

# The Journal of Communication and Religion

Volume 42

Winter 2019

Number 4

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## A Persian Preacher's Westward Migration: Táhírih's Transnational Rhetoric, 1817–2015

Layli Maria Miron

**Abstract:** During her brief life in the early nineteenth century, the Persian poet and theologian Táhírih advocated for a spiritual revolution. Authorities executed her for heresy in 1852. After death, Táhírih attracted admirers around the world; Western writers—especially women—have interpreted her history to argue for gender equality, religious renewal, and global interdependence. This Middle Eastern preacher has established a posthumous pulpit in the United States, as members of the Bahá'í Faith there have authored a dozen books about her. After introducing Táhírih's rhetorical rebellions, this essay demonstrates her transnational influence by analyzing her afterlives in U.S. Bahá'í discourse.

*Keywords:* Middle East (Persia/Iran), United States, Bahá'í Faith, women writers, Orientalism

...*Tahirih has become a universal figure. She is the first modern Iranian woman to belong to the world.*  
—Bahiyiyh Nakhjavani

Tehran, 1852: a woman is executed for heresy. According to Persia's official record of this condemned prisoner, she is a promiscuous blasphemer, little more than a prostitute, who enthroned herself as queen of a heretical sect.<sup>1</sup> Even in recent decades, she has been cited as an example of how when “beautiful women discard their modesty they bring rains of devastation.”<sup>2</sup> In Iran, only in a minority community marginalized by persecution—the Bahá'ís—have her accomplishments been honored throughout the 168 years since her death. Yet, beyond Iran, Táhírih<sup>3</sup> (c. 1817–1852) has won admirers who find in her history a call for emancipating the human spirit from oppressive tradition. In life, she roamed as far as central Iraq from her hometown in northwestern Persia; in death, she has roved much farther, becoming through the traveling tale of her rhetorical rebellions a “universal figure,” as Bahiyiyh Nakhjavani puts it.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes as a preacher, sometimes as a prisoner, theologian and poet Táhírih traveled between provinces of Qajar Persia and Ottoman Iraq. Born into a wealthy family of theologians, she followed her ancestral vocation, developing into an erudite commentator on Islamic scripture. Her enthusiastic engagement with theology in her youth; her enrollment in a millenarian movement forecasting a messiah, a successor to

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<sup>1</sup> If discussing events before 1935, I use “Persia”; if discussing events after the 1935 renaming, I use “Iran.” Regarding Táhírih's purported enthronement, the court chronicler, Sipíhr, imagined a decadent Táhírih sitting on a throne in front of Bábí men; see Negar Mottahedeh, “The Mutilated Body of the Modern Nation: Qurrat al-'Ayn Tahirah's Unveiling and the Iranian Massacre of the Babis,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18, no. 2 (1998): 38–50 (43).

<sup>2</sup> G. I. Nají, *Zebra Bano*, trans. Raza Husain Baroywal (Karachi: Peermahomed Ebrahim Trust, 1973), 100.

<sup>3</sup> Táhírih (“Pure One”) had many other titles, notably Qurratu'l-'Ayn (“Solace of the Eyes”) and Zarrín-Táj (“Crown of Gold”). The transliterations of these titles vary. Her birth name was Fátimih Barágháni.

<sup>4</sup> Bahiyiyh Nakhjavani, *The Woman Who Read Too Much* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 317.

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Layli Maria Miron is completing a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition at Penn State University. Her research focuses on transnational discourses enabled by immigration and religion. She has witnessed such transnational connections firsthand: she met her husband, Sergey, who hails from Moldova, while they were both serving at the Bahá'í World Centre in Israel. Today, in moments when she's not writing, she enjoys strolling with Sergey through Central Pennsylvania, admiring the region's natural beauty, from its dense woodlands to its abundant groundhogs. Layli invites you to read more of her essays on her website: <https://layli.net>.

Muhammad; her acceptance of Siyyid ‘Alí Muhammad (1819–1850), titled “the Báb,” as that messiah; her bold preaching of the Báb’s call for spiritual revolution entailing the transformation of society and abolition of clergy; her leadership of Bábís; and her execution by her government for heresy: most members of the Bahá’í Faith—followers of Bahá’u’lláh, who claimed to be the Promised One foretold by the Báb—know these outlines of Táhirih’s life. She is “the most well-known woman in Bábí-Bahá’í history,” as historian Susan Stiles Maneck avers.<sup>5</sup> Her longstanding fame stems from her brash heterodoxy. In the context of Persia’s strict sex segregation, her public mobility was unprecedented, eliciting attempts to still her: imprisonments, execution, and distorted histories.

If Táhirih’s life is a story of revolutionary rhetoric’s persuasive—and punishable—power, her afterlives tell a story about historiography’s evolutionary nature, as rhetors around the world have written and rewritten her exploits to make arguments for women’s rights, religious renewal, and transnational solidarity. Though figuratively exiled from Persia by its rulers’ bloody censorship of the Bábí movement in the 1850s, her story and her poems migrated east to the Indian subcontinent, where she won acolytes; north to Russia, where her story gained fame onstage; and west to Europe and then to the United States, where she found her most sustained audience. As of this writing, at least fifteen books about Táhirih have been published in the United States,<sup>6</sup> as well as numerous shorter texts.

My purpose in this essay is historiographical: to introduce Táhirih’s rebellious rhetoric in its nineteenth-century context and to demonstrate her transnational influence in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. That is, I aim to write Táhirih into the history of rhetoric. As Cheryl Glenn writes, “rhetorical history is not neutral”—it has traditionally been “patriarchal territory,” but our new histories open “a frontier.”<sup>7</sup> Táhirih stands on a rhetorical frontier, not only as an exceptional woman meriting recovery, but also as a border-crosser catalyzing the transmission of Middle Eastern discourse to “the West.” Few rhetorical studies consider texts produced at crossroads of the Middle East and the West in modernity, and of those few, most focus on how rhetorical concepts have spread *eastward*.<sup>8</sup> But what about the other direction—how have

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Stiles Maneck, “Táhirih: A Religious Paradigm of Womanhood,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 2, no. 2 (1989): 1–10 (2).

<sup>6</sup> These books are two scholarly histories, two biographies, four novels, three collections of her translated poetry, two plays, one illustrated children’s book, and one poetry collection inspired by her. There have also been several multimedia works on Táhirih released in the United States, including a film and musical albums.

<sup>7</sup> Cheryl Glenn, “sex, lies, and manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric,” *College Composition and Communication* 45, no. 2 (1994): 180–199 (194–195).

<sup>8</sup> Most such studies focus on Greco-Roman influences on Arab-Islamic philosophy in the medieval era or on Euro-American influences on educational practices in modernity. For instance, Lahcen Ezzaher presents *Three Arabic Treatises on Aristotle’s Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2015), providing U.S. scholars a window into how medieval Islamic philosophers interpreted the urtext of rhetoric. These philosophers helped transmit Greco-Roman learning to Europe, demonstrating the multidirectional relations between Middle East and West. Given that Europe’s relationship with the Middle East became explicitly colonial by the nineteenth century, with the United States taking a neocolonial role by the twentieth, it is no surprise that the few rhetorical studies on the region during this period analyze Western influences and local responses thereto. Such studies include Lisa Arnold’s illuminating studies of the early years of the American University of Beirut (see “An Imagined America: Rhetoric and Identity during the ‘First Student Rebellion in the Arab World,’” *College English* 78, no. 6 [2016]: 578–601) and Randall Fowler’s *More Than a Doctrine: The Eisenhower Era in the Middle East* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018). In

discourses migrated *westward*? If we only examine Western influences on the Middle East, we risk perpetuating a historical narrative that denies the Middle East any agency, depicting it as a victim/beneficiary of Western imperializing/liberating interventions. This narrative reduces the Middle East and the West to nemeses, hawking an essential clash between the “Axis of Evil” and the “Great Satan.” Historiography, a rhetorical art, persuades publics to envision a future based on a framing of the past; some framings, in the words of LuMing Mao, “perpetuate the existing power imbalances,” but others point toward “relations of interdependence.”<sup>9</sup> By tracing a Persian woman’s influence on the United States, I complicate the fabled East-West dichotomy, gesturing toward the potential for humane transnational coalitions.

In historicizing *transnational* rhetoric, I pay attention to that *trans-* prefix and focus on Tāhīrih’s travels *beyond* Persia, *across* time, and *through* a faith community. To understand her travels, we must first know her origins, which, despite scores of relevant publications, are largely unknown outside the Bahá’í community. Indeed, the field of rhetoric has left this renowned and reviled rhetor unexamined. So the first part of this essay relates the outlines of her brief life, describing three of her rhetorical rebellions. She has continued her preaching in imaginative texts by Bahá’í writers, as the second part reveals through an analysis of texts about Tāhīrih published in the United States since the early 1900s.<sup>10</sup> I focus on four works of historical fiction because this genre has proven an enduringly popular platform for reviving Tāhīrih; indeed, the first known

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these cases, the focus is on how rhetorical concepts spread eastward, whether from ancient Greece or the modern United States to the Middle East.

