“From the Seed of Love We Sow”: Further Research on Tahirih Qurrat al-ʿAyn

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!

Tahirih

Introduction

She is one of the select few who constitute the pride and adornment of the human race; those few women who will shine for centuries in the world of historical ideals. Let us also preserve her name in our memory, for she, with her beautiful life and martyr’s death, redeemed with her life and spirit, all Eastern women, lifting them up and dignifying them! Honor be to her.

Aleksander Jablonowski, Polish historian and ethnographer

In my opinion, beyond the Constitutional Revolution and the Islamic Revolution, Tahirih Qurrat al-ʿAyn is the standard-bearer of Iran’s third revolution ... Hers was a revolution that is not defined by the traditional meanings of the term, but it nonetheless fundamentally changed the political and cultural landscape of the country. It shunned violence and the shedding of blood as the means to solving societal problems.

It was gradual. Its foundation was building a new world with new relationships.

Farzaneh Milani, Professor, University of Virginia

Tahirih (1817–1852) – also known by the names and titles of Fāṭima, Umm-i Salmih, Zakiyya, Zarrīn-Tāj and Qurrat al-ʿAyn – is best remembered by history for the removal of her veil before an assembled gathering of her co-religionists in the small village of Badasht in northern Persia in the summer of 1848. Executed in the prime of her life for her deeds as much as her words, Tahirih was a dynamic revolutionary, an eloquent speaker, a gifted poet, a prolific scholar and “the first [Persian] woman to preach equality of the sexes and religious freedom”. Although she was not directly involved in advocating women’s suffrage, through proclaiming the advent of a new religion and transcending cultural constraints and by the central role she played in the Conference at Badasht, Tahirih helped usher in a revolutionary transformation in human society. More than any other act, her unveiling – an “apocalypse” in the truest sense of the word – symbolized the independence of the Bābī religion – the only religion which, according to perhaps the most renowned historian of the period, “consciously and concretely broke away from Islamic beliefs and Islamic community and initiated a new prophetic cycle with its own scripture, sense of community, and vision”. Just as the Bāb’s appointment of Tahirih as a leading disciple demonstrated the Bābī religion’s commitment to improving the position of women, her martyrdom stimulated concern for the conditions of women in her country and throughout the world.

The seed for this special issue of Hawwa dedicated to Tahirih was planted in August 2016 when, close to the bicentenary of her birth, we organized a panel dedicated to Tahirih at the biannual meeting of the Association for Iranian Studies (AIS) in Vienna, Austria. Negar Mottahedeh chaired the panel.

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3 Although she is referred to by these other names and titles, the name that she herself preferred was Tahirih. Tahirih is the name she chose to be impressed in her seals. A document comprising a letter written in her own hand has seven impressions of one of her seals. The seal reads, “His handmaiden, Tahirih (amatuhu Tahirih)”, Harvard University, ed., “Writings of Tahirah (Aminah) Qurrat al-ʿAyn, [1844–1852]”, Rouhi (Sarlati) Collection. Women’s Worlds in Qajar Iran Digital Archive, Middle Eastern Division, Widener Library, seq. 7, available at https://iiif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/vie/drs:3178600882i.


during which Moojan Momen and Sahba Shayani presented early versions of their articles. After the conference, we invited Amin Egea, Negar Mottahedeh, Moojan Momen, Sahba Shayani, Mina Yazdani and Hoda Mahmoudi to contribute additional articles and the foreword to this special issue.

The articles are presented more or less in chronological order. Moojan Momen’s contribution expatiates upon the sectarian context in Qazvin into which Tahirih was born and from which she ultimately detached herself, defying its patriarchy and rejecting its reactionism. The writings of Tahirih are the focus of the next two articles. Sahba Shayani’s study advances our understanding of Tahirih’s poetry by comparing three of her most famous literary imitations with the original pieces. Omid Ghaemmaghami’s article furthers study of Tahirih’s largely overlooked prose writings by exploring two of the most obscure and striking ideas in them. The last four articles turn from Tahirih’s life and writings to her afterlife. Mina Yazdani’s contribution deconstructs the ways in which Tahirih’s image has been continuously distorted, beginning with her contemporaries and continuing to scholars today. Sasha Dehghani’s article examines the scholarly interpretation of Tahirih and her impact on the women’s avant-garde in five European countries pre-World War Two. Negar Mottahedeh draws on references to Tahirih in the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā to consider the role of human solidarity in constructing nation and gender. Finally, Amin Egea’s contribution casts light on how British suffragists in the early twentieth century exploited Tahirih’s image and legacy to further their aims and objectives.

The articles in this special issue follow *Hawwa*’s transliteration system with some exceptions: Tahirih, Bahā’u’llāh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahā and Bahā’ī. Most historical references to Iran before 1935 refer to the country as “Persia”, the exonym that served as its official name in the Western world before March 1935.

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