

Táhirih, a Symbol of Progress:
Reading a nineteenth-century Iranian poet in the United States and England

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For my parents.

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Abstract

This thesis offers a reception history of Táhirih, Qurrat al-‘Ayn (d. 1852), an important female poet from nineteenth century Iran. While Táhirih has been received globally, this thesis examines her reception in two contrasting Anglophone reading publics: nineteenth century England and early twentieth century United States. Scholarship regarding Táhirih is altogether sparse, though biographical and literary studies of her life do exist. This thesis, however, marks the first comprehensive reception study of her work and persona as a poet.

Táhirih’s symbolic importance as an early historical figure of the Bahá’í Faith, along with her identity as a female poet, render her a valuable subject for such a reception history. This thesis argues that with the introduction of Táhirih’s figure into the Anglophone reading publics of England and the United States, these two aspects of her identity become emblematic of larger social and political movements. It is my contention that Táhirih represents a symbol of progress across Anglophone readerships.

The first chapter deals with how Táhirih’s religious beliefs shaped her work and her identity as a poet. Central to her poetry are the themes of progress and renewal, which she presents in the context of the Bábí movement. This chapter also addresses the issue of translation, arguing that although various translations offer differing language and form, the themes of renewal and progress are consistently preserved. The second chapter examines Táhirih’s reception in England, which was initiated by scholar Edward G. Browne, a professor of Persian at Cambridge University. In providing a close reading of Browne’s selected works, which include *A Year Amongst the Persians* and *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion*, I prove that Browne’s political motivation to inspire unity between England and Iran shaped his reception of Táhirih. The third and final chapter observes Táhirih’s reception in early twentieth century United States, which was led by the American Bahá’í community. In my study of this community’s reception, I will consult with *Táhirih the Pure*, a biographical text by Bahá’í scholar Martha Root. I will also look closely at *Star of the West*, an early Bahá’í newsletter published between 1910 and 1935. Through a close reading of both these texts, I demonstrate that for the American Bahá’í community, Táhirih was emblematic of faith and martyrdom, but also of gender equality—a social issue which was of great interest to them.

Keywords: Reception, translation, biography, poetry, heroine, Iranian female poets, American-Bahá’í, Bábí

CONTENTS

Short Titles	i
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Reading Táhirih's Poetry	9
Chapter 2: Edward G. Browne and the English Reception	23
Chapter 3: American Bahá'í Reception	39
Conclusion	48
Works Consulted	51

Short Titles

TA: Táhirih. *The Quickening: Unknown Poetry of Táhirih*, trans. John Hatcher and Amrollah

Hemmat. Wilmette, Ill: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2011.

Amanat, Abbas. *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844-*

1850. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Introduction

In 1848, eminent members of the Bábí¹ community gathered in Badasht, a small village in the north of Iran. This meeting, which came to be known as the Conference of Badasht, was composed of 80 men and a single woman.² That single woman in attendance was Táhirih, Qurratul-‘Ayn³, whose intelligence had earned her special distinction within the movement. Held over the span of three weeks in the burning months of June and July, this conference was the site of several historical moments, both in the histories of the Bahá’í Faith and Iran. The founder of the Bahá’í Faith, Bahá’u’lláh, financed and led this conference of ardent believers. As the head of this gathering, Bahá’u’lláh designated two secondary leaders: Táhirih and Quddús⁴. Therefore, Táhirih occupied the charged space of this conference, not only as the sole woman, but as an appointed leader.

¹ The Bábí Faith is an independent religious movement that originated in Iran in 1844. Heralded by Manifestation of God, The Báb. The Báb, literally meaning ‘The Gate,’ declared the Bábí Faith as a religion which designated the commencement of an entirely new religious dispensation. This religious dispensation, which has come to be known as the Bahá’í Dispensation, is composed of two Twin Manifestations: The Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. In essence, the Báb announced the coming of Bahá’u’lláh. Bahá’u’lláh is the central Manifestation of God for the Bahá’í Faith. Now acknowledged as a universal religion, the Bahá’í Faith has an estimated total of 7.3 million believers in some 191 countries.

² Nabíl-i-A’zam (Mullá Muhammad-i- Zarandí). *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl’s Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá’í Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1932), 294.

³ Qurratul-‘Ayn is Arabic for “Solace of the Eyes.”

⁴ Rabbani, Shoghi. *God Passes by*. Wilmette, Ill: Bahá’í Pub. Committee, 1944, 8.

Quddús was designated as an apostle, or Letter of the Living, of the Báb. The following is a brief biography as cited in Shoghi Effendi’s *God Passes By*, a historiography of the beginnings of the Bahá’í Faith: “The last, but in rank the first, of these Letters to be inscribed on the Preserved Tablet was the erudite, the twenty-two year old Quddús, a direct descendant of the Imám Ḥasan and the most esteemed disciple of Siyyid Kázim.”

It was at this conference where Táhirih tore asunder her veil, realizing the Bahá'í ideals of equality into action. Even when performed in this setting of progressive Bábí thought⁵, Táhirih's act was wholly unprecedented and considered blasphemous by many; at the time, women in Iran had minimal rights and Islamic law required them to wear veils. Early Bahá'í historian Nabil-i-A'zam provides an account of the event in his historical narrative, *The Dawn-Breakers*. In the narrative, Táhirih is depicted as an erudite woman of the utmost purity. Nabil explains that, "To behold her face unveiled was to them inconceivable. Even to gaze at her shadow was a thing which they deemed improper, inasmuch as they regarded her as the very incarnation of Fátimih, the noblest emblem of chastity in their eyes."⁶ Thus, to unveil herself was an act of radical independence unforeseen by the 80 men present at the conference. As a result of this spontaneous act, Táhirih's image as an "emblem of chastity" was, in the eyes of some, compromised. Nabil recalls the frantic reaction that took place at the moment of Táhirih's unveiling:

Quietly, silently, and with the utmost dignity, Táhirih stepped forward and, advancing towards Quddús, seated herself on his right-hand side. Her unruffled serenity sharply contrasted with the affrighted countenances of those who were gazing upon her face. Fear, anger, and bewilderment stirred the depths of their souls. That sudden revelation seemed to have stunned their faculties... Her countenance displayed that same dignity and confidence which she had evinced at the first moment of her appearance before the assembled believers. A feeling of joy and triumph had now illumined her face. She rose

⁵ The Báb established a new religious system which abrogated Islamic law. Among the principles of this new system was the equality of genders and the proper education of women. The Báb declared this new system effective until the coming of "He Whom God shall make manifest," Bahá'u'lláh.

⁶ Ibid, 295.

from her seat and, undeterred by the tumult that she had raised in the hearts of her companions, began to address the remnant of that assembly.⁷

This scene captures the “confidence” with which Táhirih unveiled herself. Nabil’s description of the historical event points to her “unruffled serenity.” Despite the “tumult” that Táhirih had stirred in the “hearts of her companions,” she went on to address the men that remained; Táhirih’s certainty in practicing the principle of equality was so great that an entire assembly of men could not stop her. This text indicates that although many of the men in attendance took great offense to Táhirih’s act, Nabil did not. Rather, Nabil frames the event as heroic, exalting Táhirih with his language. To Nabil, and the other men whose faith were not shaken by this act, Táhirih’s unveiling only made her “dignity” more complete.

Táhirih is most widely known for the event of her unveiling. For this reason, she is considered an early feminist icon within Iranian culture. Even so, Táhirih continues to be overlooked by the generality of the Iranian public. Moreover, her poetry, which can be considered one of the crowning achievements of her life, is often overlooked by Iran’s literary community and public. As scholar Farzaneh Milani solemnly observes, “It is unfortunate that this woman who unveiled herself so many years ago still lives such a veiled life in the memory of her own people.”⁸

The question of Táhirih’s identity is a complicated one. This complication is largely due to the spectrum of her reception across varying communities. On the surface, these receptions of Táhirih’s persona and poetry seem unambiguous. To some, Táhirih is a heroine who represents the pinnacle of womanhood and beauty. To others, Táhirih represents the emergence of feminism

⁷ Nabil-i-A’zam, 295.

⁸ Milani, Farzaneh. *Veils and Words: Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. Syracuse University Press, 1992, 80.

and gender equality in Iran. Most commonly, Táhirih is recognized as a paradigm of martyrdom and faith. As a literary reception study, this thesis will examine the reception of Táhirih's poetry and persona in contrasting reading publics, focusing on the nuances of each and exploring why discrepancies exist. More specifically, this thesis documents Táhirih's reception in the Anglophone reading publics of England and the United States.

Before delving into the details of Táhirih's reception, it is necessary to establish the context of her life. Born Fatimah Baraghani in 1814 Qazvin, Táhirih received the utmost care in the cultivation of her intelligence. Her father, Muhammad Salih Baraghani, was a noted Usuli mujtahid⁹ who oversaw his own school, Salihyya Madarasa. It was at this school where Táhirih received an education and ultimately delivered lectures of her own, something which was unheard of among other female members of her family. Indeed, so great was the breadth of her abilities that Táhirih was appointed as a teacher in the women's section of Salihyya Madarasa. As an educator, Táhirih undertook the instruction of each of her sisters, as well as other young, privileged women.¹⁰

Despite the independence afforded by her thorough education, Táhirih was still expected to uphold certain social obligations. At the age of fourteen, Táhirih was forced into a marriage with her cousin, Mulla Muhammad Baraghani.¹¹ Upon marrying, the two relocated to Karbala, where Táhirih had two sons, Ibrahim and Isamael. According to Abbas Amanat, Táhirih's marriage was tense and not without its fair share of quarreling.¹² Therefore, it is unsurprising that

⁹ Usulis constitute the most dominant Twelver Shi'a Islam group. They are essentially a sect of Shi'a Islam. A Mujtahid is an official authority in the interpretation and implementation of Islamic law.

