hatreds reconcile
May love grow from the seed of love we sow!¹⁰

When I first read this poem, it seemed to me to be so filled with Baha'i ideas that I refused to believe it had been written by Tahirih. Surely, this was a later Baha'i invention. The independent investigation of truth, equality of all people, justice, world peace, universal love and friendship—this seemed to me to be the work of some Baha'i poet. Banani assured me, however, that the work can safely be attributed to Tahirih.¹¹

After brilliant opening lines testifying to the coming of a new era in human history, Tahirih goes on to denounce the ulama with vehemence that is not unexpected for a Babi leader. But when she turns to her vision of a new world coming, we are suddenly in new territory. It is a vision that was unheard of in Iran in the 1850s, including among her fellow Babis, and would remain unknown until Baha'u'llah articulated a similar program in his Tablets revealed after the *Kitab-i Aqdas* (1873). A world without despotism, where the search for truth would destroy despots, where equality and justice are central principles, where ancient hatreds would be forgotten, and peace and universal love would replace them.

¹⁰ Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 47.

¹¹ If so, it seems to me that this poem alone is sufficient grounds for historians to reevaluate the entire Babi movement. Tahirih, it appears, was able to discern themes in the movement that have escaped the notice of most historians.

Iranian literature would not produce any poems like that until the Constitutional Revolution, after the turn of the century.

Despite my skepticism, often expressed to Banani, that this poem could possibly have been written by Tahirih, we can find similar sentiments in other poems. Her poem “Lovers!” ends with the lines:

. . . The day of truth is here! Lies have turned to dust!
Order, justice, law are now possible.

Smashed, the despot’s fist! God’s hand opens:
grace pours down—not sorrow, pain, and trouble

Minds in darkness now burn light with knowledge
Tell the priest: Shut your book! Lock the temple!

Hatred and doubt once poisoned all the world.
The bloodied cup holds milk now—pure, ample!

Let nations hear who’s come to set them free:
Broken the chain, and smashed the manacle!¹²

Here the same themes are present. So, the first poem is not unique. Both poems illustrate a kind of proto-Baha’i ideal of the coming of a new age that will realize the unity of humanity. Likewise, the poem “No One Else,” although it is a classic Sufi love poem, ends with the lines:

Kindness blossoms as a gentle flower
Harmony stands on the carpet of power¹³

Antinomian Sentiments

Another striking motif that is found in the poems of Tahirih is her repeated reference to the removal of veils, as well as to nudity as a symbol of spiritual purity, to exposure, and to clothing of light. In some ways, these may be thought of as well-known and well-used metaphors found in the works of all Sufi

¹² Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 79.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 97.

poets. But in the poems of Tahirih, who actually removed her veil, they certainly take on a new significance and concrete social meaning. She was willing to take these symbols from the world of mystic reverie into the world of reality and action.

Sufi metaphor or not, her poem “Proclamation” must have seemed shocking in the time and place that it was written:

Hear this! My one and only Cause is true.
The words I speak mean victory for you.

Off with rags of law and pious fashion!
Swim naked in the sea of compassion!

How long will you drift through this world of war,
far from the safety of your native shore?

Sing, *Be!* Our Cause stands strong, both clear and plain:
“What comes from God returns to God again!”¹⁴

Such references can be found in most of her mystic poems. In “He Has Come”:

Its fire burns our world with wild delight
Stripped bare we stand: we’re made of purest light!

Lift the veil, Táhirih! He’s now exposed!
His hidden mystery has been disclosed!

And say: The Lord in glowing clothes is dressed!
Praised be his beauty, and forever blessed!¹⁵

In “Morning Breezes”

You Bábís from the province of pure Light!
Strip off your splendid veils, just look and see.

Believers, he has thrown away his veil,
so forget the verse “You will never behold me.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid., 53. Alternately, the opening lines of the poem can be translated, and perhaps more clearly, as:

Now hear me!/Since I proclaim what’s manifest and true.
I speak the word of victory to you.
Strip off your rags of law and pious fashion.
Leap naked into the sea of compassion!

¹⁵ Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61.

From “His Drunken Eyes”:

The goldsmith’s tent glows bright from his fire-brand
All veils now burn away at his demand¹⁷

In “Friends Are Knocking at the Door,” in an appeal to God, Tahirih says:

At least, why don’t you raise the window curtain?
Just peek out for once to show your face.

They want nothing from you, except yourself.
The only thing they beg for is your grace.

Outside, they got drunk on love—then sober.
They didn’t care. They’re longing for your place.

They dropped their veils, forgot their desires,
gave up their search, and stripped to nudity.

