

Article

A Bābī Theology in Poetry: The Creative Imagination of Tāhirih, Qurratu'l-ʿAyn

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Abstract: Tāhirih, also known as Qurratu'l-ʿAyn (1814–1852), was one of the leading disciples of the Bāb (1819–1844), Sayyid ʿAlī-Muhammad of Shiraz, the founder of Babism. She was formally educated in Islamic learning and theology, but relied heavily on inspiration for some of her most radical doctrines. Her poems contain radical theological pronouncements that would propel the Bābī movement beyond Islam. By no means typical or representative of other Bābī scholars, her theology seems to be filled with a woman's sensibility, with its inclination towards peace, justice, and reconciliation. At certain moments, Tāhirih anticipates developments in Bābī / Bahā'ī teachings that would not take place until decades later. Tāhirih's poetic voice offers a unique Bābī theology understood, perhaps, only by her few (women?) followers at the time.

Keywords: Bahai; Babi; Qurratu'l-ʿAyn; Tahirih; Persian poetry; Iranian history; women's history; gender studies; women's theology

In his recent book, Hossein Kamaly chooses 21 Muslim women in history to narrate a history of Islam (Kamaly 2019). He titles his chapter on Qurratu'l-ʿAyn Tāhirih (1814–1852) with a question: “Heroine or Heretic?” It is a question that he seems unable to answer. Recognizing that she lived in Iran, at the heartland of Shiʿih Islam, at a time when it faced the complex challenges of emerging modernity, a modernity that demanded change, the author cannot answer his own question. For him, Tāhirih remains an enigma. She was a woman, she demanded radical change in a society that could not tolerate change, making her a heroine of modernity and a heretic to orthodoxy. Perhaps, it seems that the author may regard the other Bābis as heretics. But when it comes to Tāhirih, he is not so sure.

Tāhirih was given the name Fātimih at birth. She is also known as Umm Salamih, Zarrīn-Tāj (Crown of Gold), and most commonly as Qurratu'l-ʿAyn (Solace of the Eyes). Among Bahā'īs, she is universally known as Tāhirih (The Pure One) and regarded as a saint. She is certainly the most well-known woman in Bābī/Bahā'ī history, and the most controversial. It is Bahā'īs who have written the most about her (Root [1938] 1981; Edge 1964; Johnson 1982; Demas 1983; Lloyd 1999; Banani et al. 2005; Afaqi 2004; Nakhjavani 2015).

ʿAbdu'l-Bahā (1844–1921) recognizes her as a holy woman and paragon of virtue (ʿAbdu'l-Bahā 1971, p. 190). However, Tāhirih stands in stark contrast in Bahā'ī history and Bahā'ī imagination to the other women who are thought of as holy figures in Bahā'ī history. Perhaps, the premier woman in Bahā'ī theology would be Bahīyyih Khānum (1846–1932), the daughter of Bahā'u'llāh (1817–1892), known as the Greatest Holy Leaf. She played a crucial role in the Bahā'ī community after the passing of ʿAbdu'l-Bahā (d. 1921). But she remained, for most of her life, in traditional, gendered roles, overshadowed by her brother, ʿAbdu'l-Bahā, and by the Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), her grandnephew. Similarly, Khadijih Bagum (d. 1882), the wife of the Bāb; Āsiyyih Khānum, Navvāb (1820–1886), the wife of Baha'u'llah; and Munīrih Khānum (1847–1938), wife of ʿAbdu'l-Bahā—all regarded as holy women—are revered, but remain confined to traditional roles in Bahā'ī history and in Bahā'ī imagination.