¹⁰ Ibid, 328.

¹¹ Amanat, Abbas. *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, 297.

¹² Ibid, 297.

Táhirih abandoned her domestic life as a wife and mother, deciding instead to pursue her religious inclinations.

Eventually, Táhirih and her family returned to Qazvin, where news of the Bábí movement came to her knowledge. Against the wills of both her father and husband, Táhirih conversed freely with the Bábís of the city. The conversations she shared with local Bábís ultimately culminated in her own declaration of faith in the Báb. Táhirih's conversion exasperated her already contemptuous relations with her husband and family. Finally, towards the latter half of 1843, Táhirih resolved to leave her husband and children. With the companionship of her sister Marziya, Táhirih set out to return to Karbala, marking the point at which her identity as a Bábí was born.¹³

Táhirih led a remarkable life marked by fearless passion; she was relentless in her pursuit of knowledge and uncompromising in her beliefs. As a disciple of the Bábí movement, Táhirih did not abide by the traditional conventions of Iran and Islam. Táhirih's refusal to blindly accept tradition, along with her undying faith in the Báb, ultimately led to her execution in 1852. In the scope of Iranian history, Táhirih's life and work stand unmatched in terms of her dedication to progressive theology and gender equality. Therefore, it is greatly surprising that her identity is relatively unknown beyond specific literary communities, both within and outside Iran.

As a poet, Táhirih's work is central to her reception. Prior to documenting Táhirih's receptions in England and the United States, this thesis provides a survey of her work as a poet. Accordingly, the first chapter of this thesis discusses Táhirih's identity as a poet, which is largely influenced by her religious beliefs. In a reading of her selected literature, this thesis demonstrates

¹³ Ibid, 298.

that the Bahá'í-specific themes of renewal and progress are central to her work. Lastly, this chapter addresses the issue of translation. Often times, translation poses a dilemma in the honest preservation of a poet's work. While various translators render Táhirih's poetry in contrasting ways, the themes of her work are left untouched. In comparing three separate translations of the poem, "Arise," I contend that although there is variance in language and form, the themes of renewal and progress remain constant.

The second chapter examines Táhirih's reception in England, which first occurred in the late nineteenth century. Central to her reception in England is the scholar Edward G. Browne, who was a professor of Persian at Cambridge University. Unlike his peers at Cambridge, Browne held the nation of Iran in high regard. As a result, he spent much of his academic career documenting Iran in a manner that humanizes its people. Although his interests spanned the breadth of Persian literature, Browne held a special admiration for the Bábí movement, which was contemporary with his own life. Browne's scholarly works on the Bábí movement signify the point at which Táhirih entered the English canon. Moreover, Browne's depictions of Táhirih fixate on her as a heroine and exemplary woman. In providing a close reading of Browne's selected works, which include *A Year Amongst the Persians* and *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion*, I prove that Browne's political motivation to strike harmony between England and Iran informed his reception of Táhirih.

The third and final chapter of this thesis observes Táhirih's reception in early twentieth century United States. In contrast to Táhirih's reception in England which was led by an academic, her reception in the United States was spearheaded by the American Bahá'í community. In observing this community, I will consult with the text *Táhirih the Pure*, a biographical work by Bahá'í scholar Martha Root. I will also look closely at *Star of the West*, a

Bahá'í newsletter published between 1910 and 1935. Through a close reading of both these texts, I demonstrate that for the American Bahá'í reading public, Táhirih was emblematic of martyrdom and their broader social concern regarding gender equality.

First and foremost, this thesis considers how the image and representation of a literary figure travels across borders. More specifically, this thesis is a reception study on Táhirih in English-speaking countries. Such being the case, its aim is to document Táhirih's contrasting receptions in England and the United States. Beyond that, however, this thesis illustrates how various reading publics carry individualized ideals and motivations, be they social or political. Lastly, this thesis argues that across readerships in the United States and England, Táhirih's image stands as a symbol of progress. For Browne, Táhirih is a symbol of political progress. By contrast, Táhirih is a symbol of social progress for the American Bahá'í community.

Chapter 1: Reading Táhirih's Poetry

Táhirih held the belief that the Báb ushered in an entirely new religious dispensation. As a result, her poetry revolves around the concept of total religious renewal, establishing a poetic persona that is relatively consistent throughout her oeuvre. A survey of Táhirih's collected poetry would prove that her poetic voice is rigidly set. With each poem she wrote, Táhirih sought to worship God and celebrate the coming of the Báb. Much like the poets of her time, Táhirih predominantly wrote poetry in the form of ghazals.¹⁴ Although ghazals are primarily a fixed form of poetry, the content they hold is often defined by metaphysical preoccupations and an acute longing for the beloved. In the case of Táhirih's poetry, the beloved is repeatedly identified as the Báb. In this chapter, we will examine Táhirih's poetry, paying special attention to theme and poetic voice. Upon doing so, we will then approach the issue of translating her poetry. It is my contention that despite Táhirih's robust presentation of poetic voice, discrepancies often arise in the details of her translated poetry. Most notably, the subject defined as the "beloved" changes. Still, while these details vary across translators, the theme of renewal and progress remains fixed.

In large part, the developments and preoccupations of Táhirih's poetry are a culmination of her family history. The Baraghani family's involvement in the conflict between the opposing branches of Shi'a Islam likely informed, and to an extent inspired, Táhirih's own break from religious tradition. In examining the general projection of the Baraghani family history, one finds a common string of religious strife and unrest. Scholar Moojan Momen has argued that Shi'a

¹⁴ A fixed form of traditional Persian poetry, ghazals are composed of a monorhyme spanning 5 to 14 lines, in addition to a line which states the author's name. Famous Persian poets such as Rumi and Hafiz wrote extensively in ghazal form.

Islam had a divisive influence on the Baraghani.¹⁵ According to Momen, the Baraghani family encountered three distinct eras of religious turbulence. With each successive era, the Baraghani family became increasingly disunified. The first era, which occurred in the late eighteenth century, ultimately resulted in the forced exile of a Baraghani ancestor out of the town of Qazvin and into the town of Baraghan. Hence, the name ‘Baraghani,’ which translates to “of Baraghan.” In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the second era of turmoil emerged, resulting in even greater religious tumult among the family. Finally, the third and last era occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century. This period of unrest was born as a result of Táhirih’s departure from Shi’a Islam.

When the Bábí movement emerged on the horizon of Iranian religion, there was great opposition and resistance on the part of the country’s Shi’a clergy. And although the clergy only fortified this resistance as time went on, many men and women, learned and unlearned alike, joined the movement. Upon learning about the movement, Táhirih quickly became enamored with the Báb and his revelation, not hesitating for a moment in accepting him as a manifestation of God. Being one of the first eighteen declared believers of the Bábí movement, the Báb designated Táhirih as a Letter of the Living.¹⁶¹⁷ In essence, Táhirih was immediate in her acknowledgment of the Báb, divorcing her faith from the religious traditions of her family.

Following her conversion to the Bábí Faith in 1844, Táhirih embarked on a life of total service to the Báb and his cause. More often than not, Táhirih’s service took the form of writing. As historian Abbas Amanat has noted, Táhirih wrote multiple doctrines proving the claims of the

¹⁵ Momen, Moojan. “Usuli, Akhbari, Shaykhi, Bábí: The Tribulations of a Qazvin Family.” *Iranian Studies* (2003), 36.3, 317–37.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 330.

¹⁷ Letters of the Living are considered to the disciples of the Báb. As a Letter of the Living, Táhirih occupies a station which is exalted above subsequent Bábís. Still, this distinction does not mark Táhirih as a prophet of God.

Báb. In one doctrine, Táhirih declares her faith in God, acknowledging the Báb as His undisputed manifestation. She writes, “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...it is incumbent upon Him, whose status is high, not to leave the people to themselves .¹⁸ Here, Táhirih expounds the order of the new religious dispensation. She credits her logic as “free of intruders.” Given her history, we can imagine that the “intruders” referenced in this statement are the Shi’a clerics. Furthermore, Táhirih’s assertions stem from her faith, as she claims to have “observed God’s power and omnipotence.” In this statement, the “great cause” signifies the Bábí movement and the subject, “Him,” is identified as the Báb. As a record of her beliefs, this passage illustrates Táhirih’s devotion to the Báb. The very fact that Táhirih published multiple doctrines defending the Báb demonstrates her dedication, both spiritually and intellectually, to the Bábí movement. In the end, Táhirih’s unapologetic commitment to the dissemination of the Bábí religion led to her execution. Therefore, Táhirih’s identity as a Bábí is an unavoidable reality of her identity, and by extension, poetry.

