

The Role of the Feminine in the New Era

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Abstract

The unveiling of the Persian poet, Táhirih, at the conference of *Badasht* in 1848 actualizes the larger symbolic unveiling of Fátimih destined to take place on the Day of Judgment as she crosses the bridge "Sirat." That larger unveiling, announcing the promised Day of God, may, in terms of Táhirih's bold actualization of Fátimih's symbolic act, be identified with the emergence in this century of the feminine from the relative obscurity to which the feminine has been patriarchally subjected throughout the now-ended Adamic cycle. The alliance between Eve and the serpent, her role as temptress, images the feminine in the Adamic cycle as the "shadow" side of the human person that is now being creatively absorbed into the light of a new global consciousness. Indeed, the Maid of Heaven addressing Bahá'u'lláh as the "Most Exalted Pen" would appear to be an initiator or instigator of that consciousness. Working in partnership with the masculine (the inner marriage of the masculine and feminine in both sexes), the unveiled feminine announces a long-awaited coming of age or psychic integration.

Résumé

En se dévoilant au cours de la conférence de *Badasht* en 1848, la poétesse persane Táhirih a concrétisé le «grand dévoilement» symbolique de Fátimih attendu au Jour du Jugement lors de la traversée du pont «Sirat». Ce «grand dévoilement», concrétisation courageuse par Táhirih de l'acte symbolique de Fátimih annonçant le Jour Promis de Dieu, pourrait être identifié à l'émergence, en ce siècle, du «feminine» longtemps contraint à une obscurité relative par l'attitude patriarcale qui a prévalu tout au long du cycle adamique, maintenant révolu. L'alliance entre Ève et le serpent et son rôle de tentatrice, présentent le «féminin» au cours du cycle adamique comme le côté sombre de la personne humaine, une imagerie présentement absorbée de façon créative à la lumière d'une nouvelle conscience globale. En effet, la Créature virginale du Paradis, s'adressant à Bahá'u'lláh, «la Plume la Plus Exaltée», semble être l'initiatrice ou l'instigatrice de cette conscientisation. Le «féminin» dévoilé, en oeuvrant de concert avec le «masculin» (le mariage intérieur du masculin et du féminin, tant chez l'homme que chez la femme) annonce une maturité longuement attendue, ou intégration psychique.

Resumen

El deshechar del velo de la poetisa persa Táhirih, en la conferencia de *Badasht* en 1848, da realidad efectiva a la aún mas grande simbólica desechada del velo de Fátimih destinada a tomar lugar en el Día del Juicio al cruzar ella el puente de "Sirat." Esa desechada del velo, de mayor amplitud, anunciando el Prometido Día de Dios, podrá, en consideración de la osada actualización de Táhirih del acto simbólico de Fátimih, identificarse con el surgimiento en este siglo de lo femenino de la oscuridad relativa a la cual ha sido sometido patriarcalmente aquel femenino a lo largo del ahora finalizado ciclo Adámico. La alianza entre Eva y la serpiente, su papel como tentadora, da imagen a la feminidad durante el ciclo Adámico como la parte "sombra" de la personal humana que ahora está siendo creadoramente absorbida a la luz de un nuevo sentido global. De hecho que la Doncella del Cielo, refiriéndose a Bahá'u'lláh como la "Mas Exaltada Pluma" aparentaría ser iniciadora o instigadora de ese sentido. Obrando en sociedad con lo masculino (el matrimonio recóndito de lo masculino y lo femenino en ambos sexos) la feminidad sin velo anuncia la largamente esperada madurez o integración psíquica.

Though in the Semitic tradition religion is essentially patriarchal—God as father addressing his people by progressively unfolding his will through a line of male prophets that include Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Bahá'u'lláh—the role of the feminine, while subordinate, nevertheless plays a powerful role. When the Bible speaks of a chosen people, it has in mind a chosen seed, a reference to the impregnating power of the male that refers directly to the Old Testament, to Abraham's testicles as the father of many nations. It is the impregnating male rather than the impregnated female who is given priority. Since, however, the one requires the other, the woman as the vessel of creation receiving into her womb the impregnating seed of the male, the two become one. This union is stressed in the Christian sacrament of marriage in which male and female become one flesh.

