

Táhirih: A Religious Paradigm of Womanhood*

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Abstract

Every religion has had its paradigm of the "ideal" woman. In Hinduism this has been Sita, the perfect wife who remains faithful to her husband at all costs. In Christianity the most eminent woman is the Virgin Mary, symbol of motherhood. Islam has Fátimih, Muhammad's daughter, who figures in the role model of mother, wife, and daughter together. Táhirih, the archetypal paradigm of womanhood in the Bahá'í Faith, presents a startling contrast to the former models. She is remembered by Bahá'ís not as the typical wife, mother, and daughter but as the courageous, eloquent, and assertive religious innovator whose actions severed the early Bábís from Islam completely. This paper will first examine the biographical details of Táhirih's life, focusing on her years as a Bábí leader from 1844 to her execution in 1852. Then it will explore Táhirih's meaning as a paradigm to writers in the Middle East and in the West, both to Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís. But most especially it will look at the meaning Táhirih has for Bahá'ís in their perceptions of what a woman ought to be.

Résumé

Dans chaque religion, il y a eu un paradigme de la femme «idéale». Dans l'Hindouisme, c'était Sita, l'épouse parfaite, qui demeure fidèle à son mari à tout prix. Dans la Chrétienté, la femme la plus éminente est la Vierge Marie, le symbole de la maternité. Dans l'Islam, c'était Fátimih, la fille de Muhammad, qui représente à la fois le modèle de mère, d'épouse et de fille. Táhirih, le paradigme archétype de l'état de femme dans la Foi bahá'ie, se distingue de façon frappante des modèles précédents. Elle représente pour les bahá'ís non pas l'épouse, la mère ou la fille idéale, mais plutôt «l'innovatrice religieuse» courageuse, éloquente et assurée dont les actions ont compétement coupé de l'Islam les premiers croyants Bábís. Cet article examine d'abord les détails biographiques de la vie de Táhirih, en mettant l'accent sur les années durant lesquelles elle a agi comme dirigeante Bábíe, de 1844 jusqu'à son exécution en 1852. Il explore ensuite la signification de Táhirih comme paradigme pour les écrivains du Moyen-Orient et de l'Occident, aussi bien les bahá'ís que les non-bahá'ís. Mais il étudie plus particulièrement ce que représente Táhirih pour les bahá'ís dans leurs perceptions de ce que devrait être une femme.

Resumen

Toda religión ha tenido su paradigma de la mujer "ideal". En el Hinduismo fué Sita, la mujer perfecta que se mantiene fiel a su marido a toda costa. En la Cristiandad la mujer más eminente es la Virgen María, símbolo de la maternidad. El Islám tiene a Fátimih, hija de Muhammad (Mahoma), que hace las veces de madre, esposa, e hija, en conjunto. Táhirih, como paradigma arquetípica de la feminidad en la Fe Bahá'í nos presenta asombroso contraste con los prototipos anteriores. Los bahá'ís la recuerdan no como esposa, madre, o hija ideal, sino como la innovadora religiosa, valiente, elocuente, sabiéndose imponer, cuyos actos separaron del todo a los primeros bábís del Islám. Esta disertación primero examinará los detalles biográficos de la vida de Táhirih enfocando en sus años como líder bábí desde 1844 hasta su ejecución en 1852. Luego hará exploración del significado de Táhirih como paradigma para los escritores del Medio Oriente y del Occidente, tanto bahá'ís como no-bahá'ís. Pero más especialmente examinará el significado que tiene Táhirih para los bahá'ís en sus percepciones de como debería ser la mujer.

Every historically minded religion begins as a reform movement whose intent is to change the very fabric of society. It begins, therefore, with a vision and ideals. Ideals are what we set before us: they are what we strive to attain. It is important that as ideals are approached they continue to recede and change if they are to give us fresh scope for future advances. When surpassed, the ideal ceases to be an ideal. When cleaved to, it becomes a mere convention that stifles and impedes progress. Among the paradigms each religion has propagated is the ideal of the perfect woman.

Each religion has its paradigm of the ideal woman. In Hinduism this has been Sita, the perfect wife who remains faithful to her husband at all costs. In Christianity the most eminent figure is the Virgin Mary, symbol of motherhood who, though devoted to her son, remained discreetly aloof from his ministry. There is Fátimih, daughter of Muhammad, who figures in the role model of mother, wife, and daughter together.

Táhirih, the most well-known woman in Bábi-Bahá'í history, presents a startling contrast to the former models.¹ This gifted poet of nineteenth-century Iran, far from being a dutiful daughter, continually opposed the theological positions of her father Mullá Sálíh, a prominent Muslim cleric of Qazvín. Neither is she admired for her success as a mother and a wife, since her estrangement from her husband (also a cleric) resulted in her forced separation from her children as well. Little wonder that to Muslims she is a paradigm of the dangers of allowing women too much freedom! This paper seeks to understand the significance of Táhirih, as a historical and literary figure, and as symbol of womanhood, for all who felt impelled to take note of her, be they Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, Easterner or Westerner.