Táhirih’s personal poetry provides the most open and passionate declaration of her beliefs. While Táhirih’s doctrines demonstrate her desire to prove the Bábí movement’s legitimacy and ascendancy, Táhirih’s poetry exhibit her impulse to express the strong emotions that accompany her faith. Both Táhirih’s doctrines and poetry did extensive work in bolstering the Bábí movement. Indeed, her travels as a teacher of the religion, and the resulting circulation of her work, enabled her to attract a mass of new believers.¹⁹ The range and effect of Táhirih’s work speak to its accessibility. It is important to note that much of Táhirih’s writing is heavily

¹⁸ Amanat, Abbas. *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Bábí Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, 302.

¹⁹ Effendi, Shoghi. *God Passes By*. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Pub. Committee, 1970, 73.

coded in Islamic traditions, which implies that only a select few individuals could access the entirety of their claims. Yet, although Táhirih's work is cloaked in multiple meanings, it is not incomprehensible. In fact, Táhirih's success as a teacher attests to the fact that her poetry works on multiple levels, some more accessible than others. Indeed, despite the complexity of its content, many selections of her poetry are written in a more accessible style of language, and thus appeal to a wider audience.

This issue of accessibility speaks to Táhirih's motivations in writing poetry. I argue that because Táhirih dedicated herself to teaching and proving the Bábí religion, she intended her poetry to do the same. Unlike the doctrines she wrote and distributed among intellectuals and Muslim clerics, Táhirih's poetry could be circulated among the more common people of Iran. Moreover, the melodious tone and universal appeal of poetry allows for easy circulation, and thus could have acted as one of Táhirih's primary tools of teaching.

When bearing these details in mind, Táhirih's poetry is cast into a more objective light and the act of curating her image becomes less sustainable. In the pages that follow, we will examine Táhirih's poetry and discern the most prevalent themes that fill its lines. As demonstrated in the initial pages of this chapter, religion sat at the core of Táhirih's life; it was the impetus that drove her to travel across Iran, produce religious doctrinal proofs, and, most notably, write poetry. As Táhirih was a devout Bábí, it follows that her poetry is heavily laden with Bábí themes and principles. Within Táhirih's poetry, these central themes are those of renewal and progress.

Central to our study of Táhirih's poetry will be John Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat's *The Poetry of Táhirih*, the first book in an extensive three-part translation of her collected poetry. These anthologies of Táhirih's poetry were translated in partnership by Hatcher and Hemmat

with the purpose of rendering a comprehensive view of her writing. In the introduction to the series' third book, *The Quickening*, Hatcher and Hemmat suggest that the themes of resurrection and renewal are “of utmost importance among the significant symbolic terms employed by Táhirih.”²⁰ This theme of resurrection, which has its origins in biblical texts, is central to the dissection of Táhirih's literature; language pertaining to religious renewal is heavily dispersed throughout her work. In her poetry, this language takes the form of eschatological terms such as “renewal,” “rebirth,” and “new day.” When reading Táhirih's poetry, I suggest following the use of these symbolic terms, as they will allow us to trace its religious undertones.

One poem that captures Táhirih's religious ardor is “Song of Praise for the Appearance of the Báb.” Táhirih utilizes this poem as a means to exalt the station of the Báb, imploring God to protect him and make his mission victorious. This poem also demonstrates Táhirih's belief in religious renewal and the initiation of a new religious dispensation. With each line, the poem builds in rapture and ecstasy. In the vein of both theme and tone, the beginning lines of this poem speak for its entirety. Much like the other poems in her collected works, Táhirih opens this poem with a prayerful invocation to God, saying, “O my God, O my God.”^{21 22} As the opening line of the poem, this initial invocation to God frames the subsequent lines as a prayer. Moreover, the line embodies the speaker's suppliant tone, which in turn informs the dynamic that exists between the speaker and her subject.

The subject of this poem is the speaker's beloved: the Báb. Immediately upon invoking God, Táhirih moves on to addressing the Báb as God's “exalted essence” (*TA*, line 2). In terms of

²⁰ Hatcher, John S. and Hemmat, Amrollah. *The Quickening*. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing, 2008, 14.

²¹ *Ibid*, 79.

²² The poem referenced in the following paragraphs is too long to cite in full. Therefore, I will only quote the lines that I close read. This poem can be found on pages 79-81 of the original text.

style, this poem relies heavily on language that seeks to exalt and praise. As a result, the poem emphasizes the holiness and exalted station of the Báb. Indeed, Táhirih leaves little room for interpretation when she references the Báb, saying “O Master, there is no one in existence except You” (*TA*, line 10). Here, she openly states that the Báb embodies all existence. In lines such as this, Táhirih’s poetic voice is direct, securing the content of her poetry and preventing the misrepresentation of her words.

Táhirih continues to speak in direct and open language throughout the poem. Finally, in the poem’s final lines, Táhirih reveals her wish. Although the entire poem can be read as a prayer, Táhirih’s prayerful invocations culminate in these lines. She summons the Báb in multiple terms, exclaiming, “O Venerable, Vital, Mighty, Most Might One!/O Incomparable, Assisting, Ever-assisting Friend!/O Source, O Creator, O Greater Creator, O Most Great Creator!/O Apparent One, O Manifest One, O Most Great Revealer” (*TA*, lines 42-45). This language, which is rendered in parallel structure, dramatizes Táhirih’s spiritual longing for the Báb. Although words such as “creator” and “source” hearken back to a God/creation dynamic, Táhirih is addressing the Báb. In the poem, Táhirih references the Báb as the appearance of God in the earthly realm. Hence, she addresses him as the “Apparent One” and the “Manifest One.” Thus, these lines capture the dynamic that exists between Táhirih, the speaker, and her beloved, the Báb.

Táhirih undoubtedly acts as the speaker of this poem. This is demonstrated in the end of the poem where she implores God to aid her in detaching from all that is not of the Báb. She beseeches God, writing, “Through your boundless grace, behold Tá, pure and detached/ That she might become severed from whatever is not of You,/That she might arrive at the feast of the Incomparable One” (*TA*, lines 48-48). Táhirih, referring to herself as “Tá,” asks God to sever her

from all that is not of the Báb. Ultimately, her purpose in acquiring this level of detachment is so that she may arrive at the “feast of the Incomparable One.” Here, the “feast of the Incomparable One” can be likened to the presence of the Báb. Moreover, it can be likened to paradise, which, in Bahá’í tradition, is not heaven, but rather spiritual proximity to God.

The theme of religious renewal is also present within the lines of this poem. In the poem’s third line, Táhirih writes, “by Your ancient self, which is Muhammad” (TA, line 3). Moreover, she refers to the Báb as Muhammad reincarnate. In connecting the identities of Muhammad and the Báb, Táhirih alludes to the concept of progressive revelation, a defining tenet of the Bahá’í Faith.²³ Indeed, this concept of progressive revelation is affirmed later in the poem when Táhirih comments on the station of the Báb, writing, “His station is the precursor for the Most Holy Face.” As elaborated by Hatcher and Hemmat, the use of “precursor” refers to ultimate coming of the Bahá’u’lláh.²⁴ Thus, in the space of the poem’s opening lines, Táhirih alludes to both Islamic and Bahá’í concepts, in such that the separation between the two religions becomes less distinct. As a result, Táhirih demonstrates the continuity of religion, framing the Bahá’í Revelation as the next stage.

Poems such as “Song of Praise for the Appearance of the Báb” demonstrate the general preoccupations of Táhirih’s work. A quick reading of this poem would suggest that Táhirih’s

²³ Bahá’u’lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. Wilmette, Ill: Bahá’í Pub. Trust, 1976, 81.

The term progressive revelation refers to the Bahá’í belief that man’s divine education is progressively administered by the Messengers of God, all of Whom originate from a single God. This principle implies the essential unity of God. Moreover, in the system of progressive revelation, the basic spiritual principles of religion remain consistent while social laws evolve. As elucidated in the Bahá’í writings by Bahá’u’lláh: “Whenever this robe hath fulfilled its purpose, the Almighty will assuredly renew it. For every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God. Every Divine Revelation hath been sent down in a manner that befitted the circumstances of the age in which it hath appeared.”

²⁴ Hatcher, John S. and Hemmat, Amrollah. *The Quickening*. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing, 2008, 80.

thoughts, desires, and aspirations revolved around the person of the Báb. Moreover, one would assume that the generality of her poetry can be defined as devotional poetry that seeks to praise and commemorate the Báb. While this may be true to an extent, Táhirih's poetry sought to serve other functions as well. For example, in her poem "Arise," Táhirih adopts a voice of urgency which attempts to revive the reader, awakening them to the new day. As an instrument of Táhirih's purpose, this poem ultimately seeks to enlist the reader's support in Bábí movement.

As one of her more widely circulated poems, "Arise" has been translated by a number of scholars. With each translation, liberties have been taken, however the ultimate theme of renewal remains fixed. A translation of the poem rendered by Hatcher and Hemmat reads:

Arise!

O sleeping one, the Friend has arrived! Arise!
Shake off that earthly dust! Arise!

Behold, O heartsick lover of the Friend,
He who was aloof has turned kind and benevolent!
Arise!