There are, however, motions toward prioritizing rhetorics indigenous to the Middle East, as exemplified by Rasha Diab’s study, *Shades of Sulh: The Rhetorics of Arab-Islamic Reconciliation* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016). Her book diverges from the abovementioned scholarship by spotlighting a vernacular rhetoric, *ṣulh*, practiced by figures ranging from Prophet Muhammad to Anwar al-Sadat. Diab’s attention to peacemaking rhetoric might help dispel the Western stereotype of the Middle East as inherently violent (195). Though, in contrast, studying the bellicose rhetoric of jihad, Philippe-Joseph Salazar makes a similar point in critiquing the West’s inattention to Islamist persuasion in *Words Are Weapons* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). It is apparent that Westerners must better attend to multifarious discourses in the Middle East for the sake of international accord; as Diab suggests, scholars should explore a range of Arab rhetorical practices beyond commentaries on Aristotle, such as “religious oratory, organizational rhetoric, the teaching of rhetorical arts as part of an educational mission, and peacemaking practices as rhetorical knowledge and practice” (9). To her list I would add rhetoric of the Middle East’s non-Arab regions (such as Iran) and minority religions, since rhetorical scholarship on these subjects is virtually non-existent. Such investigation will, I believe, bring to light Middle Eastern rhetoric’s influence on the West.

<sup>9</sup> LuMing Mao, “Writing the Other into Histories of Rhetoric: Theorizing the Art of Recontextualization,” *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric*, ed. Michelle Baliff (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2013), 41–57 (47–48). Mao argues that in writing about rhetorics beyond our own cultural traditions, we inevitably view them from our own location, often resulting in either appropriation or idealization. He recommends we acknowledge the contexts of both our subjects and ourselves, advice I attempt to implement by devoting attention both to Tāhīrih’s context in nineteenth-century Persia and to my own context in the U.S. Bahá’í community. As Mao indicates, historiography necessitates a constant negotiation between standpoints.

<sup>10</sup> This study’s scope, spanning Eurasia and North America and the two centuries from Tāhīrih’s birth to the publication of *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, is intentionally wide, akin to “pan-historiography,” a method recognizing that “the making of meaning and of influence is an expansive project, one whose contours and complexities would be lost if pursued only in the scope of a few years or a single figure.” Debra Hawhee and Christa Olson, “Pan-Historiography: The Challenges of Writing History across Time and Space,” *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric*, 90–105 (96).

book on Táhírih produced in the United States was a novel.<sup>11</sup> These fictionalized biographies exemplify Táhírih's capacity to link regions, because as their protagonist, she articulates visions of transnational unity, which I explicate in the second half of this essay.

Unity, centering on interpersonal harmony, social justice, and international cooperation, is a key tenet of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'ís (myself included) believe in the potential of unity in diversity, global unification without homogenization.<sup>12</sup> As an example, Bahá'ís advocate a universal auxiliary language to facilitate intercultural communication; this lingua franca should *supplement*, not *replace*, local languages.<sup>13</sup> As another example, Bahá'ís envision that as humanity develops cosmopolitan consciousness, an international government will complement those at smaller scales, enabling both effective responses to global issues and situated decisions about regional ones. This vision is reflected in the Bahá'í elected administration, in which local assemblies implement programs suited to their communities, while national and international bodies ensure localities are working toward a common purpose.

To a skeptic, mindful of the violence wreaked by imperial attempts at transnational governance and by capitalistic globalization, this belief in global unification might appear naïvely idealistic. For Bahá'ís, however, it is a matter of faith in humanity's maturation out of fractious adolescence toward the "Day of Resurrection" that Táhírih anticipated—a spiritual awakening enabled by the teachings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>14</sup> With this awakening will come the motivation to cooperate across traditional boundaries, Bahá'ís believe. Therefore, in discussing Bahá'í rhetoric, I employ terms like *unification*, *interdependence*, and *globalism*, which in a Bahá'í context denote humanity's advancement. Tracking Táhírih's migration to the United States, we witness how this community has developed a transnational heroic paradigm that swerves from Orientalism's worn ruts.

### TÁHIRIH'S ARGUMENT FOR SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION (1817–1852)

*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!*  
—Táhírih, from "Lovers!"<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> This novel was Constance Fauntleroy Runcie's *The Bab*, written around 1908; although Runcie's "Persian romance" never made it to print, it is now published online on the Missouri Digital Heritage website.

<sup>12</sup> Regarding my positionality as a believer, I credit my experience as a Bahá'í with awakening my interest in Táhírih and in the relationship between Iran and the United States more generally (a relationship literalized in my mother's Persian-Euro-American parentage). Through my longstanding interest in the history of the early U.S. Bahá'í community—in which several of my great-great-grandparents were involved—I encountered the rhetorical efforts of converts including Laura Barney and Martha Root. In researching them, I noticed their common affection for Táhírih, leading to this project. I write more about their rhetoric—and about the significance of unity—in my articles "Laura Barney's Discipleship to 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Tracing a Theological Flow from the Middle East to the United States, 1900–1916," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 28, no. 1–2 (2018): 7–31, and "Martha Root's Interwar Lectures: Cosmic Education and the Rhetoric of Unity," *Peitho* 21, no. 1 (2018): 132–157.

<sup>13</sup> Miron, "Martha Root's Interwar Lectures," 142.

<sup>14</sup> John S. Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat, *The Poetry of Táhírih* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2002), 45.

<sup>15</sup> Amin Banani, Jascha Kessler, and Anthony Lee, *Táhírih: A Portrait in Poetry: Selected Poems of Qurratu'l-'Ayn* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2004), 79.

“You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.” These are reputed to be among the last words spoken by Tāhīrih before her executioner strangled her in 1852.<sup>16</sup> Persian authorities sought to silence this outspoken woman through murder and slander, maligning her as wanton and wicked.<sup>17</sup> But her voice, the reverberations of her preaching and poetry’s rhetorical power, resounds. In addition to briefly recounting her life story,<sup>18</sup> this section highlights three episodes in which Tāhīrih challenged the patriarchal norms prevalent in her historical context of clerical control and strict gender segregation: her 1845 violation of a mourning ritual, her 1848 unveiling, and her 1850 rebuke of Persia’s king. Tāhīrih mustered embodied rhetoric—combining sophisticated theological argumentation with strategic physical nonconformity—to advocate for a groundbreaking revolution.

Although nineteenth-century Persian “gender apartheid” typically confined women to the private sphere and denied them higher education, Tāhīrih had an unusually liberal upbringing.<sup>19</sup> Her father, Mullah Salih, and his kinsmen had accumulated wealth and clout in Qazvin as clergy of Shi’ism, the Islamic denomination of most Persians. Some of Tāhīrih’s kinswomen—her grandmother, aunt, and mother, Aminih—preceded her as poets and theologians.<sup>20</sup> Tāhīrih studied literature with Aminih,<sup>21</sup> and she also pursued jurisprudence, philosophy, poetry, and theology.<sup>22</sup> She participated in Mullah Salih’s classes from behind a curtain, sharing her views in debates,<sup>23</sup> and she went on to teach women at his seminary.<sup>24</sup> Tāhīrih thus accrued religious and rhetorical expertise that would later bring her renown—and persecution—as an orator.

Tāhīrih’s educational pursuits must have been constrained when, at age fourteen, she was wedded to her cousin. Her liberal search after spiritual truth clashed with his conservatism. Indeed, her interest in a millenarian movement known as Shaykhism, which prophesied a messiah’s advent, disturbed her clerical kin. Planning to meet the Shaykhi leader, she left her husband and their two sons to travel some 535 miles southwest to Karbala with her daughter, sister, and brother-in-law. The leader died before their arrival, but Tāhīrih was supported by his widow in asserting leadership among the Shaykhis. She taught classes in his home, lecturing from behind a curtain.

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<sup>16</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, Illinois: U.S. Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979), 75.

<sup>17</sup> Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 81–82.

<sup>18</sup> In recounting Tāhīrih’s life, it must be acknowledged that no definitive version exists. I have based my account on the episodes frequently repeated in her various biographies. As for her own texts, she was known to be a prolific writer; historian Denis MacEoin in *The Sources for Early Bábí Doctrine and History: A Survey* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992) states that “Qurrat al-‘Ayn is known to have written a large number of *risálas* [religious essays], prayers, homilies, and, above all, poems, many of which are still extant” (108). Unlike her poems, her surviving prose has for the most part not been translated into English. As with every aspect of her life, some doubt the authenticity of words attributed to her. In offering passages of her translated preaching and poetry, I have selected poems and quotations generally accepted as being her work.

<sup>19</sup> Farzaneh Milani, *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 117.

<sup>20</sup> Shabnam Tolouei, *Dust-Flower-Flame* (Persian Media Production, 2016), 00:09:50.

<sup>21</sup> Tolouei, *Dust-Flower-Flame*, 00:13:20.

<sup>22</sup> Moojan Momen, “Usuli, Akhbari, Shaykhi, Babi: The Tribulations of a Qazvin Family,” *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2003): 317–37 (328).

<sup>23</sup> Milani, *Words, Not Swords*, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Momen, “Tribulations,” 328.

Since veiling was crucial to female chastity, with unveiling tantamount to prostitution,<sup>25</sup> Táhírih's concealment of her body from male audiences comprised a negotiation with sex segregation, an acceptance of modesty but rejection of quietude.