Biography

How could it be that a woman, in Persia where woman is considered so weak a creature, and above all in a city like Qazvín, where the clergy possessed so great an influence, where the 'Ulamá, by their number and importance, attracted the attention of the government and of the people,—how could it be that there, precisely under such untoward circumstances, a woman could have organized so strong a group of heretics? There lies a question which puzzles even the Persian historian, Siphir, for such an occurrence was without precedent!

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Táhirih's background was certainly inauspicious for one who would later emerge as a preeminent leader of the militantly anticlerical Bábi religion and who would become in Shoghi Effendi's words "the first woman suffrage martyr" (*God Passes By* 75). Fátimih Zarrín Táj Baraghání, known to Bahá'is by her titles Qurratu'l-'Ayn and Táhirih, was born to the most prominent family of 'ulamá of Qazvín (*circa* A.H. 1233/A.D. 1817-18). Her father, Mullá Muhammad Sálíh, along with her uncle Mullá Muhammad Taqí, had established their dominance over the more than 100 ecclesiastics who lived in the city. Mullá Muhammad Sálíh was renowned for his commentaries on the Qur'án (*tafsír*). In exercising religious law, he had a reputation for rigidity and firmness. His brother Mullá Muhammad Taqí had achieved his position by his ruthless denunciation of rivals, particularly those sympathetic to the Shaykhí school,² which he had declared to be dangerous heresy and whose leader, Siyyid Kázim, he had excommunicated. A younger brother accepted the Shaykhí views and became a firm follower of Siyyid Kázim Rashtí.

Táhirih and her younger sister Marziyih were brought up in a strictly religious yet affluent environment. Her father, recognizing Táhirih's extraordinary abilities, had permitted her to continue her studies beyond the elementary level that was expected of a woman of her station. She far surpassed her brothers³ in theological and juridical knowledge.

At the age of thirteen Táhirih was married to the eldest son of her uncle Mullá Muhammad Taqí. She bore three children from that marriage, two sons⁴ and a daughter. Family tensions soon developed after Táhirih became attracted to the teachings of the Shaykhís. Her father, husband, and uncle all tried to dissuade her from supporting the views of Siyyid Kázim Rashtí but to no avail. Through her Shaykhí relatives she corresponded with the leader of that school and wrote a treatise vindicating it. Siyyid Kázim, delighted to have such a talented supporter within the immediate family of his arch-enemy Muhammad Taqí, bestowed upon her the name Qurratu'l-'Ayn (Solace of the Eyes). Táhirih's relations with her husband quickly deteriorated, and after her father-in-law publicly began to denounce the Shaykhís from the pulpit, she decided to leave her husband and children and return to her father's house. Shortly afterwards she set out for Karbilá and joined the circle of Shaykhís there.

She arrived in Karbilá around 1843 only to find that Siyyid Kázim had passed away just a few days earlier. At the time of her arrival a controversy had erupted within the Shaykhí community between those who stressed the charismatic and mystical aspects of the teachings of Shaykhism, and the more conservative Shaykhís who wished to preserve their legitimacy within Shí'í orthodoxy. The "radical" Shaykhís held that the central tenet of Shaykhism was the belief in the imminent appearance of the Qá'im or Mihdí, the Promised One who would appear at the end of time. Táhirih sided with the radicals, and by allying herself with Siyyid Kázim's widow, she won the support of the Shaykhí women in Karbilá as well as that of other students and adherents of the late Siyyid. Taking up residence in Siyyid Kázim's house, she held classes in place of those that had been offered by the Shaykhí leader, this much to the chagrin of Kázim's son Mullá Ahmad who wished to succeed his father.

When the Báb arose claiming to be the Promised One, Táhirih immediately accepted his claim and persuaded most of the Shaykhí community at Karbilá to do the same. The Báb appointed her as one of his chief disciples, one of the nineteen⁵ “Letters of the Living.” Her commitment to the Báb came, not so much out of extensive investigation of Bábí beliefs, but rather seems to have been a result of a revelatory experience.⁶

The surviving samples of her work⁷ from this period demonstrate her considerable ability in using the Qur’án, *hadīth*, and *tafsīr* to argue for God’s continuing revelation in history. At the same time she insisted that to recognize God’s activity, particularly as manifested in the person of Prophets, one must possess an inner awareness of God’s purpose (*sunnat-i illāhi*).

Claiming that much of Islamic law was no longer binding upon Bábís, she refused to perform the daily ritual prayers. At the same time she instituted a number of innovations within the Bábí community at Karbilá. Her most dangerous and unconventional act was appearing unveiled in a gathering of believers.