O frail and broken-hearted one,
the consoling physician has come to your bedside!
Arise!

O thou, half drunk with intoxication for the
Friend,
the choice solacing wine is here! Arise!

O thou who art sick with separation,
the season of reunion with the Friend has arrived!
Arise!

O thou whom autumn made melancholic
now spring has really come! Arise!

Behold the new year teaming with new life!

Cast off that dead flesh! Become reborn! Arise!²⁵

In this poem, Táhirih writes with the intent of exciting the reader. Táhirih rejoices at the emergence of a new day. She exclaims, “Now spring really has come! Arise!” In Táhirih’s eyes the world has entered a new era and it is time for humanity to “cast off that dead flesh! Become reborn! Arise!” Unlike the previous poem, this poem addresses humanity as opposed to the divine. Moreover, while an attempt to engage the audience was altogether lacking in the previous poem, this poem makes a concerted effort to win the reader’s support.

Ultimately, these two poems embody the central themes that occupy the pages of Táhirih’s poetry. The first theme is that of devotion. The great majority, if not all, of Táhirih’s poetry took great care to convey a devotional attitude. As demonstrated earlier, Táhirih’s poem, “Song of Praise for the Appearance of the Báb,” perfectly captures this theme of prayerfulness, the subject of her devotion being the Báb. The second theme within Táhirih’s poetry is that of renewal. This theme, which is key to much of Táhirih’s poetry, can be readily found in the poem “Arise.”

In translating the poem, Hatcher and Hemmat have made several interesting decisions. The majority of these decisions are attached to the word “arise.” For instance, Hatcher and Hemmat chose to include an exclamation point after “arise.” This punctuation mark can be found in both the poem’s title and body. Furthermore, the team toyed with the poem’s form, indenting “arise!” a total of three separate times. In manipulating the form in such a way, Hatcher and Hemmat place an emphasis on “arise,” which in turn contributes to the poem’s excited tone. The result is a poem that reads as though the speaker is galvanizing the reader into action.

²⁵ Hatcher, John S, Amrollah Hemmat, and al-‘Ayn Qurrat. *The Poetry of Táhirih*. Oxford: George Ronald, 2002, 41-42.

Unlike Táhirih's image, translations of her poetry are generally uniform in theme and tone. An excellent example of this united vision of translation is scholar Farzaneh Milani's alternative translation of "Arise." Although Milani's translation of the poem reads much differently than Hatcher and Hemmat's translation, the two translations share the same themes. Milani's translation reads:

Arise

O slumbering one, the beloved has arrived, arise!
Brush off the dust of sleep and self, arise!

Behold, the good will has arrived,
Come not before him with tears, arise!

The mender of concerns has come to you,
O heavy hearted one, arise!

O one afflicted by separation,
Behold the good tidings of the beloved's union, arise!

O you, withered by autumn,
Now, spring has come, arise!

Behold, the New Year brings a fresh life,
O withered corpse of yesteryear, up from your tomb, arise!²⁶

In Milani's translation of the poem, "Friend" is replaced with "beloved." This discrepancy is the greatest one between the two poems. In the Hatcher and Hemmat's translation, the capitalization of "Friend" implies an allusion to the Báb, thus establishing a tone of reverence. Thus, in leaving "beloved" uncapitalized, Milani forgoes a certain degree of reverence. She also keeps the identity of the "beloved" more ambiguous. Still, although Hatcher and Hemmat's translation is overtly religious and Milani's translation is not, the two poems share many similarities. For

²⁶ Milani, Farzaneh. *Veils And Words: the Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1992, 98-9.

instance, both touch upon the themes of resurrection and renewal. Moreover, both poems celebrate union with the “beloved.” Ultimately, Milani’s selection of “beloved” downplays the poem’s religious overtone.

While the previous translations differ in language, and to an extent implication, they ultimately share the greater theme of regeneration and renewal. This commonality holds true for scholar Amin Banani’s translation of the poem, as well. Interestingly, Banani elects to alternatively title the poem “Sleeper!” In this translation, Táhirih rejoices in the new day. The translation opens:

Sleeper!

Wake up, sleeper! Your lover’s come for you!
Rouse yourself, brush those cobwebs from your hair

Gentle Love is here, and brings you kindness
Miserable lover, your Love stands near

Comfort awaits at the side of your bed
Sit up, throw off your grief- not one more tear!

Suffering, separate, lying there cold,
embrace your lover, who loves without fear

Wan and wasted, starved to death by the Fall,
Get up! Get up! At last the Spring is here.

Our time’s renewed, for life is always new
Rise! Rise up! Your corpse of that old, dead year!²⁷

Unlike Milani’s translation and Hatcher and Hemmat’s translation, Banani’s translation omits the inclusion of “arise.” Banani makes this translating decision despite the fact that “arise” is repeated at the end of each line. Instead, Banani refrains from including this exhortation until the poem's last line, which he translates to, “Rise! Rise up! Your corpse of the old, dead year!” The

²⁷ Amin Banani, Jascha Kessler, and Anthony A. Lee, trans., *Táhirih: A Portrait in Poetry: Selected Poems of Qurratu’l-‘Ayn* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005), 75.

decision to exclude “arise,” a word whose presence is undeniably central to the poem’s meaning, speaks to Banani’s overall method of translation.

The image that Banani’s translation conjures is that of a dead corpse being quickened by new life. Similar to Milani’s capitalization of “New Year,” Banani capitalizes “Spring,” thereby emphasizing the importance of this new era. Still, in the matter of designating importance with capitalized words, Banani takes his translation a step further than Milani’s. In referencing the poem’s subject, the beloved, Banani writes “Love.” As a result of his capitalization of “Love,” the poem adopts a religious context; here, the “Love” can be read as the Báb. Moreover, Banani’s capitalization of “Love” can be likened to Hatcher and Hemmat’s capitalization of “Friend.” Both mechanical decisions clarify that the beloved is divine and exalted beyond the human world.

Although there are nuances in the poem’s various translations, each poem shares a common theme: progress. Indeed, each translator honors the poem’s celebration of progress, growth, and renewal. In Milani’s translation, which is shorter than Hatcher and Hemmat’s translation and Banani’s translation, there is an emphasis on the emergence of a “New Year.” This choice to capitalize “New Year,” suggests that the speaker is referring to a great event, one that is exalted above human experience. Furthermore, the capitalization of “New Year” also hearkens back to the eschatological terms that define Táhirih’s poetry. Therefore, although Milani’s translation is not overtly religious, it still carries religious implications.

While the question of Táhirih’s poetry is vast, there are several facts that must inform its reading. First and foremost, Táhirih was a disciple of a new religious movement. Enamored with the Báb, Táhirih gave her life to the teaching of his religion. Naturally, this religious motivation drove all her actions, including her writing. As a result, Táhirih’s poetry openly celebrates the

Báb and the emergence of a new religion. Thematically, Táhirih's poetry is fixated on renewal and rebirth. While translations of her work emphasize the appearance of the Báb in varying degrees, the concepts of renewal and progress are consistently present. Along the course of this thesis, we will study Táhirih's reception in England and the United States, asking ourselves this question: why has her persona been cast in a variety of lights when the content and purpose of her poetry is so clearly stated?

Chapter 2: Edward G. Browne and the English Reception

Born to an affluent family in Uley, Gloucester in 1862, British orientalist²⁸ Edward G. Browne dedicated the expanse of his scholarly life to the study of Iranian culture. Both among western scholars and Iranians, Browne is widely accepted as the preeminent early European scholar in the field of Modern Iranian Studies. Beyond modern Iranian studies, Browne is a notable figure in the history of scholarship concerning the Bahá'í and Bábí faiths. Although not his exclusive area of study, the Bábí movement was one of Browne's greatest scholarly passions. Consequently, Browne generated a vast body of historical and literary scholarship regarding the Bábí movement. In fact, Browne was among the first of his countrymen to facilitate the movement's British introduction. Naturally, Browne's scholarship regarding the movement often included excerpts on Táhirih. In each passage, Browne renders a consistent, almost formulaic, portrayal of Táhirih as an exemplary woman and heroine for the ages.

Before reading Browne's reception of Táhirih, it is necessary to consider his personal affiliation with Iran. It was during his time at Cambridge that Browne cultivated his knowledge of Iran. In 1887, Browne was named a Pembroke Fellow and subsequently permitted to journey to Iran as an extension of his studies. Although he spent less than a year in Iran, Browne established a lasting connection to the country.²⁹ Moreover, by immersing himself in Iranian culture, Browne acquired a rich understanding of the country's customs and traditions. As Browne wistfully recalls, "I found myself ere long in a world whereof I had never dreamed, and wherein my spirit was subjected to such alterations of admiration, disgust, and wonder, as I had

²⁸ By orientalist it is meant a scholar who studies the history, culture, and traditions of regions in either the Near or Far East

²⁹ Browne, Edward Granville. *Selections From the Writings of E. G. Browne On the Bábí And Bábá'í Religions*. Oxford: G. Ronald, 1987, 1.

never before in my life experienced.”³⁰ Browne’s journey to Iran left him utterly spellbound. Not only did it provide him with a vast wealth of direct experience, but it kindled within his heart a passion for Iranian culture that sustained the remainder of his life’s work. In the following paragraphs we will closely observe the dimensions of Browne’s scholarship on Iran in order to discern his political stance on the country.

