

Judge Dorothy Nelson
U.S. Court of Appeal, 9th Circuit

TAHIRIH AND THE AMERICAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In the early 1950s, when I was a student at the U.C.L.A. Law School, I first heard of Tahirih. There were 50 men and only two women in my law school class. All were invited to join a legal fraternity and all joined. Three weeks later, the National office of the fraternity wrote our chapter that women were not allowed in the fraternity. The president of our class called the class together, urged everyone to resign from the legal fraternity and to form the U.C.L.A. Legal Association to which women as well as men might belong. I praised the class president and asked him why he had done this. He replied that he was studying the Baha'i Faith, and that one important principle of the Faith was the recognition of the equality of men and women. And he said: "You should read a book I have about Tahirih who not only was a very famous Baha'i woman but one who had a very significant part to play in the promotion of the principle of equality of men and women since the middle of the nineteenth century." I was anxious to read about her.

Conditions in the middle of the last century in Persia were deplorable, despite the many glorious pages in the Persia of the past. There was no formal educational system. majority of the population were illiterate and many of the clerical leaders were bigoted and intolerant men. Women were treated with great injustice. They were covered from head to toe. A woman's voice was to be heard only by the male members of her family. Polygamy was practiced. Many believed that women did not have a soul.

In 1844, when a young man from Shiraz who took the title of the Bab, declared that he was the promised Imam or Qa'im expected according to the teachings of Islam, Tahirih was one of the first 18 to recognize his station, and of those the only woman. Her role as a disciple of this new religion was played with such brilliance, dedication and effectiveness, that her name will forever be glorified in the record of human progress. And her accomplishments were to prove of vital consequence to all women.

From early childhood, it was evident that she was a child prodigy. It was rare for women to be educated, she was tutored by her father, a prominent theologian. When her father's colleagues came to discuss matters of the Qur'an, she sat behind a curtain

and listened to their discussions. One day, when a mulla asked a question of her father, she interrupted with an answer so startling and eloquent that the men were forced to accept her. From then on, she routinely participated as a regular member in these discussions, from behind a curtain.

From the time she recognized the Bab as the promised Qa'im, she dedicated her life totally to serving this new found Faith until her tragic death.

Most important to me as an American woman, was the story of the Conference of Badasht which took place in the latter part of June and the early part of July in 1848. The 81 men and one woman in attendance at the conference, were all Babis. Although they were devoted and thousands had given their life for their new faith, many did not understand that this new religion was a definite break with the past.

When Tahirih appeared before the men, fully adorned and without her veil, her appearance was so shocking that one of the men slit his throat and ran from the gathering. Others renounced their faith, for they could not understand this kind of action on her part. Tahirih was serene and beautiful, totally oblivious to the confusion and to the effect she had on the assemblage. Her purpose was to announce the end of the old age and the beginning of the age of the equality of men and women. She proclaimed this principle with her tragic martyrdom when her last words to those who strangled her were: "You can kill me as soon as you wish, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women."

Tahirih's fame spread rapidly beyond the boundaries of her native land, and the spiritual import of her life on the cause of women's emancipation, even in America, is becoming more widely recognized. In fact, a Catholic publication *Ecomenews* suggested that the contemporary women's liberation movement could logically be called the Tahirist movement.

The dust from the hoofbeats that carried Tahirih from Badasht toward her martyrdom had scarcely settled before the call she had raised echoed back from the American continent. In the state of New York on July 14, 1848, a notice placed in the *Seneca Falls Courier* by five nervous but determined women announced a "Women's Rights Convention . . . to discuss the social, civil and religious rights of women." Five days later, on July 19, in a small chapel at Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton arose before an audience of 300 women and men to say:

"I should feel exceedingly diffident to appear before you at this time, having never before spoken in public, were I not nerved

by a sense of right and duty, did I not feel that the time had come for the question of women's wrongs to be laid before the public, did I not believe that woman herself must do this work, for woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length and the breadth of her degradation."

As in Tahirih's Persia, women in America suffered discrimination, when they were allowed to work received pay of one-third that of the men. They had no rights to property, could not be guardians to their own children, could not attend college in most places, and did not have the right to vote. It was considered improper for women to speak in public.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, like Tahirih, was in her early thirties. Mrs. Stanton wrote the Seneca Falls Declaration of Rights and Sentiments. It was modeled after the American Declaration of Independence. It opens with the ringing phrase "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal." The document called for women's right to vote, to hold property and many other rights. It was considered such a radical document that of the 300 present, only 68 women and 32 men would sign it.