Burn off the clouds now and show us the sun.
Pull off the veil. Let us see your beauty: . . .

Near the end of her long poem “From These Locks,” Tahirih goes beyond discarding the *chadur*:

I’ll drop my robe, my prayer mat I’ll discard,
drink till I’m drunk, and none of them regard . . .¹⁸

This theme in many poems argues for the necessity of transgressing the boundaries of convention and decency in order to realize an encounter with the divine. Husam Nuqaba’i recounts an event at the Conference of Badasht: While Quddus was saying his prayers (presumably, *salat*, the Islamic obligatory prayer which Tahirih opposed as having been abrogated) Tahirih rushed from her tent with a sword in her hand. “Now is not the time for prayers and prostrations,” she challenged him. “Rather, on to the field of love and sacrifice.”¹⁹ Tahirih’s poems may give some theological shape to the

¹⁷ Ibid., 77.

¹⁸ Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 104.

¹⁹ Husam Nuqaba’i, *Tahirih: Qurratu’l’Ayn* (Tehran: Baha’i Publishing Committee, 128 Badi’ [1972]), 60.

antinomian aspects of Babi history noted by so many chroniclers, both friends and enemies. Writing many years after the event, even Nabil-i ‘Azam complains about Babi excesses in the wake of the events at Badasht.²⁰

Tahirih’s theology apparently maintained that with the announcement of the appearance of the Qa’im (the Promised One) all of the laws of Islam, the entire body of the *shari’a*, had been abrogated. Therefore, until the universal proclamation of a new holy law, humanity existed in a sort of limbo, an interregnum, a time in which no religious law was applicable.²¹ Presumably, true believers were free to follow the promptings of their own inner spirit. Quddus and Tahirih both defied Islamic norms flagrantly, and in the most public way, climbing into the same howdah when leaving the Conference of Badasht, traveling together, with Tahirih loudly reciting poems during the rest of the journey.²²

The Manifestation of God

All of Tahirih’s poetry is written in the Sufi tradition, in the same genre as the great Persian Sufi poets Rumi, Sa’adi, and Hafez. Naturally, she makes use of the standard poetic metaphors of the tradition—including wine, fire, light, madness, sexuality, love, etc. All as metaphors for the spirit.²³

One of the motifs found throughout her poems is the strong identification of her beloved as God himself. The Manifestation of God is strongly identified with the godhead. This identification is not explicit, but it is virtually omnipresent in her poems. One is never sure to whom the identification of godhead specifically refers: the Bab, Baha’u’llah perhaps,²⁴ God, or spirit. In any case, this godhead

²⁰ Nabil-i-A’zam (Mullá Muhammad-i- Zarandí). *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil’s Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá’í Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1932), 298.

²¹ Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 310-11. Abbas Amanat, personal communication with the author.

²² Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers*, 298.

²³ Cf. Anthony A. Lee, “Translating Rumi,” in Amin Banani and Anthony A. Lee, trans., *Rumi: 53 Secrets from the Tavern of Love* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2014), xii-xv.

²⁴ See, for example, “Morning Breezes” in Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 61.

she takes as her lover and anticipates the end of separation in a kind of Sufi longing for *fana'*, or union with God. Sometimes expressed metaphorically as sexual union:

Look at these tear-filled eyes, this pallid face —
Can you refuse them? Whom would it disgrace?

Will you not come at daybreak to my bed,
with kindness ravish me, and end my dread?

Lift me, love, on the wings of my desire
Lift me to you, to safety in your fire

Only take me up, away from this place
Set me down in the place that is no place²⁵

Or sometimes as full union with the Sublime:

I am the slave on your roof keeping time,
I am the frightened bird snared by your lime,
the nightingale silent in your night-time,
the axis that stands for your name, Sublime
Not I, not we — That agony's erased!²⁶

The Day of *Alast*

Repeatedly, Tahiriḥ appeals to the Islamic tradition of the day of *alast*, the time before time. It is a vision of pre-existence referred to in Qur'an (7:172). According to this tradition, all the souls who were ever to be born were assembled in the presence of God before the creation of the world. He spoke the words, "Am I not your Lord?" And every soul replied, "Thou art." Baha'u'llah refers to this narrative explicitly in the Hidden Words:

O MY FRIENDS!

Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour

²⁵ Banani, *Tahiriḥ: A Portrait in Poetry*, 92-93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you.²⁷

In her poems, Tahirih repeatedly invokes the day of *alast*. In these passages, she calls the mythological past into the concrete present. Identifying the Manifestation with God himself, she asks him to speak the primal words:

Fars is set aflame, and Tehran's burning.
Pure spirit rises from his place. Start dancing!