In order to understand Browne’s relationship to Iran, and by extension the Bábí community, one must examine Browne’s general sentiments towards the country. Browne’s views on Iran were deeply rooted in both admiration and respect. In *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia*, an impressive book on Iranian press and journalism, Browne expresses his personal political views on the country. He writes:

I spoke briefly of this modern poetry, and gave some specimens of it, and after the lecture several of those present expressed surprise at learning that there was any modern poetry to speak of. This determined me to devote some attention to the refutation of a pernicious error chiefly attributable to the rarity of intimate relations between the literary worlds of Europe and Asia, but fostered and encouraged to some extent by those who desire for political reasons to represent such Asiatic peoples as the Persians as entirely decadent and degenerate, whereas in fact they have during the last eight years shown a vitality which, under happier circumstances, had it been unimpeded by malignant external forces entirely beyond the control of the Persian people, would, I am firmly convinced, have ultimately effected the moral and material regeneration of the country.³¹

³⁰ Browne, Edward Granville. *A Year Amongst the Persians*, (Cambridge, 1926), p. 476.

³¹ Browne, Edward Granville. *The press and poetry of modern Persia: partly based on the manuscript work of Mírzá Muhammad "Alí Khán "Tarbiyat" of Tabríz*. Cambridge: University press, xxviii.

This text, which is presented in the translator's preface, allows a valuable glimpse into Browne's personal beliefs and motivations. Browne's voice, which he renders in first person, is personal and unaffected. Browne's perceptions of the East are directly contrary to classic orientalist perceptions. Whereas orientalist scholars of Iran frequently emphasized the country's Islamic Golden Age, Browne's interests ran towards Iran's modern political and literary situation. This meant that the focus of his scholarship overlooked popular literary giants such as Rumi, Saadi, and Hafez, choosing instead to focus on Iranian authors active within the country's new and contemporary literary scene. As the excerpt indicates, Browne's lecture on modern Persian poetry warranted shock from his colleagues. Upon hearing his lecture, they "expressed surprise at learning that there was any modern poetry." In essence, many of Browne's fellow scholars were shocked to learn that in an Eastern country such as Iran, literature was in a state of growth. In fact, Browne's assertions on the literary developments of Iran were contrary to the common Western belief that Iranian literature was in a state of decline, regressing from its Islamic Golden Age.

Browne writes that these reductive opinions drove him "to devote some attention to the refutation of a pernicious error." Browne's language expresses his deep resentment of his peers' views; phrases such as "pernicious error" capture his intense disapproval. Furthermore, rather than overlook the ignorance of his fellow orientalists, Browne felt compelled to "devote" scholarship in "refutation" to their thinking; hence, the writing of *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia*. This excerpt is key to understanding Browne's identity as a scholar; Browne was conscious of England's regressive notions regarding Iran. Rather than accept the injustice of these false perceptions, Browne harbored an impulse to correct them.

Browne's observations on the British orientalist community speaks to his own progressive politics. The passage reveals Browne's supportive views of Iran as a country. We see that rather than adopting a colonialist attitude towards the East, Browne defends Iran, arguing that its people are neither "decadent" nor "degenerate." Rather, Browne insists that political circumstance has prevented Iran and its people from arising within the global scene. Therefore, it quickly becomes clear that Browne has specific intentions motivating his decision to translate the current press and journalism of Iran into English. I propose that Browne wished to prove Iran's dignity and legitimacy as a nation—one that is worthy of the consideration and respect of England's countrymen.

Indeed, the political and social climate of Iran is pertinent to understanding Browne's studies and views on the country. The period of political unrest known as the Constitutional Revolution, which raised the question of democracy and led to the establishment of a Persian Parliament, was at its height during the time of Browne's scholarly activity. The revolution was led by a group of self-proclaimed Constitutionalists who called for the dethroning of the monarchy, along with the establishment of a national constitution. As noted earlier, Browne took a particular interest in Iran's current events and evolving politics. Therefore, it was only natural that he aligned himself with this new political movement.

In his book, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith*, scholar H.M. Balyuzi details Browne's relationship with Iranian politics and the Constitutional movement. As Balyuzi has demonstrated, Browne's personal investment in the political cause of the constitutionalists was great.³² Browne expended much effort in the path of advancing the cause of the constitutionalists. Not only did he form close relationships with the leaders of the movement, but

³² Balyuzi, H. M. (1970). *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá'í Faith*. London: George Ronald, p. 89.

he acted as a voice of the movement within the Western world. Balyuzi goes on to write that in 1907, “Browne helped to form the Persia Committee in London to promote and defend the cause of the constitution, and his pen was prolific in the service of the same cause.”³³ This detail of Browne’s political activity provides insight on the function he intended his writing to perform. Moreover, the fact that he exercised his power in propagating the message of the Constitutionalists affirms the idea that Browne was a genuine supporter of Iranians’ rights. Ultimately, Browne’s political activity and commentaries prove that he disapproved of Britain’s imperialist foreign policies towards Iran.

While Browne’s interest in Iran touched a variety of cultural subjects, he dedicated a great deal of his scholarship to the study of the Bábí and Bahá’í Faiths. Browne’s fixation on the Bábí community began during his year-long visit to Iran. While still new to the country, Browne’s curiosity towards the Bábís motivated him to become personally acquainted with the movement and its members. At first, this task of establishing contact with the elusive circle of individuals proved to be difficult. Browne recounts:

Although I exerted to the utmost all the skill, all the tact, and all the caution which I had at my command, I was completely foiled in my attempts to communicate with the proscribed sect. I heard something about them, it is true, and what I heard serve only to increase my desire to know more. I was told tales of their unflinching courage under torture, of their unshakeable faith, of their marvelous skill in argument.³⁴

Thus, Browne’s primary impressions of the Bábís were those of awe and inspiration. Browne relies on his language to exhibit his wonderment at the Bábís. He cites their “unflinching

³³ Ibid, 89.

³⁴ Browne, Edward Granville. *Selections From the Writings of E. G. Browne On the Bábí And Bahá’í Religions*. Oxford: G. Ronald, 1987, 14.

courage,” “unshakeable faith,” and their “marvelous skill in argument.” In using such commendatory language, Browne builds the image of Bábís as one of excellence. Over the course of his travel narrative, Browne details the various exchanges he shares with the Bábís he encounters. It is with this same spirit of excitement, eagerness, and admiration that Browne discusses the various figures of the religion, including Táhirih.

In *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion*, Browne writes on the history and beliefs of the Bábí movement. Before approaching a reading of this book, it is necessary to consider what Browne’s intentions were in writing it. The book’s title alone is telling of his purpose; in labeling it a “study,” Browne suggests that there is something to be learned from the Bábí religion. Moreover, this book was intended to circulate among the British elite and policymakers. Thus, Browne believed that the social infrastructure and belief systems within Britain could be transformed by a study of the Bábí movement.

This theory is even more plausible in the light of Browne’s statements on the Bábí religion. Indeed, he viewed the religion as progressive and formative not only within Iran, but among the entire Eastern world and, potentially, the Western one as well. In his 1892 article “Bábísm,” Browne wrote: “I say nothing of the mighty influence which, as I believe, the Bábí faith will exert in the future, nor of the new life it may perchance breathe into a dead people; for, whether it succeed or fail, the splendid heroism of the Bábí martyrs is a thing eternal and indestructible.”³⁵ Browne believed that the Bábí religion would have lasting effects on the world. According to Browne, the religion would cast a “breath” of new life into a “dead people.” The “dead people” in this statement can be read as the people of world who, on some level, have

³⁵ Browne, Edward Granville. “Bábísm.” *Religious Systems of the World: A Contribution to the Study of Comparative Religion*, London: Swann Sonnenschein, 1892, 333.

fallen from religion. Thus, Browne viewed the Bábí religion as a reviving force that could transform society.

Although not central to his scholarly identity, Browne's politics often shaped his intentions. As a scholar occupying the prestigious academic space of Cambridge University, Browne held a significant degree of intellectual clout. In fact, Browne approached his study of the Bábí movement with the intention of disseminating the knowledge among his peers at Cambridge. In a personal letter to a Bahá'í assisting him in his study of the religion, Browne writes:

I am very anxious to get as accurate an account of all the details connected with the Bábí movement as possible, for in my eyes the whole seems one of the most interesting and important events that has occurred since the rise of Christianity and Muhammadanism- and I feel it my duty, as well as pleasure, to try as far as in me lies, to try and bring the matter to the notice of my countrymen: that they consider it- With a view to this, I have promised to give an account of it at Cambridge next term, and also later in the year here...At any rate I feel it incumbent on me to go there, for I cannot rest till I have sifted the matter to the bottom.³⁶

As the rushed syntax of this passage indicates, Browne harbored anxieties regarding his scholarship on the Bábí movement; namely, Browne was dedicated to identifying the facts of the movement. Browne was not satisfied with the mythology and folklore surrounding the movement. Instead, his scholarly pursuit revolved around the acquisition of facts. Moreover, Browne viewed the Bábí movement as the modern counterpart to Christianity and Islam. According to Browne, the Bábí movement is one of the most "interesting and important" events

³⁶ Balyuzi, H. M. *Edward Granville Browne And the Bahá'í Faith*. London: George Ronald, 1970, 49.

to have occurred since the rise of Christianity and Islam. Such an opinion implies that Browne believed the Bábí movement was an event which matched Christianity and Islam in importance. Most importantly, this excerpt demonstrates Browne's personal sense of obligation in documenting the Bábí movement and presenting it to his fellow "countrymen." Browne claims that with both a sense of "pleasure" and "duty," he intends to disseminate knowledge of the Bábí movement among England.