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Tāhirih stands apart from these other holy women, since she discarded her traditional roles as daughter, wife, and mother, invaded male space, and became an actor and a leader of the Bābī community in her own right. As Susan Maneck has noted, she presents the Bahā'īs with a paradigm of the ideal woman who is “assertive, intelligent, eloquent, passionately devoted to causes, and yet, still beautiful.” (Maneck 2004, p. 197) But even this paradigm is problematic because Tāhirih was also rebellious, transgressive, liberated from husband and children, deliberately outrageous, and confrontational. As a result, Tāhirih remains something of a contradiction. Her public actions, radical as they were, are celebrated by Bahā'īs. But her family life and personal choices are usually ignored. Her radical theology remains unexplored.

1. Tahirih's Corpus

The volume entitled *Tahirih: A Portrait in Poetry*, translated and edited by Banani, Kessler, and Lee, is Banani's selection of the poems of Qurratu'l-'Ayn. This compilation includes the poems that Banani regarded as most likely to be authentic, most poetic from the perspective of literature, and most representative of Tāhirih's spirit. He viewed other collections of poems attributed to Tāhirih with suspicion, yet confessed that we are very far from a critical *divan* of Tāhirih that can stand up to academic scrutiny (Banani et al. 2005, pp. 4–5). For some of these collected poems, Banani insisted that they were not intended as poetry at all. They were only rhymed letters of correspondence with fellow Bābīs. I was able at one point, and with some difficulty, to obtain a manuscript of Tāhirih's unpublished poems in the original language. This manuscript was sometime later translated by John S. Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat (and published in facsimile) as *Adam's Wish: Unknown Poetry of Tahirih*. After studying the manuscript, Banani insisted that there was nothing of literary value there. He refused to translate the verses, despite my repeated pleas to reconsider, because he did not feel that the work represented Tāhirih as a poet. He regarded the verses as prose (to my utter despair).

As for the poems that Banani did choose for translation, many of them had already been translated in an earlier volume, *Poetry of Tahirih*, also by Hatcher and Hemmat (2002). Banani's collection was more selective. He declined to translate a number of poems he felt were probably not by Tāhirih. His judgments were based in part on the scant manuscript record that we have of the poems. But all the poems attributed to Tāhirih are of doubtful provenance. Mostly, he relied on the internal evidence of the poems themselves: the vocabulary, the words, tone, and style of each poem.

2. Scholarship vs. Poetry

Tāhirih was born into a prominent clerical family in Qazvin, in Iran. Her father was the head of a religious college in that city. Her mother taught women and girls in the same institution. As a result, Tāhirih was formally and highly educated, as was her mother, and her grandmother. She obtained a considerable reputation for learning and scholarship, even as a young student. Married to her cousin at the age of 14, Tāhirih continued her studies after their move to Karbalā. She pursued and obtained a full education in higher Islamic studies, though she was unable to receive the customary certificates of completion (*ijāzih*) that a man of her level of learning would have received (Momen 2003).

As a Bābī,¹ Tāhirih wrote many learned treatises in defense of the Bāb and Bābī doctrines. In these, she makes use of the traditional conventions of Islamic jurisprudence and theology. Amin Banani, in the preface to his translation of a selection of Tāhirih's poems, makes a distinction between Tāhirih's learned dissertations and her poetic voice. He writes:

Tāhirih was—insofar as her family, her education, her social networks, and her social position defined her—a scholar of religion. A full account of her philosophical, doctrinal, and intellectual positions must include a painstaking and judicious examination and analysis of all her prose writings. But it is her poet's voice that provides us with a portrait of her person and her passion. Of her

extant works, the prose writings in Arabic and Persian are works of nineteenth-century religious scholarship that are too arcane and abstruse for the general public. A handful of poems, however, reveal her tempestuous temperament and make her accessible to all people at all times. (Banani et al. 2005, p. 3)

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

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

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

With insight free of intruders, I observed God's power and omnipotence [and realized] that this great cause most definitely needs a focus of manifestation, for after God made His Fourth Pillar and His encompassing sign and His manifested locality known to people, and [thus] brought them close to His presence and showered them from His high exalted Heaven with His [spiritual] nourishment, then by proof of wisdom it is incumbent upon Him, whose status is high, not to leave the people to themselves . . . (Amanat 1989, p. 302)

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

At the same time, this makes the theology found articulated in the poems of Tāhirih idiosyncratic and unique. It should not be imagined that her theological positions were commonplace among Bābīs, or even shared by any other Bābī leaders. Of course, her followers would accept her teachings. But they were not ordinary Bābī doctrines or ideas. Nor did they imitate the writings of the Bāb. The radical thought found in many of her poems is, however, progressive in its social implications and almost prophetic in its universal sentiments and its anticipation of some later Bahā'ī themes.