Historians date the beginning of modern American feminism from the publication of the Seneca Falls declaration. Elizabeth Stanton's blueprint declaring that right of women to vote, to hold property apart from her husband, to become a guardian of her own children when a divorce occurred, to keep her own earnings, to be permitted to obtain higher education, to enter all the professions set the course for America. Property rights in most states were the first to be granted, but it was not until August 7, 1919, that women in this country were given the right to vote. As Elizabeth Stanton said: "The establishing of woman on her rightful throne is the greatest revolution the world has ever known or will know. To bring it about is no child's play." Compare these words with those of Tahirih just before she died when she said: "You can kill me as soon as you wish, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women." To me, Tahirih and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were soul sisters at opposite ends of the globe.

Tahirih's influence on me was so profound that after a good deal of study, I became a Baha'i as did 17 members and families of my law school class. For we believe that the very peace of the world depends upon the principle of the equality of men and women; that until women achieve high policy making positions, the very peace of the world will not come about. Tahirih's actions may indeed be the ultimate cause of world peace.

Review Essay

Fariba Khamsei, *Cultural Change of the Iranian Woman in Bologna*, unpublished dissertation at the University of Bologna (Italy), 1987-88.

While the Westerner's idea of Iranian women is changing rapidly, it nevertheless is still marred by prejudices and misunderstandings. The original stereotype of the enchantress in the *harem* was first replaced by that of armed women in *chador* who chanted slogans while marching in protest in major Iranian towns, and then it began to see the Iranian woman as a symbol of a backward and fanatical society.

Although these representations partially correspond to reality, they are only fragments of the complex history of Iranian women. Among other important elements useful for drawing a more complete picture of Iranian women is the study of their living as exiles in the Western world. Little work has been done on Iranian women who live in Europe: Fariba Khamsei's dissertation on *Cultural Change of the Iranian Woman in Bologna* is an attempt to fill this gap.

The research, which was carried out in the Department of Sociology of the Faculty of Political Sciences in Bologna, can be divided into two parts.

In the first one, Khamsei outlines the condition of women in Iran: a brief note on their historical position, a sketch of their status according to the Qur'an and an analysis of women's role in the family and the society of the 20th century.

In the second part, after a discussion of "Women's acculturation in Iran," Khamsei gets to the main point, that is, the study of the cultural changes that Iranian women who live in a foreign environment undergo.

Khamsei's work is based on two principal sources: current statistical data supplied by local institutions (Immigration Department, Foreigners' Office, University) and her interviews with thirty Iranian women aged between 19 and 50 who live in Bologna (Fourteen interviews are added to the Appendix of the dissertation).

Khamsei analyzes in detail the life of those interviewed: their socio-cultural background, their role in the Iranian community in Bologna, their participation within the Bolognese society. Khamsei is in a qualified and privileged position: as a native of

Iran, she is able to expose and decode Iranian women's cultural patterns. Her knowledge of Persian and her familiarity with Iran's culture and traditions enable her to collect information that would be inaccessible to Western scholars.

The result is an interesting and a relatively complete picture of the life of Iranian women living in a North-Western Italian city, which combines anthropological research, historical knowledge and statistical data.

Khamsei also has a theoretical concern: she provides a chapter in which "The Concept of Cultural Exchange" is discussed (pp. 82-88). A final conclusion is not reached in this study. Khamsei does not claim to have the definitive word on the question of the acculturation of Iranian women who live in Bologna, but some general factors can be drawn from her work:

1) Iranian migration to Bologna (and to Italy in general) is still an "elite" phenomenon. Iranian women come from the bourgeoisie, that is, from "a social class which thought that, by accepting Western values, it would have the possibility of increasing the importance of its social role." (p. 166)

Most of the women were already used to Western standards of living (such as high schooling for women, access to every social activity, interaction with men); although "going to the disco or wearing Western clothes was very important in the big [Iranian] towns, . . . everything around them helps them to maintain strong ties with their original culture. Their coming to Italy changed this relation completely. Acculturation has been imposed. . . so much so that now it is partially refused." (p. 167)

2) Contrary to what happens in other European countries and in the U.S., very few Iranian women have an occupation outside home in Bologna, and their jobs are usually temporary. As a consequence, Iranian women's social life is quite restricted. Khamsei, in addition, ascribes Iranian women's lack of participation in social life to the absence of an organized Iranian community (p. 22) and to the natives' lack of interest in Persian culture. (p. 162)

3) As Khamsei points out, the acculturation process of Iranian women is in transition (pp. 166-169). In fact, Iranian migration to Italy is still too recent (it goes back to the 1970s) to enable us to make final judgement about this process.

Khamsei's work deserves credit for being a pioneering study. The general defect of this type of investigation lies in the fact that the statistical data quickly become outdated. Hopefully, this data will be supplemented by further studies in this field.