At the same time, however, there is in the Book of Genesis, the ambivalent figure of Eve as the consort of Adam. Her curious alignment is with the serpent who tempts her to eat of the forbidden fruit, thus initiating what in

Christianity is called Original Sin or the Fall of Man. Against this figure of Eve, as if to redeem her from her fallen state, stands in the New Testament the mysterious figure of Mary as the mother of Jesus, who though espoused to Joseph is already pregnant. In the moving accounts of her plight, which placed her in a potentially dangerous relationship to her society—a society that could stone her to death for adultery—she is declared to be a virgin impregnated, not by her husband but by the Holy Ghost whose divine action is announced by the archangel Gabriel. While the Qur’án specifically rejects the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—that Mary is the mother of God—it nevertheless affirms her virginity, describing in more than one of the súrihs the visitation of the archangel Gabriel. If Mary, in the New Testament, is the second Eve, Christ is the second Adam. As Adam and Eve in their relationship enact a fall from Paradise that begins humanity’s earthly evolution, so Mary and her son in their relationship enact a return to it. Hence, especially in the Russian, Greek, and Roman Churches, the veneration of the Virgin Mary makes her, as intercessor and redeemer, almost the equal of Christ. It was long believed that like Christ she bodily ascended to heaven, and, in the Papal Bull of 1950, the *Assumptio Maria* [Assumption of Mary] was proclaimed as a dogma of the Church. In this way, through the back door rather than the front, the feminine came to assume in Catholic Christianity a significance almost equal to that of the masculine. The Church as Mother Church bestowed its sacraments through its anointed priesthood, the priests in a particular sense being her sons.

The feminine in Islam has found in Fátimih a form of veneration that is almost as significant as the veneration of Mary in Christianity. Fátimih was the daughter of Muhammad, given in marriage to Muhammad’s cousin, ‘Alí, named by Muhammad the first Imám, whose function was to initiate believers into the mysteries of the revelations of the prophets, particularly the revelation of Muhammad in the Qur’án. From Fátimih’s womb came the second and third Imáms, Imám Hasan and Imám Husayn. She is, therefore, the mother of the Imáms, and especially in Shi’ite Islam, she is venerated as mother of the Imáms. Her womb is sacred, like the womb of Mary, because of what issued from it. Her body is also venerated as a sacred body, the sign of its sacredness being in the veil she wears. Because Islam was essentially a theocracy, no distinction being made between the two kingdoms of earth and heaven, or between the secular and the spiritual in Iran where the majority of the Shi’ahs dwell, the sacred body of Fátimih became identified with the sacred soil of Iran. Her body was described in the mystical sense as the celestial earth. We cannot begin to understand the Shi’ite revolution under Khomeini or his successors unless we grasp its veneration of Fátimih. The invasion of the materialism of the West epitomized by the United States was viewed by Khomeini and his followers as the tearing aside of Fátimih’s veil and the rape of her sacred body. For this reason, the United States is described as the great Satan whose rape of the sacred soil of Iran (a rape that had the permissive sanction of the late Shah) cannot go unpunished. It seems that until Iran is restored to some imagined medieval purity, the revolution will not be complete.

One of the major Shi’ite beliefs concerning Fátimih is that with the reappearance of the Twelfth or Hidden Imám, the Imám Míhdí, Fátimih will appear unveiled as the sign of his return and the day of resurrection. Her unveiling will be as the removing of the seal, identified with Muhammad as the seal of the prophets. With this unveiling, Fátimih will become as the bride at the marriage feast, described by Bahá’u’lláh in one of his Tablets as the unsealing of the wine of reunion. In 1848 there was held at Bada^{sh}t a conference of Bábís, over which Bahá’u’lláh presided. The purpose of the conference was to assist the Bábís to wean themselves from Shi’ite Islam so as to establish the Bábí religion as an independent revelation. Attending this conference were one of Persia’s greatest poets, the esteemed Táhirih, and the passionate figure Quddús, both of whom were Letters of the Living and who would later meet a martyr’s death. Each day one of the essential features of the Bábí religion that demonstrated its independence was isolated for particular consideration. On one of these days, the boldest of these features was formally and dramatically pronounced. Táhirih appeared in their midst without her veil, thus boldly announcing the unveiling of Fátimih that proclaimed the emergence of the Hidden Imám. The shock of seeing Táhirih unveiled was so great that some of the Bábís were unable to accept it and could not embrace in reality the full implications of the revelation of the Báb. In fact, one Bábí, overcome by what he considered Táhirih’s blasphemous behavior, slit his throat. Under the protection of Bahá’u’lláh, Táhirih was led from the conference when it finished. Later she was placed under house arrest by the Shahs and finally met her martyrdom, strangled with the silk handkerchief she had carefully saved for this sacred occasion, which she described as her union with her Beloved.