### Táhírih's First Rebellion: Violating Custom (Karbala, 1845)

*Such a sea has been churned up  
and loosed upon the earth's expanse  
that each moment two thousand Karbilá deserts  
are transformed into verdurous planes.*

—Táhírih, from "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest"<sup>26</sup>

Starting in Karbala, Táhírih vociferously promoted the messianic claim of a young man titled the Báb ("the Gate"), whose message was carried to her by Shaykhi colleagues.<sup>27</sup> Central to the Bábí religion was the belief that God continued to send revelation to humanity, providing new teachings suited to the current age. She embraced the Báb's message; he appointed her, along with seventeen men, to apostleship. Táhírih understood that his mission necessitated abrogating Islamic law as a prerequisite to adopting Bábí law, and she pulled away from Shia orthodoxy. In a poem about the Báb's "dawning day" of transformation, Táhírih jubilantly announces the deposal of clergy: "No ranting shaykh rules from his pulpit throne / No mosque hawks holiness it does not know / No sham, no pious fraud, no priest commands!"<sup>28</sup> "Equality shall strike the despots low," she continues, perhaps alluding to the equality of the sexes. During this Iraq period, she reportedly began to move toward unveiling at some Bábí gatherings.<sup>29</sup> Her rebellion as a woman appropriating masculine traditions of religious rhetoric—a hen crowing like a cock, as one clergyman called her—heralded the shift to new teachings.<sup>30</sup>

Karbala was the setting for Táhírih's first major public performance of rebellion: a revolt against a Shia ritual day of mourning known as Ashura. In Shia Islam, Ashura commemorates the martyrdom of the revered Imam Husayn, with observers wearing dark colors to mark their grief.<sup>31</sup> In 1845, Ashura coincided with the birthday of the Báb. Táhírih, asserting that Islamic traditions had been abrogated, chose to celebrate the Báb rather than mourn the Imam Husayn. She wore festive garb and some of her Bábí acolytes, called "Qurratiya" after her, did the same, stirring a scandal in the city.<sup>32</sup> Her outrageously joyful attire constituted an embodied sermon, exhorting the Bábís to physically discard religious convention, regardless of the resulting opprobrium. Not all Bábís appreciated her guidance. Some complained to the Báb, who, in his reply, called her "a righteous, learned, active, and pure woman," and instructed, "do not dispute al-Táhírih in her command for she is aware of the circumstances of the cause and there is

<sup>25</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 321.

<sup>26</sup> Hatcher and Hemmat, *Poetry*, 79.

<sup>27</sup> Momen, "Tribulations," 329–30.

<sup>28</sup> Banani, Kessler, and Lee, *Táhírih*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Momen, "Tribulations," 331; see also Amanat, *Resurrection*, 305.

<sup>30</sup> Momen, "Tribulations," 333.

<sup>31</sup> Janet Ruhe-Schoen, *Rejoice in My Gladness: The Life of Táhírih* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing, 2011), 169.

<sup>32</sup> Ruhe-Schoen, *Rejoice*, 171.

nothing for you but submission to her since it is not destined for you to recognize the truth of her status.”<sup>33</sup> Táhírih’s actions—and even “her command”—bore the Báb’s imprimatur. Her preaching attracted followers and converts but also enraged Islamic clerics, whom she brazenly invited to public debate.<sup>34</sup> She left Karbala under a hail of stones from a mob riled by the clergy, traveling to Baghdad, from whence she was banished from the Ottoman Empire, returning to Persia with a band of followers.<sup>35</sup>

### Táhírih’s Second Rebellion: Unveiling (Badasht, 1848)

*He’s come! He’s here to tear our veils away  
He’s here! He’s come to show us God today  
Yet masters of the mind refuse to hear  
And heaven’s song is wasted on their ear  
He’s come to bring us life beyond all praise  
He lights this world: his voice is heaven’s blaze  
Its fire burns our world with wild delight  
Stripped bare we stand: we’re made of purest light!  
Lift the veil, Táhírih! He’s now exposed!  
His hidden mystery has been disclosed!  
—Táhírih, from “He Has Come!”<sup>36</sup>*

In 1847, Táhírih traveled from city to city in northwestern Persia, preaching and holding discussions with public leaders.<sup>37</sup> Her rhetoric’s efficacy is clear from records of the passionate reactions—the fervor of converts and the wrath of clergymen (those “masters of the mind”)—she provoked. In one village, Karand, 1,200 admirers offered to accompany her, apparently as a retinue of guards.<sup>38</sup> Her husband and his clergyman father, on the other hand, despised Shaykhi and Bábí teachings. Táhírih concluded her journey in her hometown, Qazvin, where they tried to coerce her back into Islam and wifehood. Unyielding, she left her husband. Soon after, his father was killed by a Shaykhi man. To avenge his death, mobs lynched Bábís for supposed complicity; Táhírih’s ex-husband accused her (baselessly) of orchestrating the murder. She escaped Qazvin’s pogrom, fleeing to Tehran.

Despite her vulnerability as a fugitive, Táhírih managed, with the help of her Bábí network, to attend the new religion’s 1848 conference in Badasht, a village in northeastern Persia. At the Conference of Badasht, in the summertime gardens where they camped for several weeks, attendees deliberated over whether to try freeing the Báb from prison and debated whether he intended to revive Islam or to replace it. Táhírih, the lone woman among eighty male attendees, performed her second major rebellion here, the performance that would cement her eventual reputation as a proto-feminist. She aspired to convince her more conservative coreligionists that the Báb’s religion superseded Muhammad’s. One day, she walked unveiled into a gathering of men, her

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Ruhe-Schoen, *Rejoice*, 171.

<sup>34</sup> Amanat, *Resurrection*, 308.

<sup>35</sup> Ruhe-Schoen, *Rejoice*, 181.

<sup>36</sup> Banani, Kessler, and Lee, *Táhírih*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Amanat, *Resurrection*, 312.

<sup>38</sup> A’zam, Nabil-i-, *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil’s Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá’í Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Illinois: U.S. Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1932), 272 n.8.

face's exposure provoking "fear, anger, and bewilderment," to such an extent that one man threatened her and another reportedly slit his own throat in distress.<sup>39</sup> Apparently unmoved by the pandemonium, she quoted from Surah 54 of the Qur'an: "Verily, amid gardens and rivers shall the pious dwell in the seat of truth, in the presence of the potent King." Her statement analogizes her surroundings, the gardens of Badasht, to paradise, and attendees to "the pious." Then she declared, "I am the Word which the Qá'im [Messiah] is to utter, the Word which shall put to flight the chiefs and nobles of the earth!" She concluded, "This day is the day of festivity and universal rejoicing . . . on which the fetters of the past are burst asunder. Let those who have shared in this great achievement arise and embrace each other."<sup>40</sup>

In a detailed analysis of Táhírih's unveiling, Negar Mottahedeh argues that her famous gesture opened Islam to questioning, "thereby creating the conditions for a new discourse on space and a new era in (religious) history."<sup>41</sup> Merging the jarring physical performance of unveiling with suasive scriptural language, Táhírih demanded that her audience relinquish their birth religion, spurring those who chose to accept the prophetic "Word" she embodied and spurning those who clung to tradition. Her embodied rhetoric, and her audience's tumultuous response, exemplifies the provocative power of delivery that violates gendered decorum.<sup>42</sup>

### Táhírih's Third Rebellion: Refusing a King (Tehran, 1850)

*But you, O King, ignorant of mine's ecstasy and love's longing,  
can but pace behind the pious ones, the ascetics.  
And what can I do when you doubt or disdain  
the holy motives of the sanctified ones?  
You desire only a woman's dangling ringlets,  
the well-bred steed, the silver-studded saddle.*  
—Táhírih, from "Rebuking the King's Desire"<sup>43</sup>

After the conference, Táhírih, still a fugitive due to her ex-husband's accusations, lived in hiding for several years. On the cusp of 1850, government agents discovered and arrested this "wanted Babi rebel."<sup>44</sup> She was so notorious that the king, Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, had taken an interest in her case. When she arrived in Tehran, the Shah summoned her. During their meeting, he requested that she unveil her face and she complied, prompting his initial edict, "I like her looks. Leave her, and let her be."<sup>45</sup> Her

<sup>39</sup> A'zam, *Damn-Breakers*, 295.

<sup>40</sup> A'zam, *Damn-Breakers*, 296.

<sup>41</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, "Ruptured Spaces and Effective Histories: The Unveiling of the Babi Poetess Qurrat al-'Ayn-Táhírih in the Gardens of Badasht," *UCLA Historical Journal* 17 (1997): 59–81 (73).

<sup>42</sup> Feminist rhetoricians have demonstrated how, merely by entering "male" spaces like the pulpit, women violate expectations of delivery, thus attracting attention (Roxanne Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003]). Similarly, by refusing to conform to sartorial norms, women can demand change—and provoke shock, as shown by public backlash against the "Bloomers," Táhírih's U.S. contemporaries (Carol Mattingly, *Well-Tempered Women: Nineteenth-Century Temperance Rhetoric* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1998]).

<sup>43</sup> Hatcher and Hemmat, *Poetry*, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman, *The Calling: Tabirih of Persia and Her American Contemporaries* (Bethesda, Maryland: Ibex Publishers, 2017), 185.

<sup>45</sup> Ruhe-Schoen, *Rejoice*, 293.

fate for the next two years, however, was house arrest, with a rooftop room of the mayor's house serving as her prison cell. The king had not forgotten Táhírih, though, and as pressure mounted from clerics eager to eradicate Bábís, he offered her amnesty—with a catch. If she would recant, he would wed her and add her to his harem.

