Two Books on the Life of Tahirih: Review

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Review

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Review of: Rejoice in My Gladness: The Life of Táhirih

Written by: Janet Ruhe-Schoen

Publisher: Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing, 2011

and

Review of: The Calling: Táhirih of Persia and Her American Contemporaries

Written by: Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman

Publisher: Bethesda: Ibex Publishers, 2017

Review by: Catherine Nash

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Review of Two Books on the Life of Tahirih

Janet Ruhe-Schoen, Rejoice in My Gladness: The Life of Táhirih (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2011), 383 pages. Available at US BDS and on Amazon.

Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman, The Calling: Táhirih of Persia and Her American Contemporaries (Bethesda, MD: Ibex Publishers, 2017), 320 pages. Available at US BDS and on Amazon.

Reviewed for The Journal of Bahá’í Studies by Catherine Nash.

Two excellent books have been published in recent years exploring Táhirih’s life and the context and zeitgeist of the time in which she lived. Taken together, these books reflect upon and explore facets of Táhirih’s life and influence in distinct ways that no one book could, enriching our understanding of this unique figure in the history of the Bahá’í Faith, the Middle East, and the struggle for gender equality.

In Rejoice in My Gladness: The Life of Táhirih, Janet Ruhe-Schoen uses her vast knowledge and extensive research to impart the pure love and joy that fueled Táhirih's courage and daring. Ruhe-Schoen has written an accessible and moving account of the life of Táhirih that grabs the reader's attention and makes one share in the love and joy of its subject.

In The Calling: Táhirih of Persia and Her American Contemporaries, Hussein Ahdieh and Hillary Chapman illuminate the role of many exceptional women in the "powerful spiritual movements" that swept across the United States as a context and backdrop for exploring Táhirih's life and her influence in Persia and beyond. By resurrecting this chapter in American history, which is not often referred to in popular discourses, the life of Táhirih is seen in a new perspective, as it is contextualized by the role of spiritual movements in advancing and motivating work to achieve gender equality.

These authors inevitably face a challenge in deciding which details to include and emphasize and which to leave out in order to achieve accessible and gripping books. And perhaps for this reason, the books complement each other wonderfully.

The Calling features a detailed appendix of Westerners who wrote about or referred to Táhirih after her martyrdom. Especially interesting is the description of a play written about Táhirih and performed in 1904 in Russia. The playwright had thought that the Bahá'í Faith was no longer in existence until she received a request for a copy of her play and discovered there were Bahá'ís still alive in the world (272). The book also includes photographs, which give a visual impression of the lands through which Táhirih traveled, as well as more of Táhirih's poems, which add a lyrical and emotional resonance to her story.

On the other hand, Rejoice My Gladness includes more details about the attempts of Táhirih's family members to either protect or silence her. This allows for an intensely personal look at how the extreme machinations and brutalities of others continually impacted Táhirih. One detailed chapter recounting the murder of her Uncle Taqí and its influence on her ends with the information that

> [t]oday her uncle Taqí's tombstone bears a relief carving captioned "The Martyrdom of Mullah Taqí by a Babí heretic." It shows a mullah kneeling in a prayer niche being stabbed by a masked man while a woman watches from behind a curtain, a piece of paper in her hand demonstrating her evil: she is literate. At present that is Táhirih's only monument in her homeland. (199)

This is but one example of specific facts that surprise the reader into remembering that the past is truly another place—such as the sentence describing Bahá'u'lláh's education as "common to aristocrats of the day—literature, etiquette, falconry" (151). This nicely counters the modern Western assumption that reading, writing, and arithmetic are the foundation of a basic education.

Both books also complement each other in how they provide for interesting comparisons. Ahdieh and Chapman begin their book in the early 1800s in the eastern United States and focus on women who were entering the public sphere to speak on spiritual matters. They then alternate between what was occurring in the United States and the path of Táhirih's life. Sometimes this transition is challenging, but it also shines a light on the incredibly compelling timing of the spiritual upheaval in both countries. For example, by juxtaposing the struggles of William Miller and the Adventist Christians who awaited the return of Christ in 1844 against the story of Mullá Husayn and the dedication of the Letters of the Living, the intensity of the lives these people led, their vast joys and sorrows, are made more palpable. It is utterly poignant when the authors point out that "a few weeks after William Miller's great disappointment at seeing an empty sky, a young Muslim cleric in faraway Persia with the same deep spiritual yearning, walked towards the gate of the city of Shiraz" (91).