3. A Woman's Voice

Nor should the dimension of gender be ignored. Tāhirih was, after all, a woman and the only female Bābī leader. Her theology was necessarily a feminine theology, the product of a woman's mind. In part, the audience for these ideas was a feminine audience, since Tāhirih attracted many women as followers. The gentleness, the peacefulness, the calls for reconciliation and friendship found in her poems are not found in the writings of other Bābī leaders. Perhaps here we find the Bābī doctrines reflected through the unique lens of its only woman leader.

4. Beyond Islam

In a celebrated episode, Tāhirih relied on her personal inspiration to come to conclusions and to take actions of tremendous import, in the face of fierce opposition from the Islamic clerical establishment and from leading Bābī clerics, as well. In Karbala, without any explicit instructions from the Bāb (though she may have interpreted some of his verses very expansively, even esoterically), Tāhirih decided to cast off the pretense of dissimula-

tion (*taqiyyih*) and openly proclaim the abrogation of the Islamic law (that is, the sharia). As shocking, as radical, and as dangerous as such a move was, Tāhirih felt confident that she could ground such a theological stance on pure inspiration. She would not be dissuaded. Even other prominent Bābīs in Karbala were shocked. One of them, Mullā Ahmad Khurāsānī, argued with her vigorously. Denis MacEoin describes the dispute:

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

She asked me “Do you know why I summoned you?”.

I replied “No”.

She said, “I was previously given the responsibility for the authority (*wilāya*) of Mullā Bāqir, and I made it incumbent on all of you to accept it. Yet no one accepted it from me, with the exception of fourteen individuals, seven men and seven women. Now I shall present you with something else.”

I said, “What is that?”

She replied “It has come to me, through the tongue of my inner mystic state (*bi-lisān al-ḥāl*), not through physical speech, that I wish to remove all concealment (*taqiyya*) and to establish the proof of the remembrance [the Bāb] and go to Baghdad. An argument ensued, at the end of which Mullā Aḥmad left, maintaining that he had himself received no fewer than seven letters from the Bāb, all commanding observance of *taqiyya*. (MacEoin 2009, p. 244)

Of course, we might reasonably have argued at the time that Mullā Ahmad was correct, from a purely literal and academic perspective of Bābī theology. The Bāb had repeatedly admonished the Bābīs to strictly observe the Shī‘ih convention of *taqiyyih*. Tāhirih’s theology rejected those commands, however, or at least found that they were no longer binding. She would go on to make these same arguments at the Conference of Badasht (1848), a gathering of Bābī leaders. There, she removed her veil (*chādūr*) and stepped into a company of Bābī men without it to demonstrate her categorical rejection of the sharia (and now with the added astounding announcement that the entire dispensation of Islam had been abrogated). In fact, her radical, mystic theology was successful and soon became the normative Bābī position. Her theological position quickly propelled the Bābīs and the Bābī religion beyond the boundaries of Islam. This was a unique event in Islamic history, a history which witnesses endless Islamic heterodoxies and reform movements. But none of these ever consciously intended to discard the religion itself in favor of a new divine dispensation. All heretics, for a thousand years, remained Muslims, if only in their own minds. Tāhirih marks the break with this model, as she makes no appeal to Muhammad or the Imams (Afaqi 2004, pp. 106–7) in her poems, declares the sharia null and void, and embraces a new revelation and a new Manifestation of God. She writes in one poem about the new Prophet:

The arches of his eyes will make the feuds
Of warring faiths and creeds to disappear.
Moses and Jesus in heaven are stunned,
And all the holy ones are lost down here.
Two thousand Muhammads hear thunderbolts,
They wrap themselves in cloaks, tremble in fear.