Naser al-Din Shah's offer to Táhírih precipitated her third performance of rebellion, as she rebuffed his invitation. The following verses are widely regarded as her rebuttal: "I'll walk the beggar's path—though bad—it's mine. / It's Alexander's road that you pursue. / Ride past my camp, on your road to nowhere."<sup>46</sup> Táhírih eloquently rejected her final lifeline; her declared acceptance of her hard fate constitutes her last great rhetorical rebellion, as she chose her principles over safety in the royal harem. She was Scheherazade's inverse, refusing to charm a king in exchange for her life. In the years of imprisonment leading up to her execution, she continued to share the Báb's teachings, sparking interest among various women residents and guests of the mayor, even as he participated in a massacre of Bábís that left thousands dead. To eradicate a threat to the socio-religious status quo, the Persian monarchy and clergy collaborated in this pogrom, which peaked in 1852. Táhírih was no exception, adding her name to the roster of dead. After she once again refused to recant, she was strangled and—at her own instruction—immediately dropped into a pit and covered with stones.

### Táhírih's *Parrhesiastic* Rhetoric

*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!*  
—Táhírih, from "Proclamation"<sup>47</sup>

This small sample of episodes demonstrates Táhírih's facility with language and her fearless bodily performance. She was a *parrhesiastic* rhetor, speaking her revolutionary truth with candor—without tempering it to mollify the majority—careless of the consequent danger to her life.<sup>48</sup> As she commanded, "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."<sup>49</sup> For those who were ready for change, her message fit their needs. But for those satisfied with orthodoxy, her message was all wrong. It was wrong from a perspective that held Muhammad to be the final revelator. It was wrong for a social order in which respectable women should be unseen and unheard by men. From these perspectives, which held sway in her country and era, her rhetoric was utterly unfitting, and since she refused to sway from her course, the only recourse was execution.

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<sup>46</sup> Banani, Kessler, and Lee, *Táhírib*, 87.

<sup>47</sup> Banani, Kessler, and Lee, *Táhírib*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> I draw this definition from Gae Lyn Henderson, "The 'Parrhesiastic Game': Textual Self-Justification in Spiritual Narratives of Early Modern Women," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2007): 423–451.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful*, [www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/memorials-faithful/](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/memorials-faithful/).

As in Persia, in Europe and the United States, agitators for spiritual and social reform faced marginalization. Yet, in the West, such reformers enjoyed greater protections. State violence was never in the cards for the likes of a Mary Baker Eddy or a Susan B. Anthony. Upon entering nations that, for all their repressions, did afford freedom of speech, Táhírih found receptive audiences that sought to amplify rather than choke her voice. In Persia, authorities buried her under aspersions. In Europe and the United States, writers, especially Bahá'í women, exalted her memory in poems, plays, and novels.

### TÁHIRIH'S AFTERLIVES AS A RHETORICAL INFLUENCE (1852–2015)

Táhírih's migration is not without precedent. Christendom's foremost woman, the Virgin Mary, won worshippers in the New World beginning some fifteen centuries after her death through her miraculous incarnation as Our Lady of Guadalupe.<sup>50</sup> A distinctive trait of Táhírih's migration, however, is its rapidity, enabled by international networks of communication and transportation. Reports of the Bábí purges of 1852, which claimed the lives of Táhírih and many others, sped westward through the dispatches of European ambassadors. Soon, this news reached the public eye; the 13 October 1852 issue of *The Times* of London reported the execution of "Kurret-il-Ain, better known as Bab's Lieutenant, or the Fair Prophetess of Kazoee."<sup>51</sup> A mere two months after her strangulation, Táhírih had already made landfall in England.

It was not long before Europeans could encounter Táhírih in tomes on the Middle East such as *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (1856) by Lady Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil. Upon her return to England from Persia, where her husband had served as ambassador, Sheil composed this memoir. In it, she describes the 1852 Bábí pogrom, which occurred while she resided in Tehran, recounting that the "prophetess" Táhírih "was brought to Tehran and imprisoned, but was well treated. When these executions took place she was strangled. This was a cruel and useless deed."<sup>52</sup> Táhírih soon made her way into the writings of other European diplomats and orientalist, including Jakob Eduard Polak, Arthur de Gobineau, E. G. Browne, George Curzon, Valentine Chirol, and A. L. M. Nicholas.<sup>53</sup>

In terms of imaginative literature, women took the lead; Táhírih's concurrence—her morphic resonance<sup>54</sup>—with Western suffrage movements facilitated

<sup>50</sup> Timothy Matovina, "The Origins of the Guadalupe Tradition in Mexico," *The Catholic Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (2014): 243–270.

<sup>51</sup> "How They Punish Treason in Persia," *The Times* (London), October 13, 1852, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil with Justin Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* (London: John Murray, 1856), 281.

<sup>53</sup> See Jakob E. Polak, *Persien: das Land und seine Bewohner* (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1865); Arthur Gobineau, *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale* (Paris: Didier et Cie, 1866); Edward Granville Browne, "The Bábís of Persia. II. Their Literature and Doctrines," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 21, no. 4 (1889): 881–1009; George Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892); Valentine Chirol, *The Middle Eastern Question; or, Some Political Problems of Indian Defence* (London: John Murray, 1903); A. L. M. Nicholas, *Seyyèd Ali Mobammed dit le Báb* (Paris: Dujarric & Co., 1905).

<sup>54</sup> The theory of morphic resonance holds that the energy of change inexplicably transmits across time and space—that "a 'critical period' exists in the life of a species and that this moment and *what occurs within it leaps over or seeps under conventional modes of transmission and is communicated to the rest of the species*"; H. R. Coursen, "'Morphic Resonance' in Shakespeare's Plays," *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Mar./Apr. 1988: 5–8 (6, italics original). In our species, perhaps in the "critical period" of the nineteenth century, the energy of women's emancipation was transmitted across continents, linking Táhírih with suffragists. She has been called "the

her uptake as a symbol of intelligence, courage, and civic engagement. Austrian feminist Marie von Najmájer composed a series of poems published as *Gurret-ül-Eyn* in 1874. Three decades later, Ukrainian writer Isabella Grinevskaya's *Bab: A Dramatic Poem of the History of Persia* (1903), which features Táhirih as protagonist, was staged to acclaim in Saint Petersburg.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps Táhirih's story first entered U.S. discourse through the circulation of such European accounts; she certainly would have been known, and likely discussed, by the Middle Eastern Bahá'í evangelists who arrived in the United States in 1892.<sup>56</sup>

Persian women faced a more troubled route to sympathizing with the “heretic of Qazvin” than did their Western counterparts, who generally enjoyed greater freedom of speech in the nineteenth century. In the unusual case that a Persian woman was elite enough to be literate, she could have encountered a history of Táhirih in the official Qajar chronicle, which misrepresents her as a seductress who instructed Bábí men to touch her for their ticket into heaven and who endorsed polyandry.<sup>57</sup> As time passed, Táhirih continued to symbolize the dangers of female immodesty. Later authors condemned her for abandoning her marriage and murdering her father-in-law.<sup>58</sup> In a 1973 book about ideal Islamic womanhood titled *Zebra Bano*, the author employs Táhirih as an example of the “devastation” wreaked by immodest women. He explains that, unsatisfied with the heresy of accepting the Báb, Táhirih “also became a preacher. To lure people into the fold of new religion she renounced Pardah [purdah] 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.”<sup>59</sup> Táhirih's persuasiveness, in this telling, results not from her convincing arguments but from her alluring body. The author thus deforms her success at winning followers into a failure of chastity. Such “histories” penned across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have, in equating Táhirih's leadership of men to prostitution, left little possibility of Táhirih's compatriots identifying with her.

Thus, Persian Bahá'ís, especially after the 1979 Revolution, have been limited to remembering Táhirih in the privacy of their marginal community. In her 2015 film about Táhirih, Shabnam Tolouei (b. 1971) recounts how her schoolteacher forbade her from discussing the “discredited Iranian poet.”<sup>60</sup> “Thus, there are dominant public memories that fortify the status quo, and there are counterpublic memories that disrupt visions of life as it was, is, and will be,” as Jessica Enoch states.<sup>61</sup> In Iran, the dominant memories of Táhirih as a heretical prostitute diminish her influence and fortify the theocratic status

first suffrage martyr in Iran”; Nina Ansary, *Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran* (Los Angeles: Revela Press, 2015), 209.

<sup>55</sup> Jan T. Jasion, “Táhirih on the Russian Stage,” *Táhirih in History: Perspectives on Qurratul-'Ayn from East and West*, ed. Sabir Afaqi (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2004), 231–38.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins, 1892–1900*, Vol. 1 (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), 26.

<sup>57</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, “The Mutilated Body of the Modern Nation: Qurrat al-'Ayn Tahirah's Unveiling and the Iranian Massacre of the Babis,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 18, no. 2 (1998): 38–50 (43).

<sup>58</sup> Milani, *Veils and Words*, 77–79.

<sup>59</sup> Najj, *Zebra Bano*, 100.

<sup>60</sup> Tolouei, *Dust-Flower-Flame*, 00:02:30.

<sup>61</sup> Jessica Enoch, “Releasing Hold: Feminist Historiography without the Tradition,” *Theorizing Histories of Rhetoric*, 58–73 (62).

quo, while a religious minority's counterpublic memories exult in her power to disrupt tradition.