Abbas Amanat suggests that this was probably the first time an Iranian woman had considered unveiling on her own initiative (*Resurrection* 306–7). The circle of women who gathered around her (both in Karbilá and later in Qazvín, Hamadán, Baghdad, and Tehran) appear to have formed the earliest group of female Iranians to attain an awareness of their deprivations as women. Yet Táhirih’s activities did not represent a woman’s liberation movement in the modern sense of the word. Táhirih clearly saw the unveiling of women as an act of religious innovation. Neither the writings of Táhirih nor those of the Báb concern the issue of women’s rights as such.⁸ Apparently Táhirih experienced the Báb’s revelation as liberating, whether or not it specifically addressed the status of women *per se*.

Táhirih’s activities became quite controversial even within the Bábí community. Many Bábís did not view the Báb’s revelation as a total split with the past or with Islamic law. They regarded Táhirih’s behavior as scandalous and unchaste. For this reason, in answer to complaints about Táhirih, the Báb gave her the title by which she is now known, Táhirih, meaning “the Pure One” (Amanat, *Resurrection* 307).⁹ As a result of his response, many of the more conservative Bábís left the fold, although most accepted the Báb’s judgment.

The opposition of the non-Bábí ‘ulamá went even deeper. Much of Táhirih’s poetry written during this period was virulently anti-clerical. She frequently issued challenges to debate the ‘ulamá. During the month of Muharram, 1847, while Shiite Muslims donned mourning clothes to commemorate the martyrdom of the Imám Husayn, Táhirih deliberately excited their reaction by dressing in gay colors and appearing unveiled. She urged the Bábís to celebrate the Báb’s birthday, which fell on the first day of that month (Amanat, *Resurrection* 305). The enraged ‘ulamá incited a mob to attack Siyyid Kázim’s house. Finally, the governor of Karbilá intervened and had Táhirih placed under house arrest for three months before allowing her to be sent to Baghdad.

Accompanied by the leading Bábí women of Karbilá, along with a number of Shaykhís who were her devoted followers, Táhirih set out for Baghdad, where she continued her activities, offering public lectures from behind a curtain.¹⁰ Often the ‘ulamá would attend these lectures to refute her. On one of these occasions the Shah’s Jewish physician, then accompanying the Shah on pilgrimage to Karbilá, was present and became thoroughly convinced of the validity of Táhirih’s message. This physician, Dr. Hakím Masih, became the first Bábí of Jewish origin (Root, *Táhirih* 62).

This conversion aroused further opposition and caused Táhirih to be imprisoned in the house of the Muftí of Baghdad Ibn Álúsí. Ibn Álúsí later wrote these observations in regards to Táhirih:

Some people alleged that Qurrat al-‘Ayn believes in the total abolition of all the duties but I do not see any truth in this though she stayed in my house about two months and so many discussions took place between me and her in which there was no taqīya [dissimulation] or apprehension. Verily, I saw in her such a degree of merit and accomplishment as I rarely saw in men. She was a wise and decent woman who was unique in virtue and chastity. I have referred to my discussions with her on another occasion; if one became aware of them, one would realize that there is no doubt about her knowledge. It became obvious to me that Bābīya [Babis] and Qurratīya [Qurratis] are the same. They believe that the time for five times obligatory prayers is over and that revelation is unsuspending and therefore the Perfect [Man] will have [further] revelations. However, these revelations are not canonical....¹¹

Táhirih was not tried for apostacy, since the usual penalty for that crime (death) could not be applied to women. Meanwhile, her family in Qazvín was quite disturbed by her activities. Her unveiling, in particular, led to rumors of immorality. Táhirih’s father dispatched a relative to Iraq who induced the governor to order her deportation to Iran (Amanat, *Resurrection* 309). Wherever she travelled en route more excitement was raised. In the village of Karand some 1200 people immediately offered her their allegiance. In Kirmánsháh, however, her activities caused such an uproar that the Bábís were attacked by a mob and driven out of the city, but not before

Táhirih had been able to expound the teachings before the leading women of Kirmánsháh, among them the governor's wife, who had long been a patron of the *Shaykhís* (Nabíl-i-A'zam, *Dawn-Breakers* 272). In Hamadán Táhirih met with both the leading 'ulamá and the most notable women of the city, whose number included members of the royal family.