(Banani et al. 2005)

5. Universality and Justice

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

Look Up!
 Look up! Our dawning day draws its first breath!
 The world grows light! Our souls begin to glow
 No ranting shaykh rules from his pulpit throne
 No mosque hawks holiness it does not know
 No sham, no pious fraud, no priest commands!
 The turban's knot cut to its root below!
 No more conjurations! No spells! No ghosts!
 Good riddance! We are done with folly's show!
 The search for Truth shall drive out ignorance
 Equality shall strike the despots low
 Let warring ways be banished from the world
 Let Justice everywhere its carpet throw
 May Friendship ancient hatreds reconcile
 May love grow from the seed of love we sow!

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 47)

When I first read this poem, it seemed to me to be so filled with Bahā'ī ideas that I refused to believe it had been written by Tāhīrih. Surely, this was a later Bahā'ī invention. The independent investigation of truth, equality of all people, justice, world peace, universal love and friendship—this seemed to me to be the work of some Bahā'ī poet. Banani assured me, however, that the work can safely be attributed to Tāhīrih.²

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

Despite my skepticism, often expressed to Banani, that this poem could not possibly have been written by Tāhīrih, we can find similar sentiments in other poems. Her poem "Lovers!" ends with the lines:

... The day of truth is here! Lies have turned to dust!
 Order, justice, law are now possible.
 Smashed, the despot's fist! God's hand opens:
 grace pours down—not sorrow, pain, and trouble
 Minds in darkness now burn light with knowledge
 Tell the priest: Shut your book! Lock the temple!
 Hatred and doubt once poisoned all the world.
 The bloodied cup holds milk now—pure, ample!

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

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 79)

Here, the same themes are present. The first poem is not unique. Both poems illustrate a kind of proto-Bahā'ī ideal of the coming of a new age that will realize the unity of humanity. Likewise, the poem "No One Else," although it is a classic Sufi love poem, ends with the lines:

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

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 97)

6. Antinomian Sentiments

Another striking motif that is found in the poems of Tāhirih is her repeated reference to the removal of veils, as well as to nudity as a symbol of spiritual purity, to exposure, and to clothing of light. In some ways, these may be thought of as well-known and well-used metaphors found in the works of all Sufi poets. But in the poems of Tāhirih, who actually removed her veil, they certainly take on a new significance and concrete social meaning. She was willing to take these symbols from the world of mystic reverie into the world of reality and action.

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

Hear this! My one and only Cause is true.
The words I speak mean victory for you.
Off with rags of law and pious fashion!
Swim naked in the sea of compassion!
How long will you drift through this world of war,
far from the safety of your native shore?
Sing, *Be!* Our Cause stands strong, both clear and plain:
"What comes from God returns to God again!"

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 53)³

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

Its fire burns our world with wild delight
Stripped bare we stand: we're made of purest light!
Lift the veil, Tāhirih! He's now exposed!
His hidden mystery has been disclosed!
And say: The Lord in glowing clothes is dressed!
Praised be his beauty, and forever blessed!

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 51)

In "Morning Breezes":

You Bābīs from the province of pure Light!
Strip off your splendid veils, just look and see.
Believers, he has thrown away his veil,
so forget the verse "You will never behold me."

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 61)

From "His Drunken Eyes":

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

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 77)

In “Friends Are Knocking at the Door,” in an appeal to God, Tāhirih says:
 At least, why don’t you raise the window curtain?
 Just peek out for once to show your face.
 They want nothing from you, except yourself.
 The only thing they beg for is your grace.
 Outside, they got drunk on love—then sober.
 They didn’t care. They’re longing for your place.
 They dropped their veils, forgot their desires,
 gave up their search, and stripped to nudity.
 Burn off the clouds now and show us the sun.
 Pull off the veil. Let us see your beauty: . . .