At daybreak nightingales don't sing. The cock
struts out and birds of Glory start praising.

When my lover asks, *Am I not your Lord?*
even the gods reply in awe, *Thou art.*²⁸

And:

When the brilliant sun of your face first dawned,
you dazed me by your light at my day's start.

So speak the words: "*Am I not your Lord?*"
My heartbeat will reply: "*Thou art. Thou art.*"

You asked: "*Am I not?*" I said: "*Yes, Thou art.*"
Then disaster set up camp inside my heart.²⁹

From the days of pre-existence Tahirih has identified herself with the godhead:

When the divine hand molded Adam's clay,
your love sowed its seed in my breast that day . . .

Since that day my heart cried out, *Behold me!*
and I stepped in that street for all to see,
gadding about, a shameless debauchee,
He was all myself, all myself was he—
His jewel set in my heart's palace³⁰

²⁷ Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, Persian, No. 19.

²⁸ Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

As Abbas Amanat observed, the theology of the Bab captured the eschatological future, the Day of Judgment, and yanked it into the present in order to overturn the established religious order and proclaim a new Dispensation of divine will. In Tahirih's theology, the Day of *alast*, that is, the Day of Pre-existence, is also dragged to the present and put at the service of the new faith. It is a theology that Baha'u'llah would validate some years later in his own poem, *Mathnavi-I Mubarak*:

Once someone posed this question to a gnostic [a mystic]:	147
O you, who've grasped the mysteries of God	
O you, by bounty's wine intoxicate,	
do you recall the day of "Am I not?" [i.e., the day of <i>alast</i>]	148
He said: I do recall that sound, those words,	
as if it were but yesterday, no less!	149
It lingers ever in my ears, His call,	
that sweet, soul-vivifying voice of His.	150
Another gnostic, who had climbed beyond,	
had bored the mystic pearls divine, replied:	151
That day of God has never ended nor	
has fallen short, we're living in that day!	152
His day's unending, not pursued by night –	
That we're alive on such a day's not strange	153
Had Time's Soul ceased its yearning for this day,	
then Heaven's court and throne would fall to dust	154
For through God's power this eternal day	
was made unending by His Majesty. ³¹	155

The theological position is that the day of *alast* is not a myth of pre-existence, but is an existential reality. The drama of that mystical day is played out again with the appearance of the Manifestation of God, who stands before humanity symbolically to declare his mission. Every soul, having already declared his allegiance to his Lord before birth, is called upon to do so again. This affirmation represents the fundamental relationship between God and humanity.

Feminine Power

³¹ Baha'u'llah, "Mathnaviyi-i Mubarak," trans. Frank Lewis, *Baha'i Studies Review* 9 (1999), v. 147-55. http://bahai-library.com/lewis_mathnavi_mubarak.

Far from understanding her gender as a weakness or as a disability, Tahirih repeatedly invokes her femininity and beauty as a source of power. As such, she suggests a sort of feminist theology that should be explored. MacEoin has argued that Tahirih never wrote or preached in favor of the social equality of women in Iranian society and should not be regarded as a “feminist” in any European sense of the word. True enough, as no such concept existed in nineteenth-century Iran. But in her poetry she is clearly and explicitly aware of her gender, her femininity, and her sexuality. In her poems, these are great strengths that can be used to subdue the world. Her poem “Just Let the Wind . . .” is filled with power and confidence:

Just let the wind untie my perfumed hair,
my net would capture every wild gazelle.

Just let me paint my flashing eyes with black,
and I would make the world as dark as hell.

Yearning, each dawn, to see my dazzling face,
the heaven lifts its golden looking-glass.

If I should pass a church by chance today,
Christ’s own virgins would rush to my gospel.³²

As referred to earlier, Tahirih’s long poem “From Those Locks” makes frequent and effective use of references to feminine power:

I’ll drop my robe, my prayer mat I’ll discard,
drink till I’m drunk, and none of them regard
My passion will fill their house, roof to yard
Mt. Sinai’s flame grows bright, for I’m its bard
By the tavern gate, there’s my place!³³

For Tahirih, her femininity was a strength—not a disability or a weakness. We are aware that she can make use of her beauty and her passion to overcome enemies and shape the world around her. As a

³² “Just Let the Wind . . .” in Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 49.

³³ “From Those Locks” in Banani, *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, 104.

learned woman, she felt free to invade male space and dispute with men, without ever sacrificing her gender or her awareness of herself as a woman.

Conclusions

Certainly there is more to say. It is far too early to draw any conclusions from this preliminary survey. But even a brief examination of a few of the poems of Tahirih that have been translated into English reveals that she has made some of her most radical theological statements in the form of poems.

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