On her arrival in Qazvín, her husband Mullá Muhammad, from whom she had been long estranged, urged her to return to his household. She replied:

If your desire had really been to be a faithful mate and companion to me, you would have hastened to meet me in Karbilá and would on foot have guided my howdah all the way to Qazvín. I would, while journeying with you, have aroused you from your sleep of heedlessness and would have shown you the way of truth. But this was not to be. Three years have elapsed since our separation. Neither in this world nor in the next can I ever be associated with you. I have cast you out of my life for ever. (Quoted in Nabíl-i-A'zam, *Dawn-Breakers* 273–75)

Táhirih's uncle and father-in-law, Muhammad Taqí, had a reputation for being virulently opposed to both the Bábís and the *Shaykhís*. On numerous occasions he incited mob violence against them. After one of these incidents, Mullá 'Abdu'lláh, a *Shaykhís* and a Bábí sympathizer, decided to retaliate. When Mullá Taqí appeared in the local mosque to offer his dawn prayers, Mullá 'Abdu'lláh fatally stabbed him and fled.¹² This led to the arrest and torture of many of the Bábís of Qazvín. Táhirih was implicated as well. To stop this orgy of violence, Mullá 'Abdu'lláh surrendered himself. Despite this, the other Bábís were not released, and many were executed. Táhirih escaped with the assistance of Bahá'u'lláh, who hid her in his home in Tehran.¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá recalled those days:

When word of this spread throughout Tihrán, the Government hunted for her high and low; nevertheless, the friends [Bábís] kept arriving to see her, in a steady stream, and Táhirih, seated behind a curtain, would converse with them. One day the great Siyyid Yahyá, surnamed Váhíd, was present there. As he sat without, Táhirih listened to him from behind the veil. I was then a child, and was sitting on her lap. With eloquence and fervor, Váhíd was discoursing on the signs and verses that bore witness to the advent of the new Manifestation. She suddenly interrupted him and, raising her voice, vehemently declared: "O Yahyá! Let deeds, not words, testify to thy faith, if thou art a man of true learning. Cease idly repeating the traditions of the past, for the day of service, of steadfast action, is come. Now is the time to show forth the true signs of God, to rend asunder the veils of idle fancy, to promote the Word of God, and to sacrifice ourselves in His path. Let deeds, not words, be our adorning!" (*Memorials* 200)

Later, following a general call upon the Bábís to gather in *Khurásán*, both Táhirih and Bahá'u'lláh travelled to a place called *Badash*t where eighty-one Bábí leaders had gathered to decide how they might effect the release of the Báb from imprisonment and to discuss the future direction of the Bábí community. At that meeting tension developed between Táhirih (who headed the more radical Bábís advocating a complete break with Islam as well as the militant defence of their community) and the more conservative Quddus (who initially favored policies aimed at the rejuvenation of Islam and prudent accommodation with religious and secular power). Bábís generally accepted Quddus as the chief of the Báb's disciples. Táhirih is reported to have said in regards to the latter, "I deem him... a pupil whom the Báb has sent me to edify and instruct. I regard him in no other light." Quddus, for his part, denounced Táhirih as "the author of heresy" (Nabíl-i-A'zam, *Dawn-Breakers* 297). At one time when Quddus was rapt in his devotions, Táhirih rushed out of her tent brandishing a sword. "Now is not the time for prayers and prostrations," she declared, "rather on to the field of love and sacrifice!" (Noghabai, *Táhirih* 60).

But her most startling act was to appear before the assembled believers unveiled. Shoghi Effendi vividly describes that scene:

... Táhirih, regarded as the fair and spotless emblem of chastity and the incarnation of the holy Fátimih, appeared suddenly, adorned yet unveiled, before the assembled companions, seated herself on the right-hand of the affrighted and infuriated Quddús, and, tearing through her fiery words the veils guarding the sanctity of the ordinances of Islam, sounded the clarion-call, and proclaimed the inauguration, of a new Dispensation. The effect was electric and instantaneous. She, of such stainless purity, so revered that even to gaze at her shadow was deemed an improper act, appeared for a moment, in the eyes of her scandalized beholders, to have defamed herself, shamed the Faith she had espoused, and sullied the immortal Countenance she symbolized. Fear, anger, bewilderment, swept their inmost souls, and stunned their faculties. 'Abdu'l-Khálíq-

i-Isfahání, aghast and deranged at such a sight, cut his throat with his own hands. Spattered with blood, and frantic with excitement, he fled away from her face. (*God Passes By* 32)

Unperturbed, Táhirih declared, “I am the Word which the Qá’im is to utter, the Word which shall put to flight the chiefs and nobles of the earth!” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 32–33).

Táhirih, much to the dismay of many Bábís, finally won over Quddús to her point of view.¹⁴ Quddús conceded that the Islamic law had been abrogated. So complete was their reconciliation that the two departed from Badash̄t riding in the same howdah. When they neared the village of Niyálá, the local mullá, outraged at seeing an unveiled woman sitting next to a man and chanting poems aloud, led a mob against them. Several people died in the resulting clash and the Bábís dispersed in different directions (*Amanat, Resurrection* 328).

From 1848–1850, pitched battles raged between the Bábís and government forces in Mázandarán, Zanján, and Nayríz. Táhirih remained in hiding, moving from village to village for about a year (*Amanat, Resurrection* 329). Around 1849 authorities arrested her on charges of complicity in the assassination of her uncle. They brought her to Tehran where they imprisoned her in the house of the Kalántar (Mayor). The Kalhntar’s wife became very attached to Táhirih, and women again flocked to hear Táhirih’s discourses (*Nabíl-i-A‘zam, Dawn-Breakers* 622).