### **Migrating Westward, Inverting Orientalism**

As Tāhīrih migrated westward, she entered the network of discourse called “Orientalism” by Edward Said. Western rhetors have for centuries represented the Middle East as inferior, thus justifying its material exploitation by colonialists (Europe) and neo-imperialists (United States). The portrayal of Middle Eastern women for Westerners—typically, depictions of their oppression by Muslim men—further validates this exploitation. Writers facilely contrast women's status in the East versus the West, as Lila Abu-Lughod, reflecting on Said's theory, comments: “Tradition and Modernity. Harems and Freedom. Veiling and Unveiling. These are the familiar terms by which the East has long been apprehended (and devalued) and the West has constructed itself as superior.”<sup>62</sup> Such depictions of women trapped in the home or behind the veil implore Westerners to intervene and rescue them. Recent bestsellers about women in the Middle East, such as Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tebran* (2003) and Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* (2007), have been accused of perpetuating this savior fantasy. As Theresa Kulbaga points out, these books circulate “within public rhetorical spheres of influence in which empathetic identification” with Middle Eastern women may facilitate military interventions.<sup>63</sup>

Evaluating U.S. writers' creative depictions of a Persian woman is, therefore, a fraught project. Even if, as historian Selena Crosson argues, “Bahá'í women saw themselves as agents *to* western/non-western imperialistic or dictatorial societies . . . *from* an internally and externally marginalized religious group,”<sup>64</sup> their self-perception cannot fully excuse them from the omnipresent Orientalizing paradigm. This paradigm, according to Abu-Lughod, has no easy antidote: “although negative images of women or gender relations in the region are certainly to be deplored, offering positive images or ‘nondistorted’ images will not solve the basic problem posed by Said's analysis of Orientalism. The problem is about the production of knowledge in and for the West. . . . As long as we are writing for the West about ‘the other,’ we are implicated in projects that establish Western authority and cultural difference.”<sup>65</sup> Any rhetoric about Iran—the “East”—produced for the United States—the “West”—risks perpetuating global inequalities. Yet, Bahá'í authors have viewed themselves as advocating global equality, imagining the reconciliation of East and West through the figure of Tāhīrih.

### **U.S. Bahá'í Women Adopting a Persian Foremother**

Although Bahá'ís worldwide revere the poet of Qazvin and seek to propagate her memory, the United States has become the epicenter of Tāhīrih literature. A Bahá'í

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<sup>62</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, “Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies,” *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 101–113 (108).

<sup>63</sup> Theresa A. Kulbaga, “Pleasurable Pedagogies: Reading *Lolita in Tebran* and the Rhetoric of Empathy,” *College English* 70, no. 5 (2008): 506–521 (518).

<sup>64</sup> Selena Crosson, “Searching for May Maxwell: Bahá'í Millenarian Feminism, Transformative Identity and Globalism in the New World Order: Shaping Women's Role in Early Bahá'í Culture 1898–1940” (PhD diss., University of Saskatchewan, 2013), 16, italics original.

<sup>65</sup> Abu-Lughod, “Orientalism,” 105.

community has existed here since the 1890s, when Middle Eastern Bahá'ís enlisted the first U.S. converts, primarily Anglo-Americans of Christian backgrounds. Some of my ancestors became Bahá'ís in this era, joining the U.S. community as it was forming an administration to facilitate its first major undertaking, the Bahá'í House of Worship for North America's construction, and was busily promoting the message of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Likely inspired by this longstanding outreach effort, U.S. Bahá'ís have authored more than two-thirds of the eighteen known English-language books on Táhírih. This community's women, in particular, have discovered in Táhírih a story of empowerment. U.S. Bahá'í women's identification with Táhírih has been facilitated by direct connections with Iran and affection for this unique forerunner—a context meriting further explanation, given this community's obscurity in rhetorical studies.

Connections between U.S. and Persian Bahá'í women developed in the early twentieth century as the religion's international leaders, housed in the Middle East, encouraged relations between the two communities. Starting in 1908, several U.S. Bahá'í women moved to Persia to support Bahá'í endeavors, such as a clinic where they doctored women patients and a girls' school where they administrated and taught.<sup>66</sup> Other U.S. Bahá'í women, though not settling in Persia, visited the Bahá'í communities there, sometimes on assignment to petition the government for their coreligionists' human rights. Two women who made extended visits to Persia, Laura Clifford Barney and Martha L. Root, would go on to write books about Táhírih. As Barney and Root found, their affiliation with Persia strengthened their relationship with Táhírih.

Many U.S. Bahá'í women regarded Táhírih as a foremother, a trailblazer of outspoken leadership who defied conventional femininity. Despite significant sociocultural differences, Anglo-American women shared some gendered experiences with their Persian role model, with their autonomy constrained by pressures to quietly occupy the domestic realm of marriage and childrearing. Some U.S. women identified with Táhírih as their ally in a struggle for assertive, vocal womanhood. Indeed, women spearheaded the development of the U.S. Bahá'í community, working in every capacity to spread the religion both on U.S. soil and abroad.<sup>67</sup> Given their leadership status, they sought a forebear to emulate as they asserted a public presence. Older religions' female exemplars, such as Christianity's Virgin Mary and Islam's Fatimah, primarily modeled dutifulness and deference to male leadership. Likewise, because many Middle Eastern Bahá'ís obeyed the regional custom of purdah, the religion's nineteenth-century history featured few eminent women. As a “paradigm of the ideal woman,” Táhírih stands out in resisting a supporting role.<sup>68</sup> She traveled far from her home and preached to powerful men, practices that resembled those required of the U.S. Bahá'í women who became evangelists and administrators. Bonded to these women by public conspicuity, Táhírih became their foremother.

Bahá'í women have celebrated this foremother in novels, plays, poems, songs, and film. In the print medium, some have written nonfiction about Táhírih, but others

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<sup>66</sup> Baharieh Rouhani Ma'ani, “The Interdependence of Bahá'í Communities: Services of North American Bahá'í Women to Iran,” *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 4, no. 1 (1991): 1–17.

<sup>67</sup> To take one testimonial to U.S. women's trailblazing role, in a 1954 letter to Iranian Bahá'í women, the religion's international leader Shoghi Effendi exhorted them “to emulate the example of their spiritual sisters in America who, he said, had surpassed the men in opening up countries to the Faith” (Rouhani Ma'ani, “Interdependence,” 14).

<sup>68</sup> Stiles Maneck, “Táhírih,” 2.

have followed the pattern established by Najmájer and Grinevskaya in reimagining her as the lead character of fictionalized plots. The historical fiction written by four rhetorical “daughters” of Táhírih—Laura Clifford Barney (1879–1974), Clara A. Edge (1891–1976), Kathleen Jemison Demas (b. 1947), and Bahiyyih Nakhjavani (b. 1948)—demonstrates how Bahá’ís have revived Táhírih to make arguments for social transformation, especially women’s empowerment, and for the interdependence of Middle Eastern and Western societies. I traverse four books instead of spotlighting a single work to show how creative interpretations of Táhírih’s life have ranged over the Bahá’í Faith’s first century in the United States, between the publication of Barney’s *God’s Heroes* in 1910 and of Nakhjavani’s *The Woman Who Read Too Much* in 2015. Each woman wrote at a different stage of the religion’s development. Barney penned her play during the U.S. community’s infancy, following the religion’s fin de siècle arrival. Edge produced her 1964 novel in the context of the community’s expansion, as signaled by its completion of the House of Worship for North America in 1953. Demas published her 1983 novel as the community began to integrate an influx of refugees after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. A member of that Iranian Bahá’í diaspora, Nakhjavani—an erstwhile U.S. resident—represents the intercultural nature of the community today, both in the content of her novel and in her own peripatetic life.

### ***God’s Heroes* by Laura Clifford Barney (1910)**

Barney, a lifelong feminist, converted to the Bahá’í Faith around 1900, which prompted her to make long visits to the religion’s leader. Having learned to speak Persian during these visits, in 1906, she traveled to Persia, visiting cities including Qazvin, Táhírih’s hometown.<sup>69</sup> After this trip, she lectured in the United States about what she had learned during her sojourns in the Middle East, and she composed her first play, *God’s Heroes*, which was published in 1910 (but apparently never staged). This lengthy drama, over one hundred pages with a cast of several dozen,<sup>70</sup> portrays episodes from Táhírih’s final years.

In the preface, Barney lays out her purpose as a dramatist, voicing a desire for the play to morally edify the audience. The preface also reveals her stance on Persia, as she notes, “My scene is laid in the distant Orient, in a country full of archaic and barbaric customs—the Persia of over half a century ago; but the aspirations of my heroes are of all ages and of all lands” (vi). The descriptors “archaic” and “barbaric” fit into typical Orientalist discourse that distinguishes the Orient, the locus of tradition, from Occidental modernity. Barney bows to the prejudices of her Western readers, who likely view themselves as “distant” from Persia in terms of social and material progress. Yet Barney also complicates this stereotype of cultural distance by promoting the familiarity of her protagonists’ aspirations, which are “of all ages and of all lands.” Division precedes efforts at identification, as Kenneth Burke famously observed.<sup>71</sup> Barney declares a division between her readers and Persia that might hinder their identification with her characters: her audience feels superior to “archaic and barbaric customs.” But she then demands identification, subverting unlike customs beneath the more

<sup>69</sup> Miron, “Laura Barney’s Discipleship,” 19.