Azadeh Azad

Women Defined As "The Other Half": A Patriarchal Concept

The title of the present Persian Language Feminist Journal being "The Other Half" (Nimeye Digar), in this paper I object to the choice of the above title by demonstrating that the concept of Other Half not only is patriarchal in its essence, but also constitutes an epistemological obstacle to, and a political mystification for, the understanding of women's situation. To do so, I put forward six different arguments.

First, the fact of being numerically, more or less, half of the population of any given society does not constitute a valid basis for our social and individual claims; the only valid basis being our inferior status as a gender in relation to men and our domination by them.

Second, the Other Half, in its qualitative meaning, represents the idea of a symmetry between men and women's situation, which is far from the truth. We, as a gender with lesser social powers, constitute a legal and political minority in relation to men. Our minority status is determined by the fact that we find ourselves dependent on men, kept by them in a "natural difference" which deprives us of access to many rights, possibilities, resources and means of our independence (our bodies, our common language, tools, techniques, technologies, etc.). We are radically cut from universality which is appropriated by men who have at their disposal the coercive, legal and economic powers, and who systematically control and exploit us.

Third, the concept of Other Half contains the detrimental idea that a woman without a man in her life is an incomplete and unfinished being. We are constantly being bombarded by the patriarchal culture telling us how much we need a man, that unless we set up housekeeping with a man, we are not living out our true destinies. And the feeling of not being complete without a man by our side is a reaction to various cultural allusions. Patriarchal society's programming causes us to be eager to mold and adapt ourselves to men and their interests, making us give up the right to define ourselves. We should allow ourselves to be who we are, to merge as ourselves, to feel complete in ourselves and to pivot around the core of security that we build up within ourselves.

Fourth, the concept of Other Half contains the patriarchal idea of complementarity of the sexes, that of masculinity and femininity, as well as the idea of "equal but different". These ideas reinforce the sex role stereotypes which are vital to the continuity of our domination by men. Biology is not destiny and the sex roles are learned behaviours. They are political constructs, the function of which is to guarantee men's power and superior status.

Fifth, the idea of women's Otherness is inherent in the concept of Other Half. We are defined and differentiated with reference to men and not with reference to ourselves. They are the Subject and the Absolute, we are the Other. Our identity as Other alienates us from ourselves and stabilizes us as objects and dooms us to immanence since our transcendence is overshadowed by another ego, the male, which is essential and sovereign. Our liberation or fulfillment can only come in the choice to exist as transcending subjects who constitute our own future by means of creative projects. We must shed or exorcise the ideology of otherness that we have internalized.

Sixth, the concept of Other Half signifies that the heterosexual couple is a normal and desirable entity, assumes that women are by nature sexually attracted to men. It therefore defends the compulsory heterosexuality which is essential to the preservation of patriarchal system. The concept of Other Half is an obstacle to the understanding of the fact that the coming together of men and women has been historically accomplished through encouragements and coercions, and that these very means have prevented women from coming together as couples or forming independent groups.

I close the article by suggesting that the title of the Journal be changed from "The Other Half" into "Shrew" (*Salitah*), or a similar name, as the Journal is supposed to be a place and a locus for the expression of women's voices.

Farzaneh Milani

Pull Back the Curtain, Let Emotions Breathe

For well over one hundred and fifty years a woman, semiconcealed behind a curtain, looks on a gruesome scene: A praying man is being stabbed to death, from behind, by a masked man. In her hands, the woman, no other than the nineteenth century poet Tahiriḥ Qurrat al-'Ayn, holds a sheet of paper, incriminating evidence that she can read and write.

In Iranian society of mid-nineteenth century, knowledge, like a child, was only legitimate if properly fathered by a man. In the hands of a woman, it became an unnecessary tool, a dangerous tool, even a sign of the end of time, of apocalypse.

Qurrat al-'Ayn appropriated the paper. She busied herself in libraries and classes, with talks and debates. By becoming a public scholar, she penetrated a male preserve. She wanted to take charge, be mobile, subvert the master narratives of her culture, control her plot. Un-inhibited by spatial constraints of femaleness, moving from one city to another, crossing boundaries between notions and cultures, she could not be pinned down. She resisted confinement and her physical mobility is paralleled by her metaphorical journey and her

struggle to attain a voice of her own: a triple transgression--verbal, spatial, and physical.

It is unfortunate that this woman who unveiled herself some 150 years ago still lives a veiled life in the memory of her own people. Generally speaking, Muslim sources, if not critical of her, relegate her to oblivion. Her role as a precursor of Iranian women's literary tradition remains neglected.