On July 9, 1850, the Báb was executed in Tabríz by order of the Shah. Two years later a small group of Bábís sought to take revenge by assassinating the Shah. The attempt failed, and a general massacre of Bábís then ensued. The government decided to execute Táhirih as well. According to one European observer (Polak, *Persien* 352), before her execution was ratified, Táhirih was taken before Násiri’-d-Dín Shah. He proposed marrying Táhirih on condition that she recant her heretical beliefs. Táhirih’s most famous poem was written as a blunt refusal of his proposal. After being interrogated by two senior *mujtahids*, Mullá ‘Alí Kaní and Mullá Muhammad Andirmání, Táhirih dressed herself in wedding attire for her martyrdom. She was taken to a garden in September 1852 (*Amanat, Resurrection* 329), strangled, and thrown down a well (*Nabíl-i-A‘zam, Dawn-Breakers* 626–27). Her last words are reported to be, “You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 75).

Poetry

Táhirih’s uniqueness as a female religious leader can be seen in the dynamism of her poetry. Before examining these poems, however, we have first to determine which of those poems credited to her are likely to be authentic. Most of the early Bábí documents were destroyed in the massacres of 1852, so Táhirih’s poetry was often preserved only orally and thus was subject to all the revisions and variations which that process involves. Some of the poems credited to her were in fact written by others. For instance, Táhirih is said to have written one poem and sent it to the Báb after she recognized his station through a vision. E. G. Browne has translated a part of this poem as follows:

The effulgence of thy face flashed forth and the rays of thy visage arose on high;
Then speak the word, “Am I not your Lord?” and “Thou art, Thou art!” we will all reply.

(E. G. Browne, *Materials* 350)

However, Muslim scholars have determined that this poem was the original composition of an earlier poet Muhammad Báqir Suhbat of Lar in whose collection the whole poem (with certain variants) occurs (*Ishaque, Poetesses* 32). Táhirih may well have quoted this when writing to the Báb, but it does not seem to have been her original composition. Another *ghazal* (untranslated) credited to Táhirih by these same Muslim scholars, according to Noghabai is the work of Ta’ir Isfahání (Noghabai, *Táhirih* 157). Táhirih’s poetry is often confused with the work of the Bahá’í historian and poet Nabíl as well.

Because so little of Táhirih’s poetry has been translated into English or compiled in any sort of anthology, I will quote some poems at length.¹⁵ Most of her poems are *ghazals* written in the *Kamil* meter. Táhirih wrote in a very classical and difficult style, using rare Arabic phrases frequently. Modern writers have sometimes criticized her for being bombastic. However, none of these phrases interrupt the spontaneous flow of the poetry. Her poems are often ecstatic and inspiring, with graceful rhythm and excellent diction. The general themes of her poetry include her ecstatic love for God and his Manifestation, the Báb (and perhaps Bahá’u’lláh); her fascination with suffering and martyrdom; her messianic fervor and apocalyptic expectations for renewal of the social order; her hostility towards the traditional clergy. The latter two themes are reflected in the following poem, which also expresses her high regard for the intellectual freedom she expects the new dispensation to bring. Such strong revolutionary and anticlerical themes were unprecedented in Iranian poetry—whether written by male or female—prior to the outpouring of such literature during the Constitutional Revolution more than fifty years later.

Truly, the Morn of Guidance commands the breeze to begin
 All the world has been illuminated; every horizon; every people
 No more sits the Shaykh in the seat of hypocrisy
 No more becomes the mosque a shop dispensing holiness
 The tie of the turban will be cut at its source
 No Shaykh will remain, neither glitter nor secrecy
 The world will be free from superstitions and vain imaginings
 The people free from deception and temptation
 Tyranny is destined for the arm of justice
 Ignorance will be defeated by perception
 The carpet of justice will be outspread everywhere
 And the seeds of friendship and unity will be spread throughout
 The false commands eradicated from the earth
 The principle of opposition changed to that of unity.
 (Noghabai, *Táhirih*, 152)

The next poem, written in a style similar to Rúmi's *Divan-i Shams-i Tabríz*, conveys the ecstatic quality of Táhirih's poetry. I quote a small portion of it:

In the path of your love, O Idol,¹⁶ I am enamoured with torment
 How long will you ignore me, I am grief-stricken
 My face veiled, my hair torn out
 I have separated myself from all creation
 You are the light, you are the veil, you are the moon, you are the horizon....
 (Noghabai, *Táhirih*, 154)

The following poem expresses Táhirih's longing for martyrdom:

In the land of your love I remain, finding no favor from anyone
 See what a stranger I am, Thou who art King of the land?
 Is it a sin, O Idol, that my every breath breathes the mystery of your love?
 Separate me, kill me, take me unjustly
 The time of patience has ended, how long should I stand separation?
 When every piece of my being, like a hollow reed, tells a sad tale
 Reason cannot apprehend you, souls die of your thought
 All at the door of existence are nothing, you are ultimate
 When the zephyr passes by bringing news of their destruction
 Making pale the faces and the eyes weep, what would be your loss?
 You step to my bed in the morning out of compassion, I fly with both wings and hands
 When you rescue one from this place, you will take her to the placeless place
 Then I will let go of the soul of the world, for you are the creator of all souls.
 (Noghabai, *Táhirih* 159)

E. G. Browne has translated Táhirih's most famous *ghazal*, which was written in answer to Násiri'd-Dín Shah's marriage proposal (Browne, *Materials* 348–49). The first section is addressed to the Báb as the Beloved. The second is Táhirih's answer to the Shah.

The thralls of yearning love constrain in the bonds of pain and calamity
 These broken-hearted lovers of thine to yield their lives in their zeal for thee.
 Though with sword in hand my Darling stand with intent to slay though I sinless be,
 If it pleases him, this tyrant's whim, I am well content with his tyranny.
 As in sleep I lay at the break of day that cruel charmer came to me,
 And in the grace of his form and face the dawn of the morn I seem to see.
 The musk of Cathay might perfume gain from the scent of those fragrant tresses rain.
 While his eyes demolish a faith in vain attacked by the pagans of Tartary.¹⁷

With you, who condemn both love and wine for the hermit's cell and the zealot's shrine,¹⁸
 What can I do, for our Faith divine you hold as a thing of infamy?
 The tangled curls of thy darling's hair, and thy saddle and steed are thy only care;
 In thy heart the Absolute hath no share, nor the thought of the poor man's poverty.
 Sikandar's pomp and display be thine, the *Qalandar's* habit and way be mine;
 That, if it please thee, I resign, while this, though bad, is enough for me.
 Pass from the station of "I" and "We," and choose for thy home Nonentity,
 For when thou has done the like of this, thou shalt reach the supreme Felicity.

The next poem is probably the last one written by Táhirih. It refers to her interrogation by the two *mujtahids* who signed her death warrant. The poem reflects disappointment but not despair; disillusionment but no loss of vision. I quote only a portion of it:

At the corner of the lip, a single beauty mark and two black tresses
 Alas, for the bird of the heart, a single grain and two snares
 A constable, a *shaykh* and I; the talk is of love.
 How can I reply to them; one boiled and two raw?
 From the face and the locks of the Idol 'ny days are as nights.
 Alas, for my days; day is one, night two....

(Noghabai, *Táhirih* 152)

Táhirih as Paradigm

In the introduction I suggested that Táhirih was for Bahá'ís the religious paradigm of womanhood, comparable to the figures of Sita, Fátimih, and the Virgin Mary. But non-Bahá'ís as well have often seen her as a figure bigger than life. Long before the Bahá'í Faith had made its way West, Europeans were inspired and fascinated by her. Lord Curzon called her life "one of the most affecting episodes in modern history" (*Persia* 497, n.2). Marie von Najmajer, the gifted Austrian poet, heard of Táhirih in 1870 and was inspired to write her greatest poem on Táhirih's life. Marianna Hainisch, mother of an Austrian president and founder of the New Woman Movement for Austria, claimed to have been inspired that same year. She stated in 1925, "The greatest ideal of womanhood all my life has been Táhirih.... of Qazvin, Iran. I was only seventeen years old when I heard of her life and her martyrdom, but I said, 'I shall try to do for the women of Austria what Táhirih gave her life to do for women of Persia'" (Root, *Táhirih* 112).

Sarah Bernhart, the famous actress, requested the playwright Catulle Mendes to write a dramatized version of Táhirih's life. He referred to Táhirih as "the Persian Joan of Arc, the leader of emancipation for women of the Orient who bore resemblance both to the mediaeval Heloise and the neo-platonic Hypatia" (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 76).

Edward Granville Browne wrote of Táhirih:

The appearance of such a woman as Kurratu'l-'Ayn is in any country and any age a rare phenomenon, but in such a country as Persia it is a prodigy—nay, almost a miracle. Alike in virtue of her marvellous beauty, her rare intellectual gifts, her fervid eloquence, her fearless devotion, and her glorious martyrdom, she stands forth incomparable and immortal amidst her countrywomen. Had the Bábí religion no other claim to greatness, this were sufficient—that it produced a heroine like Kurratu'l-'Ayn. (*Traveller's Narrative* 309)

To the Muslim polemicists, Táhirih is often an archetype of a different sort. For them she is the paradigm of the dangerous and seductive whore, an object-lesson in the dangers of allowing women too much freedom. One such Writer describes her story in these terms:

It seems God created women as a sort of test for men. As it is forbidden to go near the wine so it is forbidden to go near the other, women. When beautiful women discard their modesty they bring rains of devastation. There was such a woman Qurratul Ayn in Iran....

