

# History internal assessment essay sample

[Religion](#)



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## A. Plan of the investigation.

In Persia of 1848, Táhirih took off her veil in the presence of an assemblage of religious leaders of her time in contradiction to the customs and authorities of the land. The aim of this investigation is to examine the significance of this event within the context of the position of women in Persian society at the time and its effect in acting as a catalyst for the process of the emancipation of women. The investigation will be carried out through examining both primary and secondary sources — accounts of the event by people who were there, commentaries on its significance written after the event itself, personal experience, and foundations that sprung up in response to the event. An analysis of all these sources and their reliability should lead to a conclusion of to what extent the event acted as a catalyst for the process of the emancipation of women.

## B. Summary of evidence

1. Background: the position of women. Their role and how they were perceived in their family and society before and during 1848 in Persia.

Persia is what has been called Iran since 1935. Islam has had a massive influence on Persian culture throughout its history. During the 19th century, women in Persia held a very low position in society. Some religious leaders of the time even relegated women to “ a rank little higher than that of animals” . To wear a veil was “ the immemorial custom” of the women of Persia and to relinquish it was unimaginable to the people of the time. Speaking with men was considered very impolite and women who did speak to men did so from behind a curtain . The painting to the right shows women veiled and

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associating only with women. Women were denied an education and only a very small minority was literate. They were not allowed to own property or vote. Thus women remained veiled and secluded, dominated, and accorded almost no respect .

Who was Táhirih and what was her heroic act?

Táhirih lived in 19th century Persia. Her name literally means “ the Pure One”. Because of her father’s high position and wealth, Táhirih was one of the few women in Persia who received a good education. She was highly esteemed, even by some of the haughtiest and most learned religious leaders of her country, for both her intellect and beauty . During the height of her fame and popularity in Tehran, both male and female society would flock to her doors to hear her brilliant discourses on religion and theology . “ In Qasvin,” writes the noted French diplomat and writer, Comte de Gobineau, “ she was held, with every justification, to be a prodigy.” Táhirih was an influential poet and theologian of the time . Though there are no known photographs of Táhirih, the painting above was painted in her memory with the purpose of spreading Táhirih’s influence .

In the beginning of the summer of 1948, Táhirih attended the conference of Badasht – a conference of distinguished religious leaders of her time. One day, all the participants were assembled in a room. Táhirih entered without the customary veil which all women were invariably expected to wear everywhere outside

the bedroom. Details from different sources vary as to what exactly took place on that day but the overall story is the same. After Táhirih entered the

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room, all those who saw her were shocked, infuriated and affrighted as she silently and with the utmost dignity, took a seat. Then, she proclaimed to all those present a departure from the time honored traditions of Islam and a revolution of thought that was to take place. The assembly was “ as if struck by lightning” . Some people hid their faces with their hands, others stood mute and transfixed before her, others covered their heads with their clothes so that they could not see her features. One man, aghast and deranged at such a sight, cut his own throat and “ covered with blood and shrieking with excitement” , fled from the scene. Thus the meeting was broken up in the midst of an indescribable tumult . Táhirih became the first woman in the Eastern Muslim world to dare to lay aside the veil .

Immediate, short term and long term effects of her action.

As mentioned above, the short term effects of Táhirih’s removal of her veil were “ electric and instantaneous” . These effects ranged from merely agitating some beholders to causing suicide for others, from inspiring wonder to arousing hatred. But for everyone who saw her that day, her actions no doubt caused a reconsideration of the law which they had thus far taken for granted and a re-examination of the status of women.

After 1848, the fame of Táhirih, traveling with remarkable swiftness as far as the capitals of western Europe, aroused the enthusiastic admiration and evoked the ardent praise of men and women of all different backgrounds .

Only eighteen years after the conference of Badasht, the Journal Asiatique of 1866 contained an article praising Táhirih and her work. “ How could it be that a woman, in Persia where woman is considered so weak a creature...

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precisely under such untoward circumstances, a woman could have organized so strong a group of heretics? There lies a question which puzzles even the Persian historian, Sipihr, for such an occurrence was without precedent!”

In 1914, when 400 women in the Middle East cast away their veils as a protest against their inferior position in society, the famous Oxford scholar Dr. T. K. Cheyne attributed this to Táhirih, writing that “ the harvest sown in Islamic lands by [Táhirih] is now beginning to appear... this noble woman ... has the credit of opening the catalogue of social reforms in Persia.”

Years later, Táhirih’s revolutionary act of removing her veil continued to inspire, as the mother of one of the Presidents of Austria, Mrs. Marianna Hainisch said, “ The greatest ideal of womanhood has been Táhirih. I shall try to do for the women of Austria what Táhirih gave her life to do for the women of Persia”

Táhirih’s determination to further the emancipation of women has inspired numerous foundations and associations dedicated to “ promoting justice for women and girls worldwide”. These include “ the Táhirih Justice Center” , “ The Táhirih Foundation” , and the “ Táhirih College of Education” .

C. Evaluation of sources.

Nabil, *The Dawn Breakers*. London. Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1953

This book is a primary source. It was originally written in Persian by Nabil, an eminent historian of the time in Persia, before being translated to English. It is a historical work recording the events in Persia in the 19th century. Many  
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other sources use “ The Dawn Breakers” as a reference and it is the authoritative description and almost the only description of the event.