In the martyrdom of Táhirih can be seen emerging in the Bábí religion (and through Bahá’u’lláh into the Bahá’í religion) the significant role that the feminine, despite the strong patriarchal emphasis, has always played in the Semitic tradition. Táhirih stands as much as any woman for the role of the feminine in the new age. She was a Letter of the Living, the only female Letter of the Living, one of Persia’s greatest poets in the tradition of Rumí, and in her bold declaration of the truth of the new day, she chose—perhaps at Bahá’u’lláh’s instigation—to declare the new day by affirming without reservation the reality of the feminine.

It is surely not without significance that in Bahá’u’lláh’s awakening to His station as the prophet of the new day, He was addressed by a visionary maid whom He described as the Maid of Heaven and who addressed Him as

the Most Exalted Pen. While it would be easy to equate this Maid of Heaven with the figure of Fátimih, unveiled to Bahá'u'lláh and through Him to the world—the unsealing of the wine of reunion—it is perhaps equally important to recognize the fact that from time immemorial, inspiration at this level has been identified with a female muse. Milton, for example, in writing the greatest English epic *Paradise Lost*, described a female figure whom he called Urania dictating to him nightly, as he slept, his “unpremeditated verse” (Book 9, 24). In Jungian psychology, we speak of this inner feminine as the anima, the Latin word for soul. The tragedy and the danger of a patriarchal society is that too often it suffers the terrible consequences of leaving the feminine soul in both men and women in a repressed and abandoned state. Wherever this happens, the ego, unrefined and undeveloped by intercourse with the inner feminine, functions at a brutal, barbaric level, measuring its strength paradoxically by its power to destroy in the name of an inhuman ideal.

The unveiling of Táhirih in Iran in 1848 has its parallels in the unveiling of nuns in present-day Christendom and in the dreams of countless women in the 1980s. One woman, for example, dreamed that she was dressed in her bridal gown ready to meet her bridegroom. Suddenly, she was aware that there was interference, something that she had not taken into account. She was told by a voice in the dream that she must make peace with her sister, a woman who in reality had defied her father by running away to marry but who had suffered a nervous breakdown as a result. A strong feminine voice told the dreamer that she must wear her veil with a Mary Queen of Scots headdress and that her forehead must remain covered or her spiritual eye would be irreparably damaged.

These three themes, the veil, the shadow sister under the power of the old father, and the necessity of protecting the spiritual eye, are characteristic of modern dreams of women, and, therefore, one can assume they carry transpersonal as well as personal meaning. Moreover, since dreams are the content of the unconscious, which moves ahead of consciousness, such dreams suggest a thrust from the unconscious towards a new way of seeing, but a way that must be integrated at every step. Such dreams make it clear that the woman is not going to the marriage that she anticipated—the union of male and female in one flesh. Nor is she ready for the new marriage because one side of her female self is still in bondage to the old father, still so fragile that although she has the strength to defy her father with his outmoded, rigid concepts of her destiny, she has not the strength to stand to her own truth. Moreover, she must remain sequestered behind her veil, unprepared as yet to step forth, as Táhirih stepped forth with the support of Bahá'u'lláh at the conference of Badashht. That support, of Bahá'u'lláh as the presiding presence, gave her strength. The woman *in* the dream is warned that her spiritual eye is not yet strong enough to see what it must see before she dare remove the veil. Her spirituality is still too vulnerable to the old dispensation, too vulnerable to the old criticisms anti the stones that will be aimed at her when she dares to speak what she knows to be her own truth. One could amplify this dream further with the actual situation that developed between Mary Queen of Scots and her cousin Elizabeth. Torn by intrigues and love affairs with the men around her, Mary put her trust in the Virgin Queen and paid for her naiveté with her life. Although Elizabeth called herself the Virgin Queen, her virginity was born of a masculine consciousness that prided itself in power, not love. Her virginity had nothing to do with the receptivity of feminine consciousness open to the impregnation of the Holy Spirit.