Qurratul Ayn was an extremely beautiful woman. She was well educated and oration was her special art. She could compose poetry in Persian language.

When she came to know that Ali Mohamad Baab had innovated a new religion; she not only accepted the religion but also became a preacher. To lure people into the fold of new religion she renounced Pardah and began to mix up with people showing her beauty and preaching the new religion. She succeeded in

gaining hold over a large number of people on account of her beauty. She was opposed by her family but she did not yield. She feared her uncle's wrath, hence she directed her lovers to murder the holy soul. Several of her lovers went in search of her uncle, they learnt that he was in some Mosque offering prayer. They went there and martyred the Mujtahed in the state of prayer.

When her prime opponent was removed she became bold enough to preach her hedonism with more gusto.... Tension prevailed in Iran due to her activities. The Emperor [*sic*] of Iran sent his army to capture her.... When the mischievous Qurratul Ayn was brought to the Royal court she came bare faced the king bent his head down but the others began to look at the marvellous beauty stealthily.... (Ghulamali, *Zehra Bano* 100–101)

No other single Bábí or Bahá'í hero or heroine has captured the imagination of Western Bahá'ís as has Táhirih. Numerous novels have been written about her.¹⁹ This may partly be due to the fact that women have largely dominated the Faith in the West. Yet strangely these accounts tone Táhirih down considerably. For instance, Táhirih's leadership within the Shaykhí community of Karbilá has been largely ignored. The story of Táhirih brandishing a sword and disturbing Quddús's devotions cannot be found in Western accounts. This may be partly attributable to the tendency of Bahá'ís to minimize the militant aspects of the Bábí religion in keeping with their present-day political quietism. But the overall result is that Táhirih appears as a more forceful personality in Persian Bahá'í sources than she does to Western Bahá'ís.

But if Táhirih provides the paradigmatic ideal of womanhood for Bahá'ís, we would do well to examine what qualities are therefore being commended and which ones are largely absent. This paradigm suggests that women are encouraged to be assertive, intelligent, eloquent, passionately devoted to causes, and yet, still beautiful. Absent are many of those qualities generally found in other feminine ideals: devotion to family, modesty, gentleness, and submissiveness.

How do the qualities Táhirih exemplified affect the lives of Bahá'í women, particularly those living in a cultural context that does not reinforce these qualities? Yazd is a city situated in central Iran with a reputation for conservatism and religious fanaticism. Anthropologist Judith Goldstein did field work on the religious communities of Yazd between 1973-1975. She observed that Bahá'í women, unlike the women of other communities, associated freely with men and participated nearly equally in religious gatherings. The principle of the equality of men and women was a frequent topic of discussion, used to establish the superiority of the Bahá'í teachings. Noting that for Bahá'ís, "eloquence is a cultivated virtue; one might argue that it becomes a substitute for public, communal ritual" ("Interwoven Identities" 206), she goes on to say:

Bahai women conduct religious discussions in a manner quite different from the style of more traditional women's conversation. The skillful use of metaphor and command of argument can be seen.... The Bahai women's active stance is expressed in eloquence. ("Interwoven Identities" 227)

As Dr. Goldstein points out, the model for the articulate Bahá'í woman is the immortal heroine Táhirih. Yet this model would not go unchallenged. Other women such as Bahíyyih Khánum are often held up as models of women playing more traditional "supporting roles." Yet the figure of Táhirih presents a paradigm truly unique in religious history. Ultimately only the future will tell if the Bahá'í community will exploit the potentialities of this paradigm.

Notes

1. In the theological sense, Táhirih is not the most important woman in the Bahá'í Faith: that distinction belongs to Navváb, the wife of Bahá'u'lláh, and Bahíyyih Khánum, his eldest daughter. Of the first figure, however, very little has been written in English, or to my knowledge in Persian. Bahíyyih Khánum is much better known, since she served as the *de facto* head of the Bahá'í community several times. She has usually been depicted as playing a supportive role in relation to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, although in the opinion of this writer she was much more of an independent actor. She has not attracted nearly as much popular attention within the Bahá'í community as has Táhirih. Táhirih plays, in this sense, a much more important role for she has become a legend. Both in Iran and America, her name is the most popular one given to Bahá'í girls.

2. The Shaykhí school was founded by Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í (d. 1824). He held that there was a material body and soul and a spiritual body and soul and that only the latter would be raised in the resurrection. He also held

that Muhammad's Night Journey was not to be taken literally. He was known for his extreme veneration of the Imáms and for his belief in the imminent appearance of the Hidden Imám.