<sup>70</sup> Laura Clifford Barney, *God’s Heroes: A Drama in Five Acts* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co., Ltd., and Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1910), xii. Further page references to this book appear in the text.

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 22.

transcendent concept of “aspirations.” Western readers should value the strivings of her characters toward autonomy in their spiritual lives; such independence aligns with Enlightenment virtues of inquiry and sovereignty. They should thus appreciate what Barney provides: “a glimpse of Eastern glory” (viii). She channels glorious episodes of Persia to an Anglophone audience.

Another ambivalent reference to the East-West relationship occurs in Act II, when Tâhîrih discusses women’s emancipation with a young woman. This woman, Laila, is dying after childbirth, and is disturbed to think that her newborn daughter must “remain behind to endure what I have endured” (37)—an unhappy marriage complicated by polygamy. Tâhîrih consoles Laila by speaking about the soul’s eternal life and assures her, “When your daughter is grown, the lot of the Eastern woman will have begun to change. Soon she will be as free as the freest of her Western sisters, for the Bab demands the emancipation of woman all over the world, and the word of God must have effect” This line is the only reference to the West within the play, and after it, the dialogue turns to the afterlife. Yet, the apparently offhand comparison between East and West raises questions. Is it Barney’s attempt at evoking transnational solidarity? Or is it a deprecation of the East in favor of the “free” West?

Indeed, the comparison sends conflicting messages. On the one hand, it evokes a religious, cosmopolitan vision of sisterhood, uniting Eastern and Western women in a divinely ordained project of emancipation. Emancipated women will participate actively in social reform (45), break “the chain of custom” by rejecting male control (56), enjoy fellowship with men (66), and refuse forced marriage (78), the play implies. Not only for nineteenth-century Persia, but also for Barney’s twentieth-century West (where she lacked suffrage, both in the United States and France), this is an ambitious feminist agenda. Faith in the revolutionary forces unleashed by the “word of God” fuels Barney’s sunny prediction of women’s emancipation “all over the world.” On the other hand, the global identification invoked by feminist cosmopolitanism has a dark side, as Wendy Hesford argues: it often propagates an agent/victim binary, with the former position occupied by Western women.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, by setting “Western sisters” as the standard of freedom, Barney mobilizes the Euro-American feminist commonplaces of (liberated) Western and (oppressed) Eastern women identified by Chandra Mohanty; Barney’s globalist vision filters through her “Western Eyes.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, Barney’s comparison represents dueling tendencies of Western feminism. The first is cosmopolitan identification; Barney tries to unite Eastern and Western women as “sisters.” The second is Western-centrism; Barney flatters her Euro-American audience for their relative freedom. Reading the play over a century later, both tendencies seem problematic, as they oscillate between homogenizing identification and Orientalist division. These essentialisms, total sameness versus total difference, are a Scylla and Charybdis between which effective transnational solidarity must navigate.

Barney ultimately leans toward sameness, contending that a uniting spiritual force should impel her (Western) audience to identify with her hero: Tâhîrih “stands forth in history as an example of what the disciple of truth can accomplish despite

<sup>72</sup> Wendy Hesford, “Cosmopolitanism and the Geopolitics of Feminist Rhetorics,” *Rhetorica in Motion: Feminist Rhetorical Methods and Methodologies*, ed. Eileen E. Schell and K. J. Rawson (Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2010), 53–70.

<sup>73</sup> Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61–88.

hampering custom and violent persecution” (viii). Readers are invited to mirror characters like Táhírih who threw away social convention—and life—in pursuit of transcendent truth. Some readers appreciated the invitation; Barney’s play was still circulating by 1977, when a Persian translation (*Dalíran-i Rabbani*) was published. A decade earlier, Clara A. Edge featured the play’s final lines—“Do you think that you can bury her there? She will reappear, and be ever before you all! You have rendered her immortal in the minds of men, and her spirit of love will be transmitted to millions of living hearts” (101)—in her novel’s epilogue.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Táhírih* by Clara A. Edge (1964)**

Edge self-published *Táhírih*, her only book, when she was in her seventies. She based it heavily on the accepted facts of Táhírih’s life, which she gathered from the growing pool of writings about Táhírih. In her acknowledgments (193), she writes that she is “indebted” to *The Dawn-Breakers* by Nabil-i-A’zam (1932), *Táhírih, the Pure* by Martha Root (1938), *The Chosen Highway* by Sara Blomfield (1940), and older texts by Browne and Curzon. In fact, Edge employs an excerpt from Root’s introduction to *Táhírih, the Pure* to open her novel, the plot of which follows Táhírih from precocious childhood through marriage, childbearing, pilgrimage to Karbala, conversion to the Bábí Faith, preaching, persecution, unveiling, and final imprisonment. Edge makes notes—“This story is not authentic”<sup>(32)</sup>; “An imaginary story which the author feels could have been true” (180)—when she invents scenes. Though *Táhírih* is a novel, it prioritizes the *historical* aspect of historical fiction.

Perhaps due to her desire to follow the facts of Táhírih’s life faithfully, Edge makes no overt claims about how she envisions her story linking West and East. The introduction—borrowed from Root—is the only passage in the book to consider this transcontinental relationship explicitly. The excerpt focuses on Táhírih as a symbol of women’s equality with men; Root notes, “It should be of thrilling interest to [women] to know that the first woman suffrage martyr was not a Westerner at all, but a young woman poet, Tahirih” (vii). Besides reproducing Root’s revision of Táhírih into a suffragette, Edge makes no mention of any region farther west than the Ottoman Empire.

Yet a hint of the novel’s transnational imagination can be found in the dustcover, which features a collage: a drawing of Táhírih, fully veiled except for her eyes, in the foreground; a photograph of an ornate white dome in the background. While many readers might associate such a dome with “the Orient,” Bahá’ís would immediately recognize it as their House of Worship for North America, completed 101 years after Táhírih’s execution. The collage anachronistically combines a nineteenth-century Persian woman with a twentieth-century Illinois building, a juxtaposition implying that time and place are immaterial for the global Bahá’í community. The history of the “The Mother Temple of the West” is suffused with collaboration between Bahá’ís in the United States and in the Middle East; its early development was guided by the son of Bahá’u’lláh, and Persian Bahá’ís enthusiastically contributed funds.<sup>75</sup> For Bahá’ís, the cover artwork taps into a familiar symbol of transnational solidarity.

<sup>74</sup> Clara A. Edge, *Táhírih* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Edgeway Publisher, 1964), 184. Further page references to this book appear in the text.

<sup>75</sup> Bruce Whitmore, *The Dawning Place: The Building of a Temple, the Forging of a Global Religious Community*, 2nd ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá’í Publishing, 2015), 58.

Another hint comes in Táhírih's repeated affirmations of the harmony of religions. "All Divine Messengers speak the same Word and bring the same Message from God," she tells a mullah, explaining the harmony of Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad (22); she explains to a friend that "as a good Moslem, you already believe in Jesus the Christ" (28); she declares that "Christ has returned" as the Báb (81), though he returned "first in Muhammad" (169); she compares the Báb's disciples to "the Disciples of Christ . . . [and] the Disciples of Muhammad" (103); she analogizes the backlash against the Báb to reactions to "Abraham, Moses, the Christ and Muhammad" (126); and she exhorts a friend to emulate the courage the Virgin Mary showed in sitting "at the foot of the Cross" (179). The focus on each founder's early days, underscoring similarities in their teachings and sufferings, erases later differences between their followers. Thus, by ignoring their eventual entrenchment in distinct regions and cultures, Edge conjures up kinship between religions born in the Levant, in Arabia, and in India, emphasizing solidarity among all the faithful worldwide.

***From Behind the Veil: A Novel about Táhírih* by Kathleen Jemison Demas (1983)**

Demas worked as a schoolteacher and a children's magazine writer,<sup>76</sup> and her novel targets a similar age group: children and teens. *From Behind the Veil* wears its Western perspective on its sleeve, imagining how a U.S. teen, similar to readers in age and nationality, would have viewed Táhírih. Ruth Caroline Smith, the fictional narrator who composes the novel in fifteen diary entries from 1843 to 1852, is a wealthy Southerner who lost her mother during childhood. As a teenager, she travels to Persia with her father, accompanied by a guide related to Táhírih. After her father dies in the Persian-Armenian hinterlands, orphaned Ruth accompanies the guide to Qazvin, where Táhírih hosts her.

The novel opens by narrating the commentary of Ruth and her father on the Middle East's shortcomings. As they traverse Armenia, Ruth's father describes Persia as "neglected by time, scarred by ruins and decay," as well as by plague and famine, "the result of war and earthquakes."<sup>77</sup> When Ruth encounters a horse carcass, he warns her "that this sight is not unusual in Persia." Their caravanserai smells of "horses, donkeys, and other animals" and is infested by "vermin" (5). At the beginning of the novel, the Middle East seems pervaded by filth and decay, in contrast to Ruth's recollection of her luxurious "big white house" on a plantation (3). Discomforting changes mark the crossing from Armenia into Persia, as if the farther east Ruth ventures, the more alien society becomes. She has to veil, the foreignness of which is reinforced by the book's cover image, an aerial view of veiled women in Tehran. Ruth confronts "the curiosity of the Persians" who host them (17)—hosts who apparently poison her father with "Qajar coffee," a Persian specialty for offing rivals. Veiling and intrigue are thus added to the region's disturbing features. Within the first few pages, then, this novel repeats Orientalist stereotypes about the Middle East's backwardness.