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

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

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 104)

This theme in many poems argues for the necessity of transgressing the boundaries of convention and Islamic decency in order to realize an encounter with the divine. Husam Nuqaba’i recounts an event at the Conference of Badasht: While Quddūs was saying his prayers (presumably, *salāt*, the Islamic obligatory prayer, which Tāhirih opposed as having been abrogated), Tāhirih rushed from her tent with a sword in her hand. “Now is not the time for prayers and prostrations,” she challenged him. “Rather, on to the field of love and sacrifice” (Nuqaba’i 1981, p. 60). Tāhirih’s poems may give some theological shape to the antinomian aspects of Bābī history noted by so many chroniclers, both friends and enemies. Writing many years after the event, even Nabīl-i A’zam complains about Bābī excesses in the wake of the events at Badasht (Nabīl-i-A’zam (Mullā Muhammad-i- Zarandī) 1970, p. 298).

Tāhirih’s theology apparently maintained that with the announcement of the appearance of the Qā’im (the Promised One), all of the laws of Islam, the entire body of the sharia, had been abrogated. Therefore, until the universal proclamation of a new holy law, humanity existed in a sort of limbo, an interregnum, a time in which no religious law was applicable (Amanat 1989, pp. 310–11). Presumably, true believers were free to follow the promptings of their own inner spirit. Quddūs and Tāhirih both defied Islamic norms flagrantly, and in the most public way, by climbing into the same howdah when leaving the Conference of Badasht, traveling together, with Tāhirih loudly reciting poems during the rest of the journey (Nabīl-i-A’zam (Mullā Muhammad-i- Zarandī) 1970, p. 298).

7. The Manifestation of God

All of Tāhirih’s poetry is written in the Sufi tradition, in the same genre as the great Persian Sufi poets Rūmī, Sa’adī, and Hāfiz. Naturally, she makes use of the standard poetic metaphors of the tradition including wine, fire, light, madness, sexuality, and love—all as metaphors for the spirit (Banani et al. 2005, pp. xii–xv).

One of the motifs found throughout her poems is the strong identification of her beloved as God himself. The Manifestation of God is strongly identified with the godhead. This identification is not explicit, but it is virtually omnipresent in her poems. One is never sure to whom the identification of godhead specifically refers: the Bāb, Bahā’u’llāh perhaps,⁴ God, or spirit (Banani et al. 2005, p. 61). In any case, this godhead she takes as her lover and anticipates the end of separation in a kind of Sufi longing for *fanā’*, or union with God. This is sometimes expressed metaphorically as sexual union:

Look at these tear-filled eyes, this pallid face—

Can you refuse them? Whom would it disgrace?
 Will you not come at daybreak to my bed,
 with kindness ravish me, and end my dread?
 Lift me, love, on the wings of my desire
 Lift me to you, to safety in your fire
 Only take me up, away from this place
 Set me down in the place that is no place

(Banani et al. 2005, pp. 92–93)

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

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 105)

8. The Day of *Alast*

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

O MY FRIENDS!

Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you. (Bahā'u'llāh 1975, Persian, No. 19)

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

Fars is set aflame, and Tehran's burning.
 Pure spirit rises from his place. Start dancing!
 At daybreak nightingales don't sing. The cock
 struts out and birds of Glory start praising.
 When my lover asks, *Am I not your Lord?*
 even the gods reply in awe, *Thou art.*

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 58)

And:

When the brilliant sun of your face first dawned,
 you dazed me by your light at my day's start.
 So speak the words: "*Am I not your Lord?*"
 My heartbeat will reply: "*Thou art. Thou art.*"
 You asked: "*Am I not?*" I said: "*Yes, Thou art.*"

Then disaster set up camp inside my heart.