A limitation of The Dawn Breakers is that the author Nabil professed the same faith (the Baha’i Faith) as Táhirih and many others whom the book mentions, and thus he could have had strong bias in favor of Táhirih’s cause. However, the author was either himself an eyewitness of the events he describes, or punctiliously quotes his authority for almost every item of information he uses. This has immense value as it ensures at least some degree of truth for the narrative. The author also submitted the book to a number of people who were key participants in the events he describes and received their approval. A limitation of the source, however, is that it was written almost immediately after the events described took place and thus the author was not able to put them into a larger historical perspective and evaluate their significance with regards to the future reactions towards these events. Although the book describes events spanning 70 years and only a bit of it concerns Táhirih, the sections regarding her and her removing of her veil are detailed and provide very valuable insight into the events which took place.

T. K. Cheyne, The reconciliation of races and religions. London, A. and C. Black, 1914

This source was written in 1914 by a Christian scholar. The self stated aim of this work is “ to contribute to the cause of universal peace, and promote the better understanding of the various religions which are really but one religion.” An immense value of this source lies in the fact that it was written

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by a Christian Westerner – someone who would not be entwined in the conflicts of the time – thus it was not biased towards or against Táhirih or her cause. However, this also suggests that Cheyne could not have fully understood the situation of the time or the effects of Táhirih's unveiling in that particular culture because he would never be able to transcend his inherent perceptions of things as a Western Christian. The source was written in 1914, nearly 50 years after the event took place, and thus the author had the advantage of hindsight and was able to evaluate its significance while this is at the same time a limitation in that the passage of time changes historians' perceptions on events. Only a small part of Cheyne's book is dedicated to Táhirih, and even less to that day in 1848 but because of the perceived objectivity of the source and the hindsight possessed by the author, it is a very valuable source,

#### D. Analysis.

A major difficulty one faces when attempting to assess the extent to which one event caused another is that the link between events is not always clear and evident. Did Táhirih's action really act as a catalyst the emancipation of women, or was it just an inevitable consequence of the progression towards emancipation, i. e. an inevitable chain of events?

One thing that confirms the former viewpoint is that Táhirih's action in 1848 was abrupt and spontaneous. It was not part of a gradual process which took place one step at a time and crept over the world unnoticed. Instead, Táhirih's action was completely against the norms of the time, it defied all accepted customs and set a new standard.

A second argument which validates this viewpoint is that numerous influential historians and commentators attribute the starting of the process of emancipation to Táhirih. T. K. Cheyne wrote in 1914 that “ the harvest sown in Islamic lands by [Táhirih] is now beginning to appear... this noble woman ... has the credit of opening the catalogue of social reforms in Persia”. Sir Valentine Chirol writes, “...the influence which she wielded in her lifetime still inures to her sex.” In 1866, the *Journal Asiatique* contained an article praising Táhirih and her work. These and many other commentaries on the life of Táhirih show that she is largely regarded as a catalyst for the process of the emancipation of women by authorities in the field of history.

Thirdly, because I myself and many people I know come from Persian backgrounds, I have sensed the effect of Táhirih’s removing of her veil in my personal life. Although almost all these people, including myself, have grown up in other cultures, the memory of Táhirih still remains with us. Babies are named after her, children sing songs about her, young girls told to be like her, and women facing life altering decisions try to think “ what Táhirih would have done”.

Lastly, the numerous institutions that arose and were immensely successful in response to Táhirih’s removing of her veil and her life in general verify that her action propelled the process of the emancipation of women. “ The Táhirih Foundation”, the “ Táhirih College of Education”, and “ The Táhirih Justice Center” were all inspired by Táhirih and designed to continue her work. This last organization was even praised by former First Lady Hillary Clinton . Through these foundations, Táhirih’s action is still directly affecting the lives of women today.

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Thus, although the link between Táhirih's removing of her veil in 1848 and the process of the emancipation of women that has been underway in the years after is not obvious, it is still evident through close examination that the former acted as a catalyst for the latter.

#### E. Conclusion.

Through a close examination of the situation in which the event took place, the main protagonist, the sequence of events, their long and short term effects and the reliability of the sources used, I attempted to clarify the cause-and-effect relationship between Táhirih's removing of her veil and the process of the emancipation of women. The fact that Táhirih's action was sudden, unexpected and thus had huge consequences for her personally, the huge effect it had in the personal lives of the people around me and myself, eminent historians' affirmations that it takes responsibility for the quickening of the process of the emancipation of women, and the number and success of the foundations and associations that sprung up in its wake all point us to one conclusion. When Táhirih removed her veil against all custom, tradition and authority in 1848, she acted, to a large extent, as a catalyst for the emancipation of women for centuries to come.

#### F. List of sources:

Thomas Kelly Cheyne, *The reconciliation of races and religions*. London, A. and C. Black, 1914

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Edward Granville Browne, *A Year Amongst the Persians*. London, Adam and Charles Black, 1970

A. L. M. Nicolas, *Siyyid Ali-Muhammad dit le Bab*

*The Journal Asiatique* of 1866

*The Encyclopedia*, <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/T%E1hirih>