At the same time, there are, of course, episodes that are covered in both books, such as the Conference of Badasht and Táhirih's famous unveiling—but they are handled in different ways, which illustrates that Táhirih's is not a simple story—it is a many-layered historical event with depth and complexity.

In her preface, Ruhe-Schoen immediately introduces the defining act of Táhirih's life. "Who is she then," the author asks, "this nineteenth century Iranian woman standing alone, unveiled, and unafraid before a company of men?" (2). Ruhe-Schoen begins her book with what might be considered a "spoiler," but by the time she leads us to the Conference of Badasht, Táhirih has experienced so much that it seems as though this might have been a peaceful interlude in her life.

Ruhe-Schoen begins her description by placing Badasht geographically as "a nondescript hamlet on a major route leading to Khorasan" (231). She thus grounds what has a mythical quality in an actual physical reality, which emphasizes the ordinariness of the location. She makes Badasht real. She details not only the moment of Táhirih's unveiling, but also what occurred prior to and after the event. She also explores the idea that the actions and words of Quddus and Táhirih may have been a type of "structured improvisation." By adding more layers to this event, Ruhe-Schoen does not allow the reader to comfortably mythologize the event as a simple moment with a simple message. She forces us to consider the complexity of Táhirih and Táhirih's message. And once again, the author adds details that may not be known to the reader, such as the tale of the man who slit his own throat after seeing Táhirih's unveiling. It is interesting to learn in a footnote that he did not perish but lived on and remained a stalwart Bábí—only later to give up his life for his faith (236).

Ahdieh and Chapman also spend time on Badasht, where many Bábís were gathering and where Táhirih would challenge notions of equality for women. The authors include numerous specific details, such as how many of the followers had to travel separately to avoid suspicion, and how Quddus “arrived after hearing about the location of the gathering from some Babis whom he had met on the road.” Ahdieh and Chapman refer to the idea that the conflict between Táhirih and Quddus may have been prearranged. And yet, when recounting this event, they bring fresh ideas to the fore. The Calling prefaces the telling of the Conference of Badasht by detailing the history of the movement of spiritualism in the United States, beginning with the story of two sisters, Kate and Maggie Fox, who heard knocking in the walls of their home at night and soon began to interpret these as messages sent by spirits. From this beginning, Ahdieh and Chapman explain how “[s]piritualism’s practitioners and followers became an important force for social change in the United States, and women were at its center. American women were soon going to hold the first convention in Seneca Falls, NY, to begin the very long and arduous process of extending the right to vote to women in the United States. At the same time in Persia the Bábí leaders were gathering to discuss the true nature of the claims of the Báb and what those meant for the laws of Islam which had guided them for centuries, a gathering in which Tahirih would help them cast the past away forever. It was the summer of 1848” (142–43). They push the reader to realize that the summer of 1848 was a unique time in history.

The authors of these two books understand and are striving to convey in all its immensity the idea that when “the world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order,” the revolution is felt around the world at every level and by every individual (Bahá’u’lláh, Proclamation 118). In both Rejoice in My Gladness and The Calling, the authors succeed in conveying the history of this energy that compelled women to demand their emancipation. While Ahdieh and Chapman convey that Táhirih uniquely expressed this in her lifetime, they also give voice to many other women inspired by the same energy at the same time.

And when Ruhe-Schoen digresses after 102 pages with a chapter entitled “1844, Europe and the United States,” the reader might be forgiven for wondering why there is a chapter about other people entirely located within a book about Táhirih. However, this chapter provides a vitally important wider sense of historical time and place. Ruhe-Schoen takes what initially seem like tangential forays into concurrent happenings elsewhere in the world and guides the reader to realize that the power of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh as experienced by Táhirih was not a lone event because “Iran wasn’t the only spot on earth made incandescent by the fiery energy of renewal” (253).

While taking sometimes disparate approaches, both books ultimately share a profound love, respect, and admiration for the subject matter and the distinct voice of Táhirih. This is seen in how her martyrdom is conveyed. The telling of Táhirih’s last few days is compelling in both books. After detailing Tahirih’s preparation for and bravery in the face of her martyrdom, the authors use Táhirih’s own words, the beauty of her writing allowing the reader to grieve for what was lost to this world and what she sacrificed with her fearlessness and love for God. Reading both volumes will help readers understand this most remarkable life in new ways and gain an appreciation for varied aspects of Táhirih in unexpected ways.

Work Cited

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Catherine Nash completed her law degree at the University of Victoria and focuses on advocacy work for vulnerable children and youth.

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