While Browne produced a great amount of original scholarship regarding the Bábí movement, he felt the necessity to acknowledge the voices already existing within the movement. As the following passage demonstrates, Browne allotted great importance to the internal accounts within the movement. In 1891, Browne translated 'Abdu'l-Bahá's historical account of the Báb and the Bábí movement. In the translator's introduction, Browne expressed his motivations in translating the work, stating, "This book is the history of a proscribed and persecuted sect written by one of themselves. After suffering in silence for nigh upon half a century, they at length find voice to tell their tale and offer their apology. Of this voice I am the interpreter."³⁷ According to his introduction, the Bábí population was an oppressed one.³⁸ Browne describes the voices of the Bábí movement as "suffering in silence" for nearly 50 years. Moreover, Browne sets up the text as their "tale" and "apology." Therefore, in translating the text, Browne puts forward a narrative and defense of the Bábí movement written by a member of the community himself. As translator, Brown positions himself as the individual who brings to light these silenced voices. Browne asserts, "of this voice I am the interpreter." Perhaps the most

³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Edward Granville Browne. *A Traveller's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Báb*. Cambridge, [Eng.]: The University press, 1891, vii.

³⁸ The Bábí movement was faced with much opposition by the Muslim clergy and Qajar dynasty. Under the collusion of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar and the clergy, their individual human rights were blighted and thousands of Bábís were killed.

powerful assertion of the statement, Browne views himself as the interpreter of movement's voice. This claim carries multiple implications. For one, Browne held a personal sense of ownership over the English translation and dissemination of Bábí texts. Furthermore, Browne's motivation as a scholar of the Bábí movement was not only to preserve a historical moment in religious history, but also to empower the voices of the oppressed.

Browne's statement regarding the empowerment of silenced voices is only fortified when considered in light of his scholarship regarding Táhirih. At the end of the text's translation, Browne provides a number of notes, lettered A through T. Note Q, also titled "Kurratu'l-'Ayn," is dedicated to documenting Táhirih's life. In this passage, Browne emphasizes the globalization of Táhirih's story. Browne opens the note with a clear statement of purpose:

In this note, I do not propose to repeat facts with which everyone who has studied the subject is acquainted, neither shall I attempt to re-tell a tale which has been set forth by Gobineu [French scholar] the language far more eloquent than I can command. My purpose is merely to add such new particulars as I have been able to glean from the *Tárikh-i-Jadíd*³⁹ and from oral tradition. Before proceeding to do this, I wish once more to call attention to the graceful poem by Marie von Najmájer whereof Kurratu'l-'Ayn is the heroine.⁴⁰

In this fascinating statement of purpose, the reader encounters a direct account of Browne's intent in writing about Táhirih. Unlike past accounts, Browne wishes to document additional details and "new particulars" regarding her life. Browne draws this new information from

³⁹ *Tárikh-i-Jadíd*, which translates to New History, is an early historical account of the Báb and the Bábí movement. The history was written in 1880 and subsequently translated by Browne in 1893.

⁴⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá; Browne, Edward Granville. *A Traveller's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Báb*. Cambridge [England]: University Press, 1891, 309.

Tárikh-i-Jadíd, a Persian history of the Bábí movement, in addition to oral tradition. Moreover, Browne references the French scholar Joseph Arthur, comte de Gobineau's 1865 work, *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*. In this text, Gobineau chronicles the Bábí movement, emphasizing the valiant contributions of Táhirih.⁴¹ Browne also references the work of Viennese poet Marie von Najmájer, who wrote poetry exalting Táhirih as a heroine. In referencing two international scholars, Browne calls the reader's attention to Táhirih's widespread fame. In fact, this entire passage does work to depict Táhirih as an international figure and heroine.

Browne's note on Táhirih continues in this vein, demonstrating her singularity among women. In the next paragraph, Browne establishes Táhirih as the distinct heroine among the followers of the Báb. As always, Browne's illustration of Táhirih brings her courage, intelligence, beauty, and overall exemplary womanhood to the foreground. Recounting her life, Browne states:

The appearance of such a woman as Táhirih in any country and in any age is a rare phenomenon, but in such a country as Irán it is a prodigy- nay; almost a miracle. Alike in virtue of her marvelous beauty, her rare intellectual gifts, her fervid eloquence, her fearless devotion, and her glorious martyrdom, she stands incomparable and immortal amidst her countrywomen. Had the religion of the Báb no other claim to greatness, this were sufficient that it produced a heroine like Qurratu'l-'Ayn, (Táhirih).⁴²

⁴¹ Gobineau, Arthur. *Les Religions Et Les Philosophies Dans L'Asie Centrale*. Paris: Didier et Cie, 1865, 180-84.

⁴² 'Abdu'l-Bahá; Browne, Edward Granville. *A Traveller's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Báb*. Cambridge [England]: University Press, 1891, 309.

According to Browne, Táhirih was a “rare phenomenon,” “prodigy,” and “miracle” of Iran. Similar to the Bahá’í community, Browne chooses to emphasize her “fearless devotion” and “glorious martyrdom.” Moreover, Browne goes on to assert that producing a heroine such as Táhirih was among the Bábí movement’s greatest achievements. This assertion is especially potent, as it suggests that Táhirih is one of the movement’s greatest figures and contributions. Moreover, this claim implies that the Bábí movement is accountable for the cultivation of Táhirih’s character. Upon reading Browne’s description of Táhirih, one is left with a clear idea of her identity and character. In light of Browne’s reception of Táhirih, one imagines her as an empowered and ardent believer in the cause of the Báb. This reception is similar to the American Bahá’í reception, which also chooses to focus on Táhirih’s passion, strength and martyrdom.

In addition, Browne’s literary depiction of Táhirih allots great importance to her femininity and womanhood. According to Browne, Táhirih was the preeminent women of Iran, distinguished in both her “marvelous beauty” and “rare intellectual gifts.” In singling out attributes such as appearance, Browne illustrates the feminine Táhirih he sought to present. Moreover, Browne’s description of Táhirih is rendered in effusive language, pushing his claims beyond the bounds of scholarly praise. If, as mentioned earlier, Browne intended to present this scholarship to his countrymen, why does he choose to emphasize Táhirih’s femininity? One possible reason could be that he considers Táhirih as an ideal woman, believing that the women of England can learn from the example of her life.

This concept of Táhirih as an exemplary woman is only solidified as Browne’s characterization unfolds. As noted earlier, Browne asserts that “had the religion of the Báb no other claim to greatness, this were sufficient that it produced a heroine like Qurratul-‘Ayn.” Browne esteems Táhirih’s so highly, that he accounts her as being one of the most significant

products of the movement. Moreover, Browne classifies Táhirih as a heroine, further suggesting that she is a courageous woman of noble and exemplary character. In specifically selecting the term “heroine,” Browne casts Táhirih in the light of parable. In essence, he is suggesting that in the great story of the Bábí movement, Táhirih takes center stage as “heroine.” In enlisting a parable-esque style of language, Browne fortifies the notion that in studying Táhirih and the Bábí movement, one can glean valuable moral and spiritual lessons.

Browne employs similar language in *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion*. In the piece, Browne introduces the figure of Táhirih as incomparable. Browne also refers to Táhirih as the “Beautiful Poetess of Qazvin.”⁴³ Moreover, in referencing her poetry Browne states that her work is not widely available, or even authenticated by the artist herself. Browne comments on the limited access to her poetry, claiming that, “though Qurratu'l-'Ayn's fame as a poetess is considerable, I know only two other poems commonly ascribed to her...Both of these poems are very fine, being only marred by the incorrectness of the Arabic phrases which they contain a defect only too common in Bábí writings.” Browne notes that although Táhirih is a renowned poet of considerable fame, he has only been able to identify two poems which are “commonly ascribed to her.” Moreover, the two poems Browne studies are widely attributed to her, but not officially confirmed. As a result, the authorship of Táhirih’s alleged poetry is cast into an uncertain light.

Nevertheless, Browne goes on to include two translations of Táhirih’s poetry. He prefaces the two poems with a disclaimer:

The following Persian poem was given to me in manuscript by the late Shaykh Ahmad Richioi Kirman...who told me that the poem (of which, so far as I know, no other copy

⁴³ Browne, Edward Granville. *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion*. Cambridge [Eng.]: The University press, 1918, 271.

exists) was composed by Qurratu'l-'Ayn, and that the manuscript which I now publish is in her own handwriting without being able to guarantee either of these assertions, I am inclined to credit them, for the poem is evidently by a Bábí, and the handwriting appears to be a woman's.⁴⁴

Once again, Browne states that he is unsure about the authorship of these poems; whether or not they were written by Táhirih remains unclear to him. However, as a scholar of the Bábí movement, and as one who wishes to document every detail of its history, Browne chooses to include these two poems regardless.