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 62)

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

When the divine hand molded Adam's clay,
your love sowed its seed in my breast that day . . .
Since that day my heart cried out, *Behold me!*
and I stepped in that street for all to see,
gadding about, a shameless debauchee,
He was all myself, all myself was he—
His jewel set in my heart's palace

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 103)

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

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

(Bahā'u'llāh 1999, pp. 147–55)

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

9. Feminine Power

Far from understanding her gender as a weakness or as a disability, Tāhirih repeatedly invokes her femininity and beauty as a source of power. As such, she suggests a sort of feminist theology that should be explored. MacEoin has argued that Tāhirih never wrote

or preached in favor of the social equality of women in Iranian society and should not be regarded as a “feminist” in any European sense of the word. This is true enough, as no such concept existed in nineteenth-century Iran. But in her poetry, she is clearly and explicitly aware of her gender, her femininity, and her sexuality. In her poems, these are great strengths that can be used to subdue the world. Her poem “Just Let the Wind . . . ” is filled with power and confidence:

Just let the wind untie my perfumed hair,
my net would capture every wild gazelle.
Just let me paint my flashing eyes with black,
and I would make the world as dark as hell.
Yearning, each dawn, to see my dazzling face,
the heaven lifts its golden looking-glass.
If I should pass a church by chance today,
Christ’s own virgins would rush to my gospel.

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 49)

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

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

(Banani et al. 2005, p. 104)

For Tāhirih, her femininity was a strength—not a disability or a weakness. She is aware that she can make use of her beauty and her passion to overcome enemies and shape the world around her. As a learned woman, she felt free to invade male space and dispute with men, without ever sacrificing her gender or her awareness of herself as a woman. In her poems, Tāhirih presents us with a transgressive femininity that can break free of the limits of gender to conquer and dominate the world.

10. Conclusions

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

Perhaps this is appropriate for a feminine theology. While Tāhirih’s ideas cannot be regarded as feminism in any contemporary sense of the word, her theology seems to be filled with a woman’s sensibility. This inclination towards peace, truth, justice, and reconciliation—the end of war—nevertheless does not soften her triumphant proclamation of victory.

At certain moments, Tāhirih anticipates developments in Bābī/Bahā’ī teachings that would not take place until decades later. At least not explicitly. But the theology that can be discerned in her poems demonstrates that such universal themes and global visions were present in Babism, even if they could only be seen by its most radical exponents. Tāhirih’s poetic voice offers a unique Bābī theology understood, perhaps only by her few (women?) followers at the time. But the beauty, the expansiveness, the universality, and the gentleness of her poems formed a legacy that can now be deeply appreciated by all progressive readers.

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Notes

- 1 There is a considerable body of academic literature on the Bābīs and the Bābī movement. Some of the most important full volumes of history include [‘Abdu’l-Bahā] Edward G. Browne, ed. and trans., *A Traveller’s Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Bab* (‘Abdu’l-Bahā [1891] 2004); Moojan Momen, ed., *The Bābī and Bahā’ī Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981); Moojan Momen, ed., *Studies in Bābī and Bahā’ī History, Volume One* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1982); Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bābī Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Bab* (Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2008); Denis MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Fereyduun Vahman, ed., *The Bab and the Babi Community of Iran* (London: Oneworld, 2020).
- 2 If so, it seems to me that this poem alone is sufficient grounds for historians to re-evaluate the entire Bābī movement. Tahiri, it appears, was able to discern themes in the movement that have escaped the notice of most historians.
- 3 Alternately, the opening lines of the poem can be translated, and perhaps more clearly, as: Now hear me! / Since I proclaim what’s manifest and true. I speak the word of victory to you. Strip off your rags of law and pious fashion. Leap naked into the sea of compassion!
- 4 See, for example, “Morning Breezes” in Banani, *Tahiri: A Portrait in Poetry*, 61.

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