Amin Banani

Tahirih: A Portrait From Her Own Pen

The remarkable figure of the nineteenth century Persian Babi heroine who was the first woman in the Muslim Middle East to publicly unveil herself in 1848, despite a measure of renown in India, Europe and America, has remained shrouded in vilification, obfuscation and misrepresentation in her own homeland. With the aid of her own poetry it is not difficult to arrive at a clear picture of her true character and motivations. She sings passionately and clearly of her firm faith in the ending of the old dispensation and the dawning of a new age of human freedom and progress. She is an unambiguous and avowed voice of the fulfillment of the millennial expectations of her age.

That her beliefs should have been declared anathema, and her actions misrepresented and vilified by the male guardians of the old orthodoxy is expected. But in recent years she has been also the victim of much superficial Marxian adulation that ignores her intellectual and motivational milieu and focuses upon her as merely a revolutionary feminist pioneer. Her truly heroic figure can be appreciated only when she is viewed through her self-revealing poetry:

LOOK ! Our guiding dawn breathes even now
The world with all its peoples is a-glow
There stands in the pulpit no canting priest
Nor dose the mosque sell piety to the crowd
No sheikh, no sham, no holy fraud prevails
the turban's knot is cut to the roots below
Freed from fears caused by wicked whispering
Mankind is rid of magic's foolish show
Ignorance is doomed by the search for truth
And equality's arm brings tyrants low
Warring ways shall be banished from the world
And Justice everywhere its carpet throw
New friendship must from ancient hatred spring
And far and wide the seeds of kindness sow *

Nimeye Digar*viii

In the early unfolding of Babi movement in Persia, it was not clear to the majority of its adherents whether their aim was to revive the traditional values of Islamic law and dispensation or to make a clear break with the past and proclaim the dawn of a new spiritual cycle. It can be said without a doubt that among these adherents it was Tahirih who was the most eloquent and ultimately triumphant voice of innovation. Her role at the Conference of Badasht in 1844 was a masterpiece of dramatic combining of action and intent, of reality and symbol. By removing her veil in a gathering of men at one and the same time she declared the abrogation of Islamic laws, and proclaimed the freedom and equality of women in the new faith. Her assertion, which was subsequently affirmed by the Bab, was not an accidental and unpremeditated act. These two facets of Tahirih's accomplishment are mutually dependent upon one another and any attempt to view them separately results in an incomplete and distorted picture of her. Tahirih is a true heroine and model of freedom, equality and power of women because the Bab's movement created the atmosphere in which to being such a struggle and Baha'i Faith brought it to fruition. And conversely, the Babi movement and the Baha'i Faith can lay claim to progressive social principles because freedom and equality of women is a fundamental part of their pattern for future society.

* Translation by Amin Banani with Jascha Kessler

Adele Ferdows

Persian article translated by Iradj Hashemizadeh

Shari'ati on Women

Shari'ati approaches the understanding of women's role from two angles: He advocates the study of the Qur'an along with Islamic history; and he examines and vehemently rejects Western theories and practices concerning the role women in society. He regards the Qur'an as a compendium of all human knowledge and as such it must be read and comprehended by all generations in accordance with changing times. Because its language is a symbolic/religious one, he considers it open to new interpretations by each generation.

Shari'ati espouses the belief that the challenge of change in the role of women is the responsibility of the intellectuals. They are the ones who must educate and inform women on how to become "new women." But, women themselves must also be prepared to adjust to the changing conditions and grasp the forces of change. Shari'ati distinguishes between Islam as a true

religion and the Islam practiced by Iranians and advocated by their religious authorities. He claims that the Islam practiced in Iran has very little similarity to the Qur'an's intentions and the Prophet's and Imams' legacy. He finds the distorted religious teachings in Iran as dangerous as the threat of infiltration of Western immorality and materialistic values concerning the role of women. He considers the body of Islamic teachings and practices to be fanatical, decadent and misleading. He also blames Iranian Muslim men for pushing women to Western lifestyles by their enslavement of women, having kept them backward and ignorant.

Shari'ati's dilemma becomes evident when he describes the nature of the changes in the role of women of the West: In his view, once women became economically self-supporting, economic calculation and logical reasoning replaced love in their relationship with men.

He suggests that change cannot be prevented; the answer to dilemmas posed by change, he seeks in Islamic history, in the form of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Viewing Fatima as the symbol of freedom, equality, and integrity most compatible with Islam, he wishes to present her legacy and traditions to Iranian women so that they may identify with her. Fatima's role as a devoted wife and hard-working mother is regarded by Shari'ati as the exemplification of the ideal Muslim woman.