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<sup>76</sup> "An Intriguing Novel for All Ages—the Story of Táhírih, the Foremost Heroine of the Bábí Era," *Bahá'í News* vol. 11, November 1983: 18.

<sup>77</sup> Kathleen Jemison Demas, *From Behind the Veil: A Novel about Táhírih* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), 4. Further page references to this book appear in the text.

Soon, though, Ruth encounters Táhírih, who serves as a bridge between Ruth and the strange country, and her perspective begins to shift. Táhírih reconciles Ruth with Persia by enveloping her first in her parents' household and then in the Bábí community. Associating Táhírih with her deceased mother, Ruth adopts her as parent, grateful to be "blessed with such a family" (66). After this adoption, which is consummated by Ruth's conversion to Islam, Ruth perceives commonalities between Persia and the United States where before she only saw differences. Contemplating polygamy, she muses, "But, after all, the women and men are so strictly segregated. It reminds me of the slave quarters on the plantations at home. . . . in Persia, and other Islamic countries, women are not even considered to have souls. Now that sounded familiar. That is exactly what the Reverend Mr. Higgenbottom used to say about the slaves. According to the mullás women exist only to give birth to children; and according to the minister, slaves exist to serve their masters" (42–43). Instead of simply inveighing against the barbaric treatment of women in Persia, Ruth recognizes that, both there and in the United States, clergymen use religion to justify inequality by claiming that God destined some beings (women and slaves) to labor for superiors (men or whites). Thus, Ruth recognizes that both countries employ religion to maintain unequal social structures.

Although Ruth cannot fully assimilate into Persian society, especially after converting to the Bábí Faith, she has adopted not only Táhírih but the entire region as her home by 1852. She admits her aversion to certain customs, like animal sacrifice, but also celebrates aspects of the culture, like the intellect of upper-class women "consumed with interest . . . in the Qur'án" (56). Moreover, she acknowledges that she does not fully understand the culture: "Sometimes the realization that I am, after all, a stranger and even an outsider is brought home to me. There are so many things that I don't know about, so many gaps in my knowledge of my new home" (68). Yet, in confessing to her difficulty acculturating, Ruth names the Middle East her "new home," and after Táhírih's execution, she decides to stay in Persia to "serve" the Bábís (121). Thus, although the novel initially rehashes tired stereotypes about the Middle East, Demas depicts a spiritual identification with Táhírih as enabling the U.S. traveler to transcend her prejudice and join a local community. In Demas's novel, then, Táhírih catalyzes a transnational relationship.

**A Diaspora Revives Táhírih (Again): Post-Revolutionary Iranian Interpretations**  
 Táhírih's multidirectional emigration from Persia after her 1852 death paralleled the 1853 exile of her coreligionists, who were banished increasingly westward—to Iraq, then Turkey, then Palestine. Along the way, most Bábís became Bahá'ís. Thus, a Persian diaspora has been a constant feature of the Bahá'í Faith. Though some Bahá'ís have been forced from Iran as exiles or refugees, others have voluntarily emigrated to establish Bahá'í communities abroad, as Bahiyyih Nakhjavani did when her family moved to Uganda in 1951. The diaspora grew after the 1979 Revolution reinvigorated Iran's ongoing effort to eliminate Bahá'ís, with the Islamic Republic authorizing their killing, imprisonment, and economic marginalization. This persecution has pushed some Bahá'ís to leave their homeland, as is the case for Shabnam Tolouei, creator of a film on Táhírih, who immigrated to France in 2004 after Iranian authorities impeded her work. In departing post-Revolutionary Iran, Bahá'ís have been joined by members of other

minority groups with limited prospects there. The Iranian diaspora is estimated at one to four million migrants worldwide, with about one-fourth living in the United States.<sup>78</sup>

The Iranian diaspora's post-1979 growth has stimulated work on Tāhīrīh in the United States. The first public memorial to her was launched in 1997 with the naming of the Tahirih Justice Center, a nonprofit firm serving female asylum seekers.<sup>79</sup> Between 2002 and 2011, four collections of her translated poems were published.<sup>80</sup> Substantial biographies came out in 2011 and 2017.<sup>81</sup> Iranian Americans have been involved in writing most of these books. Though Tolouei and Nakhjavani live in France, their works on Tāhīrīh were released in the United States, both in 2015. In the twenty-first century, the United States has persisted as a nexus of rhetorical reincarnations of Tāhīrīh, invigorated by Iranian immigrants who have extended and deepened the earlier writings of Anglo-Americans like Barney, Edge, and Demas. A recent work of “transnational historical fiction”<sup>82</sup> exemplifies the discursive contributions of Iranian immigrants: Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much*.

### ***The Woman Who Read Too Much: A Novel* by Bahiyyih Nakhjavani (2015)**

Nakhjavani, who has published eight other books, differs from Barney, Edge, and Demas in resisting any smooth narrativizing of Tāhīrīh. Instead, her novel runs backwards in time and offers only fragmentary views of its titular woman. Nakhjavani implies the partiality of these views by splitting her novel into four books, splintering Tāhīrīh across the perspectives of four women who observe her final few years: the king's domineering mother, who desires full control over Tāhīrīh's punishment (Book 1); the mayor's wife, who “hosts” the captive Tāhīrīh for several years (Book 2); the king's mistreated sister, a princess who admires Tāhīrīh (Book 3); and the women of Tāhīrīh's family, including her mother, sister, and daughter, who bemoan her intransigence (Book 4). Narrative threads, including the story of Lady Sheil, the abovementioned wife of the British Envoy, run throughout the four books. Nakhjavani casts Sheil as a symbol of the vexed relationship between West and East.

The novel's recurrent turns toward Anglo-Persian relations, and especially to Lady Sheil's life in Persia, expose mutual prejudices between the regions. Upon arriving in 1849, Sheil surmises that “the female sex had less relevance than the common ass in Persia,” through she later realizes “this was a country effectively ruled by women.”<sup>83</sup> Those ruling women, however, are hardly eager to embrace Sheil into transnational sisterhood, since she is tainted by “her foreignness.” On her diplomatic visits to the harem, the Qajar women find Sheil awkward and invasive; they resent her faux pas as she chooses a chair over floor cushions and inquires about female illiteracy and veiling, and they deride her bashfulness and her attempts at speaking Persian. In turn, she finds

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<sup>78</sup>Shirin Hakimzadeh, “Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home,” MigrationPolicy.org, September 1, 2006, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/iran-vast-diaspora-abroad-and-millions-refugees-home](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/iran-vast-diaspora-abroad-and-millions-refugees-home).

<sup>79</sup> “History,” Tahirih Justice Center, [www.tahirih.org/about-us/history/](http://www.tahirih.org/about-us/history/).

<sup>80</sup> One is by Banani, Kessler, and Lee; the other three are by Hatcher and Hemmat: *The Poetry of Tāhīrīh*, cited above; *Adam's Wish: Unknown Poetry of Tāhīrīh* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing, 2008); and *The Quickening: Unknown Poetry of Tāhīrīh* (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing, 2011).

<sup>81</sup> Ruhe-Schoen, *Rejoice*; Ahdiéh and Chapman, *Calling*.

<sup>82</sup> Mary A. Sobhani, “Transnational Historical Fiction in a Postsecular Age: A Study of the Spiritual Theses in the Works of Luis Alberto Urrea and Bahiyyih Nakhjavani” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arkansas, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> Nakhjavani, *Woman*, 94. Further page references to this book appear in the text.

them rude, both in their outlandish outfits and their disinterest in her Victorian ideals of abolition and female education. The strained relations between Lady Sheil and the Qajar harem represent the tension between Europe and Persia. Nakhjavani depicts the Qajars as hostile to “the threat of foreign influence in . . . domestic politics” (209), especially “British interference” (12). Naser al-Din Shah Qajar complains, “Why did the British . . . always poke their noses in other peoples’ affairs?”<sup>(168)</sup>. These frictions would burst aflame in 1856 with the Anglo-Persian War.

There is one issue on which Lady Sheil and a Qajar royal find common ground, albeit unknowingly: Táhiriḥ’s plight. Though Lady Sheil fails in her attempts to befriend and defend the Shah’s sister, these women are united in opposing Táhiriḥ’s execution. Sheil expresses compassion for persecuted Persians, including “the woman who had been under house arrest next door for almost three years without recourse to justice” (213)—that is, Táhiriḥ. In Nakhjavani’s imagined Tehran, the mayor’s house abuts the British Legation; therefore, Sheil can hear Táhiriḥ responding, sometimes with laughter, to the priests trying her for heresy. Sheil petitions her husband “to lend his support to the liberation of the female prisoner” (296). As Sheil entreats the Envoy to “offer sanctuary to the poetess of Qazvin” (222), the Princess, who has become fascinated by Táhiriḥ after witnessing the poet performing her verses, asks the Shah to “release the poetess of Qazvin immediately” (226) in return for her own future obedience. To Lady Sheil, the Envoy declares his refusal to involve the British government; to the Princess, the Shah promises that Táhiriḥ will be released—a promise he breaks. After Táhiriḥ’s execution, Lady Sheil refuses to stay in Persia since diplomats “were unable to stop such cruel and useless deeds” (297). In their mutual chagrin at Táhiriḥ’s killing, the British Lady and the Persian Princess have a common cause to lament: male politicians’ lack of scruples. Sympathy for Táhiriḥ crosses lines of nationality, as does impotence to save her from a system intent on quashing dissidence.