All in all, Browne's treatment of the poems is unusual. Not only does he forgo labeling them with working titles, but he also does not accompany them with commentary of any sort. Moreover, it is important to note that Browne considers the handwriting of the manuscripts feminine. In fact, Browne feels that the only physical proof confirming Táhirih's authorship is that "the handwriting appears to be a woman's." Once again, Browne calls the reader's attention to Táhirih's gender.

Ultimately, the study of Táhirih's poetry was not central to Browne's reception of Táhirih. Instead, Browne provides translations of poems that express her ideologies and style as a poem. The first poem opens, "The thralls of yearning love constrain in the bonds of pain and calamity/ These broken-hearted lovers of thine to yield their lives in their zeal for thee."⁴⁵ The only commentary that accompanies this translation is a footnote that states the poem is addressed to the Báb. Aside from this bit of guidance, the reader is left to dissect the poetry on their own.

With this knowledge, Browne's presentation of Táhirih becomes even more complicated. Although Browne lauds Táhirih's talents as a poet, his study of Táhirih fixates on her enigmatic

⁴⁴ Ibid, 343.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 348.

image and the story of her martyrdom. In many ways, Táhirih's image precedes her work. Furthermore, in presenting Táhirih as a bold heroine in any country, Browne positions her as a universal example of womanhood. When considering these details of Browne's representation of Táhirih, it often seems as though Browne is presenting her story as a method of satisfying his own political agenda—one that presents Iran as a socially progressive and equal counterpart to England. In presenting Táhirih as an extraordinary heroine, Browne attempts to convince his countrymen of Iran's legitimacy, thereby facilitating stronger relations between the two nations.

Ultimately, a survey of Browne's work regarding the Bábí movement demonstrates the hopeful expectations he bore for the religion's growth and impact; Browne believed in the movement's transformative effects on society. For Browne, the Bábí movement was not merely a moment in history. Instead, the movement presented an opportunity for global progress. In all of his scholarship regarding the Bábí movement, Browne frames the religion in parable-esque language that elevates his discourse beyond intellectual history.

The same holds true for his depictions of Táhirih. In presenting Táhirih as a heroine and poetess, Browne attributes an enchanting figure to Bábí movement. As a "poetess," Táhirih produces poetry that reveals the interiority of her character, rendering her less opaque than the other figures within the religion. As a result, Browne makes the figure of Táhirih instantly more enchanting. Considering his politics and his work on the Bábí movement, Browne's depictions of Táhirih can be read as an example of womanhood to English women. I contend that if Browne considered knowledge of the Bábí movement as crucial to his countrymen, he also considered knowledge of Táhirih as crucial to his countrywomen.

Thus, Browne's reception of Táhirih hinged on the ideal of progress. As we move forward to the next chapter, we will learn that the theme of progress is a continuous string that

runs through both Táhirih's English and American receptions. Moreover, this theme of progress is a commonality that both Táhirih's poetry and Browne's reception of the Bábí movement share; both Browne and Táhirih understand the Bábí religion to be the genesis of a new era. Although not as emphatic as Táhirih's poetry, Browne is also a proponent of the Bábí movement as a transformative force.

Chapter 3: American Bahá'í Reception

Outside Iran and beyond the works of Browne, Táhirih's reception has, by and large, been concentrated in the Bahá'í community. In this third chapter, we look at the initial reception of Táhirih within the American Bahá'í community. Among the early American Bahá'ís, Táhirih's reception was nuanced. While she was depicted as a paradigm of Bahá'í martyrdom, Táhirih was also lauded for her dedication to achieving the equality of genders. In a close reading of *Táhirih the Pure*, a biography written by Martha Root, and *Star of the West*, an early Bahá'í newsletter, we learn that for the American Bahá'í community, gender equality and martyrdom are the most salient aspects of Táhirih's biography. Moreover, in examining these texts' depictions of Táhirih as a champion for gender equality, we discover that the American Bahá'í readership was greatly motivated on the front of social progress.

As a female figure within a religious movement, Táhirih stands distinguished from many women of past religious dispensations. Táhirih's unconventional life and fierce independence differentiate her from figures such as Mohammad's obedient daughter Fátimih and Christ's devoted mother Mary. As scholar Susan Maneck has argued, Táhirih stands in stark contrast to the prior religious paradigms of womanhood. Unlike Fátimih, Táhirih rejected her father's religious practices. Moreover, Táhirih does not follow the Virgin Mary's example of motherhood, as her faith in the Bábí religion resulted in separation from her husband and children. What, then, is the purpose of Táhirih's example? More specifically, what does her life represent to Bahá'ís and how is she depicted?

In order to understand all Bahá'í narratives regarding Táhirih, one must understand the formative influence and authority of 'Abdu'l-Bahá⁴⁶. As a central figure within the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments on Táhirih are considered the standard to which Bahá'ís measure all other depictions of Táhirih. In 1924, 'Abdu'l-Bahá published a compilation of oral eulogies he gave in Haifa, Israel. In the book, which is titled *Memorials of the Faithful*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's eulogizes Táhirih's life. In the memorial's opening line, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "A woman chaste and holy, a sign and token of surpassing beauty, a burning brand of the love of God, a lamp of His bestowal, was Jináb-i-Táhirih."⁴⁷ In his description, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to Táhirih as "Jináb-i-Táhirih." An honorific title, "Jináb," roughly translates to "excellency." In bestowing Táhirih an honorific title, 'Abdu'l-Bahá raises her status and positions her as an eminent Bahá'í figure. 'Abdu'l-Bahá further validates Táhirih's exaltation by describing her as "chaste and holy." Therefore, Táhirih's character is defined by concepts of purity and holiness. However, the most striking and pertinent detail of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description is the language he uses to describe Táhirih's love of God. Rather than plainly state the depth of Táhirih's devotion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes her as a "burning brand of the love of God." This language does work to conjure images of "burning" passion and faith that continue to define Táhirih's image today. As we will see, when reading American Bahá'í literature regarding Táhirih, one hears the resonance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words in *Memorials of the Faithful*.

The origins of American Bahá'í literature arguably began with *Star of the West*, a newsletter published between 1910 and 1935. The newsletter, which was ran by several

⁴⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh. As designated in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's duty was to oversee the unity of the Bahá'í Faith and its believers, ensuring that it would not break into multiple sects like past religions.

⁴⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Memorials of the Faithful*. Wilmette, Illinois, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. 1977.

American Bahá'ís under the remote guidance of Abdu'l-Bahá, focused on disseminating the principles and ideals of the Bahá'í Faith among the Western world. The publication was of great significance to the Western believers, as it provided access to the English translations of sacred Bahá'í texts. Until the regular publication of *Star of the West*, Western believers had extremely limited access to the Bahá'í holy writings. Therefore, the newsletter provided them an expanded knowledge of the religion's holy scripts.

Moreover, *Star of the West* was the first piece of American literature to make mention of Táhirih. In an earlier issue of the newsletter, a talk given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is cited. In this talk, 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the station of Táhirih and her contributions to the rights of women in Iran. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Táhirih heralded the rights of women in Iran, displaying an unsurpassed degree of courage. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

All women in Persia are enveloped by veils in public. So completely covered are they that even the hand is not visible. This rigid veiling is unspeakable. Qurratul-'Ayn tore off her veil and went forth. She was like a lioness. Her action caused great turmoil in Persia. Qurrat al-'Ayn lost all thought of herself and was unconscious of fear in her attraction to God.⁴⁸

Once more, 'Abdu'l-Bahá paints Táhirih as a fearless “lioness,” devoted to God and the Bahá'í Faith. Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's rhetoric centralizes around Táhirih as a figure of feminism and gender equality; Táhirih is emblematic of the Bahá'í ideal of gender equality. According to him, Táhirih was consumed with her love for God, losing “all thought of herself.” In this passage, we see a continuation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's language in *Memorials of the Faithful*. Moreover, it is important to note that at the time of this newsletter's publication, *Memorials of the Faithful* had

⁴⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "Questions Answered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá." *Star of the West*. Chicago, IL. 17 May 1912, Vol. 3, No. 4.

not been translated into English. Therefore, this image of Táhirih, along with those presented in the books of Browne, would have been the only ones circulating in the Western world, let alone the United States. That being said, this description cited in *Star of the West* carries overtly feminist implications. 'Abdu'l-Bahá paints Táhirih as a woman who refuses to accept the “unspeakable” social restrictions forced upon her; his rhetoric centralizes around Táhirih as a figure of feminism and women’s rights activism. According to ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Táhirih stepped from behind the “veil” and “went forth,” resisting subjection of any form.

In choosing to emphasize this feminist aspect of Táhirih’s persona, the *Star of the West* demonstrates its priorities. As curators of the newsletter, the editors selected content that would resonate the most with its readership. By this logic, the readership of *Star of the West*, which was largely the American Bahá’í community, was deeply invested in the cause of gender equality. Because the American Bahá’í reading public greatly valued the ideal of gender equality, Táhirih’s characterization was shaped to accommodate such concerns.