Where a woman has not integrated her own femininity, has not looked into herself for her own inner shadow sister who still values herself according to the laws of the old patriarch (in fairy-tales the old king), she puts herself in a very dangerous position if she takes off her veil too soon. The resultant tragedy is clear in the lives of many nuns who have removed their veils, lost the security of the nunnery walls, and found themselves unable to cope with a sexual, materialistic, brutal world they do not understand, fluctuating between their freedom in the eyes of God and their slavery to their guilt and fear. It is equally clear in the lives of countless women who yearn to throw off the veil of their imprisoning marriage to a father-husband whom they once promised to love, honor, and obey, only to realize they have not the inner strength nor the fundamental knowledge of the marketplace to survive, let alone live a free life. They are more afraid of freedom than prison because, although they are seeing with new eyes, they have not the inner marriage which would give them the strength to stand to their own virgin truth—the strength that would allow them to say, “This is who I am.”

In another dream, a woman who had been working hard to contact her own inner femininity received a message on a slate, written in the well-formed letters of a conscientious adolescent. She felt she had lost contact with her own inner soul about the age of puberty. The message on her slate read, “I’m not quite with this seeing through the veil nor fashioning it into silk. I love you” The middle-aged dreamer was profoundly moved by the frankness of the message, the honesty that would say, “I don’t understand,” but quick to add, “I love you,” as if to say, “Don’t leave me down here in darkness.” In consciousness the woman had been meditating daily on the meaning of the soul in matter, the energy that can permeate flesh, flower, fish, and fowl. Earlier, she had dreamed that she met an old woman who gave her oil to rub on her body, and as she rubbed she felt light moving through every molecule of her person until her whole body was one living essence through which she could perceive the essence of the tulip on her desk, the essence of the tree outside her window, the essence of the song of the cardinal on the branch. This

perception stayed with her and made her weep for the ravaging of the dear planet on which we live. It made her weep too for the ravaging of the human body in our culture, the desecration of the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In the dream of the slate, she felt her own young feminine (the anima) trying to come to grips with the illusions that blocked her vision of reality. The fashioning into silk, as in Táhirih's use of her silk handkerchief, probably had something to do with the transformation of the sow's ear, the corporeal body into the subtle body, making the corporeal body transparent, translucent, so that one can see through it, beyond it. Or perhaps, from the other side, the young feminine is the soul who perceives from the other side of the veil, neither quite understanding the problems of the body locked in illusions, nor the perception of the body as anything less than finest silk. Perhaps her assurance of love is encouragement to the ego still striving to release itself into the new dispensation.

Release into the new dispensation has nothing to do with profane images of unveiling; it has nothing to do with the so-called freedom of exhibiting the body in a bikini. Not that I have anything against bikinis, but dieting to fit into a bikini is too many women's vision of the unveiling. The unveiling is a spiritual event, the unveiling of the soul that recognizes the sacredness of matter, the sacredness of matter in union with the sacredness of spirit.

Though the application of the unveiling of Táhirih to the dreams of modern women may seem to be rather far-fetched, I am making the application in an effort, not only to honor Táhirih as an example of a new feminine consciousness crucial to this new era but also to stress the universality of the feminine that cuts across all cultural and religious boundaries to affirm in its own way the oneness of humanity.

And now to conclude, perhaps the most beautiful description of the unveiling epitomized by Táhirih is to be found in Shelley's lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, written in 1819 at a time when in Persia, the school of Shaykh Ahmad was preparing many Muslims for the coming of the Hidden Imám. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Asia, the feminine soul of Prometheus, has just released him from his bound and limited consciousness to a recognition of himself as the inaugurator of a new age. Asia is addressed by her sister:

How thou art changed! I dare not look on thee;
I feel; but see thee not. I scarce endure
The radiance of thy beauty. Some good change
Is working in the elements, which suffer
Thy presence thus unveiled.
(2.5.16–20)

The unveiled presence of Asia reminds her sister of Asia's birth as Venus, when, as in Botticelli's painting *The Birth of Venus*, she stood in the veined shell to symbolize the birth of love:

The Nereids tell
That on the day when the clear hyaline
Was cloven at thine uprise, and thou didst stand
Within a veined shell....
.....
...love, like the atmosphere
Of the sun's fire filling the living world,
Burst from thee, and illumined earth and heaven,
And the deep ocean and the sunless caves,
And all that dwells within them....
(2.5.20–30)

It is this bursting of love to fill the living world that is perhaps the best interpretation one can give to the unveiling of Táhirih and to the role of the feminine in the new era. This love is present in matter itself even as the sun's rays are present in the atmosphere. It permeates matter rendering the earth itself, in Bahá'u'lláh's phrase, "the foot-stool" of God (*Gleanings* 30).

Works Cited

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