Táhiriḥ’s transnationality as a female activist causes some distress to the stodgy British Envoy, in fact. Reflecting on the concurrence of the Conference of Badasht and the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, he thinks, “It sounded like a conspiracy of international dimensions!” (92). Later, he continues to mull over this “conspiracy”: “The suffragettes had been ridiculed by the press on one side of the planet and the poetess of Qazvin denounced by the clergy on the other, but he could not banish from his mind that this was no coincidence and that there was some mysterious connection, some serendipitous association between them. For his wife seemed to have been influenced by both” (295). Was it an international feminist conspiracy or ineffable global zeitgeist, a morphic resonance, that led U.S. suffragists and Táhiriḥ to publicly assert themselves in the same year? Nakhjavani indicates that, at least in the imagination of Lord Sheil, Táhiriḥ made the mid-nineteenth-century threat to male supremacy a transnational project.

### **Táhiriḥ’s *Ars Praedicand*<sup>84</sup>: Transnationalism over Orientalism**

Across the fictional books on Táhiriḥ examined above, across the 105-year span between Barney’s and Nakhjavani’s publications, a trend toward increasingly nuanced portrayals

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<sup>84</sup> *Ars praedicandi* translates as the “art of preaching” and generally refers to the rhetoric of Christian sermons. Roxanne Mountford, “Ars praedicandi,” *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*, ed. Theresa Enos (New York: Routledge, 2010), 39.

of Táhírih's role in transnational relations is perceptible. The Táhírih of Barney's *God's Heroes* is didactic, an inspirational teacher of the Báb's religion; the characters to whom she teaches Bábí principles are analogs for the audience to whom Barney hoped to convey Bahá'í tenets. Edge employs a similar technique, as Táhírih explicates Bábí doctrines to foes and friends throughout the novel. Neither book features a Western character, although both authors furnish prefatory comments stressing how Táhírih serves as a paradigm of courageous rectitude and womanly strength. The relationship between East and West, then, is depicted as apolitical and transcendental, based on the Bábí reconciliation (and abrogation) of all older religions.

In their effort to establish the unifying universals preached by Táhírih, Barney's and Edge's works depart from the Orientalist drive to distinguish West from East—yet, by employing Táhírih to support their agenda, they conscript the East into service to the West. This conscription resembles Western romanticists' view of the East as “therapeutic” for the West.<sup>85</sup> Romantic Europeans hoped their continent would be saved or regenerated by Asia.<sup>86</sup> Exalting the East as spiritually superior to the West is preferable to a racist attitude that denigrates it as entirely inferior—but it still posits an unequal relationship. This inequality reflects Abu-Lughod's warning about the production of knowledge about the East for Western consumption. Can such knowledge-making ever avoid discursive colonization?

There is a kind of knowledge of the Other made to facilitate humanistic understanding, as opposed to knowledge contrived to support (neo)imperialistic interventions, according to Edward Said. The former enacts “hospitality,” as “the interpreter's mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other.”<sup>87</sup> This hospitable mindset rejects jingoistic agendas: “Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together.”<sup>88</sup> Observing such coexistence requires “wider perception” based on “time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction.” Though not denoting religion, Said's “faith” does suggest a disposition of the spirit: a loving and unorthodox commitment to “a foreign Other.” Barney and Edge, embedded in a religious “community of interpretation” rooted in Persia and budding in the United States, aspire toward this disposition, attempting a hospitable mindset that recognizes compatible rather than clashing civilizations. To celebrate the spiritual overlaps they perceive, they borrow stories of their coreligionists in Persia, resembling Said's characterization of the “working together of cultures.” Such cross-cultural negotiations are “slow,” and, I would add, imperfect. Barney and Edge write both *within* and *against* Orientalist mores—within romanticism, against racism. Their efforts mark an early step in the development of a global religious identity.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979, I suggest, pushed subsequent representations of Táhírih toward a next step: honoring spiritual oneness while attending to the complexities of intercultural relations. News of coreligionists' imprisonments and executions in Iran would have recalled for Bahá'ís worldwide the nineteenth-century

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<sup>85</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 271.

<sup>86</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 115.

<sup>87</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xxv.

<sup>88</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xxix.

persecutions of Bábís in that same country. Although Westerners were not at the gallows, in the imagined global community of Bahá'ís, the suffering of some members affects all. The entry of Iranian asylees further reinforced the transnational consciousness of Western Bahá'ís. Moreover, as noted above, U.S. and Persian Bahá'ís had a longstanding relationship inaugurated in the early twentieth century. Although I cannot prove that Demas intended *From Behind the Veil* to respond to the exigence of the Islamic Revolution, I infer that, given its 1983 release, her novel was influenced by the events unfolding in Iran.

Perhaps for this reason, Demas was not satisfied with composing another plot that rendered invisible the presence of its Western audience, as Barney and Edge had done. Instead, she created Ruth, a U.S. teen, to reify U.S. readers—to make the audience a character in the plot. Ruth's initial observations of Persia align with stereotypical Orientalist tropes of Middle Eastern decay and debauchery. In such perceptions, she seems an authentic representative of U.S. prejudices. Yet, the filial relationship she establishes with Táhirih furnishes her with an entryway into Persian culture and a more nuanced perspective on its relationship with her homeland, recognizing that religious institutions exacerbate social ills in both countries. By the novel's conclusion, she commits to life in Persia by devoting herself to the Bábí movement.

While Demas begins to unravel some of the political misapprehensions between East and West, Nakhjavani's novel most thoroughly grapples with challenges to transnational solidarity. Contrary to Orientalist dualism, the Persian monarchy's corruption is not entirely unlike the difficulties plaguing the British Legation, where, to Lady Sheil's vexation, political ambitions outweigh ethical commitments. Also to Sheil's vexation, and contrary to the ideals of cosmopolitan feminism, membership in the oppressed category of "woman" avails not in overcoming prejudice between Britons and Persians. Yet, all hope of solidarity between East and West—though unrealized in the plot—is not lost. Táhirih emits the unique glint of hope. In her zealous, obstinate commitment to her cause, Táhirih inspires admiration that crosses cultural lines, as both the Lady and the Princess try to move their politicking male kin to rescue her. That they both fail does not diminish these characters' symbolic rapprochement via compassion for the prisoner. Indeed, their failure to influence policy—to move the British Envoy toward intercession or to hold the Qajar Shah to his pledged reprieve—conjoins them in a transnational system: patriarchy. Nakhjavani's novel suggests that, although prejudice pollutes Anglo-Persian relations, both societies would do well to heed Táhirih—to listen to women's voices.

Although Táhirih has long been vilified in her homeland, some Iranians outside the Bahá'í minority have recently intervened in public memory to reclaim her as their nation's first women's rights activist. In 2006, Iranian activists initiated the One Million Signatures campaign for gender equality. "To provide the genealogy of our method," activist Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani wrote, "seeking face-to-face interactions in various public spaces . . . it is important to recall that this method is inspired by the words of the brave poetess and campaigner for women's equal rights, Zarrin Taj . . . who wrote the following couplet more than 160 years ago."<sup>89</sup> Khorasani then quotes from "Point by

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<sup>89</sup> Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, "The 'One Million Signature Campaign': Face-to-Face, Street-to-Street," Feminist School, July 23, 2008, [www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?page=print&id\\_article=205](http://www.feministschool.com/english/spip.php?page=print&id_article=205).

Point,” which is “perhaps the most widely known of Táhírih’s poems.”<sup>90</sup> In these stanzas, the speaker describes searching for her divine beloved:

*If I met you face to face, I  
would retrace—erase!—my heartbreak,  
pain by pain,  
ache by ache,  
word by word,  
point by point.*

*In search of you—just your face!—I  
roam through the streets lost in disgrace,  
house to house,  
lane to lane,  
place to place,  
door to door.<sup>91</sup>*

Today, Táhírih’s revolutionary preaching, which has, since her 1852 strangulation, emanated primarily from pages written in the West, is slowly circling back to its original platform, Iran.

As Khorasani’s essay indicates, the story of Táhírih—and of her many afterlives—reveals historiography’s rhetorical power. Drawing upon the oft-repeated “facts” of Táhírih’s life, writers have made diverse choices about how to re-invent, arrange, and deliver them. My own essay performs such choices; in the first part, I repeated the celebrated episodes but arranged them into three rhetorical rebellions. The sample of Táhírih literature I presented in the second part, written by Bahá’ís, frames Táhírih in globalism—the unification of East and West. But even within this framework, much variation is possible, as demonstrated by distinctions in the historical fiction of Barney, Edge, Demas, and Nakhjavani. Táhírih yearned for a profound spiritual and social transformation. Her yearning has been taken up by women living in different contexts. Though they have written fiction, they also assume the historiographical office of rhetoric, rewriting her history into verse, into chapters, into lyrics, into scenes. It remains to be seen whether imaginative retellings of history like these can transform our future. For now, Táhírih shows us how history can be invented from the margins.

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<sup>90</sup> Hatcher and Hemmat, *Poetry*, 102.

<sup>91</sup> Banani, Kessler, and Lee, *Táhírih*, 64.

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