The American Bahá’í commitment to equality followed Táhirih’s reception elsewhere in literature from that period. In terms of characterization, one encounters the same basic tone and assertions of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s characterization of Táhirih. The most noteworthy occurrence of this replication can be found in a 1938 biography entitled *Táhirih the Pure*. The biography was written by one of the most notable figures in American Bahá’í history, Martha Root. Root, a Bahá’í woman and scholar, spent her life traveling the world in an effort to teach the Bahá’í Faith. Although Táhirih occupies a higher station of recognition, Root’s life mirrored Táhirih’s in several ways. Firstly, both women were dedicated to the teaching and dissemination of the new Bahá’í dispensation. For Táhirih, this teaching entailed spreading the news of the Báb and his religion; for Root, it meant spreading the message of Bahá’u’lláh. Moreover, both women defied

gender conventions; like Táhirih, Root lived her life as an independent woman, free of domestic commitments. Lastly, much like Táhirih, Root was a lifelong writer, employing literature as means to arouse the public's faith and support.

In the biography, Root frames Táhirih as a champion of faith, piety, and most importantly, gender equality. The biography provides a careful chronicle of Táhirih's life, focusing specifically on her faith and force of will. Root opens the introduction with a powerful statement regarding Táhirih's life:

To understand the story of Táhirih, Irán's premier woman, one should know something of the Irán of her time, should be cognizant of that phenomenal quickening of religion known as the Bahá'í Faith which had its rise in that land in the middle of the nineteenth century. Until then women were in a state of more or less subjection, now women - and they constitute one-half of the whole human race...It should be of thrilling interest to them to know...that the first woman suffrage martyr was not a Westerner at all, but a young woman poet, Táhirih, sometimes known as Qurratu'l-'Ayn, of Qazvin, Irán.⁴⁹

Referring to her as “Iran's premier woman,” Root centers Táhirih's identity around her religion. She urges the reader to be “cognizant of that phenomenal quickening of religion known as the Bahá'í Faith,” as it bears great importance to understanding Táhirih. As observed earlier in this thesis, the theme of “quickenings,” meaning renewal and rebirth, was central to Táhirih's literature and the construction of her poetic voice. Essentially a theme of the Bahá'í dispensation, Root conflates this religious concept to Táhirih's persona and literary work. Root continues to elevate the importance of history, arguing that at the time of Táhirih's life, women in Iran “were in a state of more or less subjection.” Thus, Root paints the picture of women in Iran as one of

⁴⁹ Root, Martha L. *Táhirih the Pure*. Rev. ed. / Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1981, i.

oppression. As a means to legitimize the cause of gender equality, Root reminds the reader that women compose half of Iran's population. Ultimately, Root's illustration of Táhirih highlight her religious "quickenings" and subsequent liberation from gender inequality.

Upon proposing Táhirih as a symbol of equality, Root attempts to affirm the legitimacy of her proposition. Shifting the attention of the reader, Root writes, "It should be of thrilling interest to them to know...that the first woman suffrage martyr was not a Westerner at all, but a young woman poet." Here, "them" refers directly to the reader who, in reading this biography, has embarked on a quest to better understand Táhirih. Perhaps her most audacious assertion yet, Root argues that Táhirih was the "first woman suffrage model." Root's selection of the word "suffrage" is bizarre and largely irrelevant. "Suffrage," which means the right to vote, is an emblematic feature of first-wave feminism. As a woman in mid-nineteenth century Iran, Táhirih's concerns were not electoral.

Additionally, Root's biography of Táhirih was published in 1938, which means that it did not coincide with the U.S. suffragette movement. Therefore, the issue of suffrage was not a contemporary concern for the reader. Moreover, such a disconnect implies that Root was not employing Táhirih's image to bolster the cause of the suffragettes or appeal to their interests. Rather, in attaching Táhirih to this fundamental feminist moment in U.S. history, Root places Táhirih in the category of women's rights activism.

For Root, Táhirih is a symbol of progress on the front of gender equality and women's rights. Still, Root upheld the characterization that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has attributed to Táhirih—a characterization that suggests Táhirih is a model of Bahá'í character and martyrdom. In fact, the language in *Táhirih the Pure* suggests that Root considered Táhirih as a global model for excellence and progress—one that will continue to touch lives for decades to come. In the first

chapter of her book, Root offers a statement that describes the scope and meaning of Táhirih's influence. In relation to the rest of the book, this first chapter establishes Táhirih's memory as an influential force that has traveled across the world and touched many lives. Similar to the introduction, Root raises Táhirih to the standard of an ideal. The chapter begins:

Hadrat-i-Táhirih "Her Highness the Pure One", Táhirih, well known also by the name Quarratu'l-'Ayn, is the most celebrated woman in Iranian history; she will remain forever immortal. As I have travelled in the five continents, I have seen how her life has influenced women and men too, throughout the world. I have observed how her poetry is sought by scholars in every land, and I know that among Bahá'ís the life of Táhirih is an ideal that everyone yearns to comprehend and attain; though from the time she first heard of the Coming of the Báb to the time she was martyred for the love of His Truth, was a little less than nine years, still every day since then, her glorious life has been to us like a living teacher.⁵⁰

With this initial paragraph, Root introduces Táhirih as the "the most celebrated woman in Iranian history." Moreover, Root does not view Táhirih as a woman whose influence is confined to Iranian women. Rather, Root defines Táhirih as a global influence that has affected the lives of both men and women. In addition, Root presents Táhirih as an exemplar of Bahá'í character, stating that her life is an "ideal" that all Bahá'ís "yearn to comprehend and attain." Like Browne, Root views Táhirih's legacy as a "living teacher" that instructs people on how to live a righteous and noble life.

Similar to 'Abdu'l-Bahá', Root places Táhirih's faith on the forefront of her identity; according to Root, Táhirih was "martyred for the love of His Truth." Therefore, the defining

⁵⁰ Ibid, 1.

feature of her life's story was her dedication to the Báb. The continuity between 'Abdu'l-Bahá' and Root's descriptions exists for a reason: Bahá'ís view Táhirih in terms of her martyrdom for the Bábí movement. Still, Root's presentation of Táhirih as suffragette speaks to the underlying social motivations that shaped her reception. For Root, and by extension the American Bahá'í readership, Táhirih's persona became the encapsulation of the Bahá'í social ideal of gender equality.

In the end, close readings of *Táhirih the Pure* and *Star of the West* prove that Táhirih's reception is nuanced. While these texts qualify the event of her martyrdom as the most salient aspect of her biography, they also put Táhirih forward as a symbol of gender equality. Lastly, Táhirih's reception in these texts demonstrate the social concerns of the American Bahá'í community. Namely, they reflect their preoccupation with the social issues of gender equality and women's rights.

Conclusion

As a reception study, the scope of this thesis is not exhaustive. In fact, reproductions of Táhirih's image can be found in a geographically disparate array of settings. For instance, in 1904, a Russian stage production depicting Táhirih's martyrdom attracted masses, ultimately earning the praise of Tolstoy.⁵¹ Moreover, in 1870, a group of Bábís travelled to Bombay, and soon after, Táhirih's name appeared in Urdu literature.⁵² Still, these incidents of circulation are limited and underdeveloped when held in comparison to Táhirih's receptions in England and the United States.

The fundamental purpose of this thesis is to initiate a broader study of Táhirih's reception. As documented in this thesis, Táhirih was received in both England and the United States. Upon entering the consciousness of readers in both countries, Táhirih became emblematic of progress. In England, Browne saw Táhirih as an instrument of political progress. Over the course of his scholarly career, Browne attempted to rehabilitate Iran for the British—his example of Táhirih is no different. Browne's depictions of Táhirih present her as an exemplary woman and timeless heroine, offering British readers proof of the innate goodness of Iranian people. In the American Bahá'í community, Táhirih represents the pinnacle of martyrdom and faith, in addition to the Bahá'í promise of gender equality. Therefore, Táhirih's reception in the American Bahá'í community reveals the readership's social preoccupation with gender equality and women's rights.

Still incomplete, the direction of this study can go in multiple directions. For one, the question of translation is rich, offering a great deal of potential; what would happen if we

⁵¹ Momen, Moojan. "Russia." *A Short Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*. Bahá'í Library Online. Retrieved 2016-09-16.

⁵² Afaqi, Sabir. *Táhirih in History, Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, Vol. 16: Perspectives on Qurratu'l-'Ayn From East and West. Kalimat Press, Los Angeles, USA. 29.

examined the translation of her work across languages? Moreover, this thesis only deals with Táhirih's initial receptions. One could ask the question of how these initial receptions have evolved; has Táhirih's reception remained primarily in print, or have other forms of media entered the mix?

Thus far, this thesis has begged the question of Táhirih's persona: who was she in relation to the publics that received her? A study of Táhirih's poetry has proved that she held strong religious convictions. In all of her literature, the Bahá'í-specific themes of renewal and progress reign triumphant. Thus, it seems only natural that in the process of being received in the United States and England, Táhirih was placed in some form of progress narrative. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how fluid the image and work of literary figures are, especially when traveling across borders. Neither English nor American, Táhirih is an outsider being brought in to comment on each community's social and political circumstances. In the end, Táhirih acts as something of a barometer for each community's spiritual, social, and political agendas.

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