Foreword

Over 170 years after her death, the lessons of Tahirih's life remain hard to grapple with. Born in Qazvin, Persia, in 1817, and having lived a short life of just 35 years, Tahirih is now known as a public scholar, an indomitable pioneer and a gifted poet. Her accomplishments and nonconforming personality stand in stark contrast to what took place in an age and society where women were marginalized, hidden behind the mandatory veil and confined to segregated quarters, their education restricted and not encouraged. Tahirih was the first Persian woman to defy tradition by removing her veil in public – a forbidden act for women in nineteenth-century Persia. She was the first woman to raise her voice in public and in an assemblage of men, declaring that the time for women's emancipation was now. She wrote eloquent poems filled with references to justice and personal freedom and the beauty of the new world that was about to burst on the scene. She challenged the religious leaders of her day and publicly demonstrated the capacity of women to think, reason and write. By any measure, her life was extraordinary and courageous. Yet it was also tragic. As one of the leading figures of the Bābī religion, she was martyred in Tehran, her body thrown into a well and filled with earth and stones. What was it about Tahirih's life that prompted such a violent reaction from the authorities in Persia? Why is it that almost two centuries after her death, Tahirih's story is still prohibited in her country of birth?

“From the Seed of Love We Sow”: Further Research on Tahirih Qurrat al-ʿAyn features seven articles, in this issue of HAWWA, highlighting different aspects of the notable life of Tahirih (also referred to as Qurrat-al-ʿAyn). The articles offer new insights and perspectives on the achievements and legacy of Tahirih. They also address the vacuum in scholarship that exists to this day about the Bābī religion’s role and Tahirih’s actions in the universal call for the emancipation of women originating in nineteenth-century Persia. The profound impact of her life raises questions about the true origins of powerful social movements such as the movement to grant women equality. As is pointed out by the editors, Drs. Ghaemmaghami and Dehghani, and other contributing authors to this volume, Tahirih, the scholar, poet and leading revolutionary figure has yet to be fully understood. This excellent volume is thus a welcome addition in advancing further research on Tahirih's life and influence.

Tahirih was a principal actor in a new religion born in nineteenth-century Persia. Founded by the Bāb, the Bābī religion declared an end to the old order.
and proclaimed a new spiritual vision. Though she never met the Bāb in person, Tahirih accepted the Bāb's teachings, leaving her community, including her husband and children, in order to pursue this new vision.

The Bāb's religion not only called for the advancement of women, but also promoted universal education and the study of the sciences. It asked people to seek the truth for themselves and to prepare for another prophet who would appear after the Bāb and whose teachings would guide humanity towards justice, unity and peace.

Despotism and conflict ruled the society into which Tahirih was born. But the new religious order promoted compassion and love. Her study of the Bāb's writings convinced Tahirih that a spiritual force was about to replace the old order. This force would be radically dissimilar to the norms and culture prevalent in Persia at the time. Those norms were promoted by a law and culture that she believed locked women in place. She saw in the teachings of the Bābī religion the possibility of constructing a beautiful and just order completely unlike the one in which she lived. She was determined to embrace this moment and share it with all who would listen.

The act for which Tahirih is most famous represented a radical break with the past. Her action symbolized the breaking of ancient chains and the opening of a new path. When she removed her veil at a gathering of Bābī leaders, Tahirih broke a time-honored law; with this act, she shattered the old ways and proclaimed a revolutionary emancipation for women at unimaginable personal cost. For her matchless courage, her eloquent words and remarkable deeds, Tahirih would become a martyr for truth and a symbol of freedom.

As news spread of her brave act, the wider society took note and both admiration and outrage ensued. Tahirih had challenged the notion that women were to remain private, unheard and unseen. She had defied tradition, asserted her identity and considered herself as equal to any man.

Tahirih demands to be evaluated on her own terms; her life, writings and actions stand as a shining example of speaking truth to power. We see Tahirih’s legacy continuing to unfold even today – just as Tahirih emerged during a repressive, backwards and culturally limiting period, only to rise up and declare her own rights, so too do the women of Iran today seize a similar spirit of truth-telling and resistance to the tired oppressions of their time.

Events in Iran bear out Tahirih’s fixity, her moral rectitude and her indignation at the status quo. Her life lies contrary to a skinny, cartoonishly patriarchal, brittle masculine imperialism that launches through fits and starts in a dark world. Tahirih instead declares that true freedom and true courage occur when a human soul decides to follow the light of truth.
This timely volume adds to the growing scholarship about Tahirih’s life. It seeks to augment the growing library of research and scholarship that reflects an enduring interest in her life which also speaks to her widespread influence. It is our hope that all people will continue to be inspired and challenged by Tahirih.

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