3. Her brother 'Abdu'l-Vahháb said of her, "None of us, her brothers or her cousins, dared to speak in her presence, her learning so intimidated us; and if we ventured to express some hypothesis on a disputed point of doctrine, she demonstrated in such a clear, precise and conclusive manner that we were going astray, that we instantly withdrew confused" (Nicolas, *Seyyèd Ali-Muhammed dit le Bab* 273–74).

4. Her two sons Ibráhim and Isma'il later became *mujtahids*. The latter succeeded his father as the *Imám-Jum'ih* of Qazvín (Amanat, "Early Years" 255).

5. The term *Letters of the Living* refers to nineteen Arabic letters comprising the opening verse of súrihs of the Qur'án (except the nineteenth): "In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate." The Báb plus his disciples total nineteen Letters of the Living.

6. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá she recognised the Báb through a dream: "One night when it was getting along toward dawn she laid her head on her pillow, lost all awareness of this earthly life, and dreamed a dream; in her vision a youth, a Siyyid, wearing a black cloak and a green turban, appeared to her in the heavens; he was standing in the air, reciting verses and praying with his hands upraised. At once, she memorized one of these verses, and wrote it down in her notebook when she awoke. After the Báb had declared His mission, and His first book, 'The Best of Stories,' was circulated, Táhirih was reading a section of the text one day, and she came upon that same Verse, which she had noted down from the dream. Instantly offering thanks, she fell to her knees and bowed her forehead to the ground, convinced that the Báb's message was truth" (*Memorials* 193).

7. Among her known works still extant are a letter written to her cousin Mullá Javad Valiyani, who at first became a Bábí and then rejected the Bahá'í Faith. Six other works are produced in *Zuhur al-Haqq* by Fázil Mázandarání, which includes a letter to Mullá Husayn in Arabic; two public addresses; a letter addressed to the Muftí of Baghdad, Ibn Álúsi; an apologetic tract written in defence of the Báb and two letters addressed to the Bábís of Isfahán. A centennial volume written by Azalí Bábís in 1949 and entitled *Qurrat al-'Ayn* provides six other prayers and letters. *Kashfu'l al-Ghitá* by Najafí contains a long Arabic treatise. E.G. Browne gives the text and translation of a letter written to Shaykh Alí 'Azím in an appendix of *The Tárikh-i-Jadíd*. Táhirih's poetry will be discussed later.

8. The Báb's teachings certainly aimed at improving the condition of women by abolishing the temporary marriage allowable in Shiite Islam as well as the practice of instant divorce, but women's position could hardly be regarded as equal.

9. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 32; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials* 192; Root, *Táhirih* 44; and Nabil-i-'Azam, *Dawn-Breakers* 293 indicate more specifically that Bahá'u'lláh gave Táhirih her title at the conference in Badashat and that the Báb subsequently approved it.

10. Táhirih would, under normal circumstances, remain veiled. She unveiled only when she had a particular point to make, no doubt because of its shock appeal.

11. Cited in Amanat, *Resurrection* 310. Amanat lists a couple of secondary sources for this quote, which he translates but is not certain of the title of Álúsi's work here. He speculates it is from Álúsi's incomplete and unpublished work *Nahj al-salama ila mabahith al-Imama*, Álúsi's last work, written in 1270 A.H.

12. After describing this incident, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarks, "These things would take place before the reality of this Cause was revealed and all was made plain. For in those days no one knew that the Manifestation of the Báb would culminate in the Manifestation of the Blessed Beauty [Bahá'u'lláh] and that the law of retaliation would be done away with, and the foundation-principle of the Law of God would be this, that 'It is better for you to be killed than to kill'; that discord and contention would cease, and the rule of war and butchery would fall away. In those days, that sort of thing would happen" (*Memorials* 198–99).

13. *Dawn-Breakers* 285–86. Táhirih's father remained convinced of her innocence as well as her chastity, but the accusations caused him untold grief. At one point, the prayer leader at the Friday mosque of Qazvín read a verse mocking Mullá Sálíh: "No glory remains on that house/From which the hens crow like the cocks." Mullá Sálíh was said to have remained silent, as tears ran down his face (Amanat, *Resurrection* 322).

14. Bahá'u'lláh apparently proved instrumental in bringing about the reconciliation. His subsequent actions show that, while advocating a total break with Islam, He believed in non-violent means for attaining that end.

15. Where not otherwise stated, these rough translations, intended only to convey Táhirih's general meaning, were done by this author with the assistance of Farzad Nakhai.

16. "Idol" is sometimes used poetically to refer to an object of extreme devotion.

17. Táhirih is here suggesting that Islam, which survived the Mongols' invasions, has fallen before the Báb.

18. "Love and wine" are to be understood in the mystical sense.

19. Among these are *Táhirih* by Clara Edge, *From behind the Veil* by Kathleen Jemison Demas, and a short story appearing in *World Order* entitled, “Thralls of Yearning Love” by Dimitri Marianoff and Marzieh Gail.

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