



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## RESURRECTION OF THE UNVEILED: REPRESENTATION OF TÁHIRIH QURRATU'L-'AYN IN DOCUMENTARY FILM DUST-FLOWER-FLAME (2016)

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### Abstract

TáhirihQurratu'l-'Ayn, a revolutionary figure in 19th-century Persian history, remains a symbol of women's empowerment and religious reform. Despite her significant influence, her portrayal in mainstream media has been limited. This research delves into the documentary film *Dust-Flower-Flame* directed by Shabnam Tolouei, which offers a unique perspective on Táhirih's life and legacy. Tolouei's film provides a nuanced exploration of Táhirih's multifaceted identity as a religious thinker, poet, and women's rights advocate. Through archival materials, interviews, and reenactments, Tolouei constructs a compelling subjective narrative. Exploring the intersection of past and present, this research examines the cinematic strategies employed in *Dust-Flower-Flame* in order to offer insights into the director's construction of Táhirih and the challenges and controversies surrounding her depiction.

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### Introduction:

“The appearance of such a woman as Kurratu'l-'Ayn is in any country and any age a rare phenomenon, but in such a country as Persia 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 forth incomparable and immortal amidst her countrywomen. Had the Bábi religion no other claim to greatness, this were sufficient - that it produced a heroine like Kurratu'l-'Ayn” (Browne & Abdu'l-Bahá, 1891/1975)<sup>1</sup>

Táhirih (Fāṭima Baraghānī or UmmSalamih; 1814 or 1817/8–1852), also known by the titles Qurratu'l-'Ayn (Solace of the Eyes) and Zarrín-Táj (Crown of Gold) (Editors)was “a revolutionary religious thinker and a prominent Bābī leader [and] a woman of literary prowess in both prose and poetry” (Shayani, 2023, p. 305). She “was a Bābī<sup>2</sup> preacher and poet, and their first woman martyr” (Schimmel, 1987).

<sup>1</sup> - The central content of this book consists of Browne's translation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's account of the Báb and his faith. Browne, an early scholar of Bahá'í history, supplements the text with numerous notes and essays detailing his own research on the history of the Bahá'í Faith. This compilation was published in 1891 in two volumes and republished in 1975 in one volume.

<sup>2</sup> - The Bábi Religion emerged in 1844 as a monotheistic faith established by the Báb. It subsequently paved the way for the establishment of the Bahá'í Faith, whose adherents regard the Báb's religion as a precursor to their own. The proclamation of the Báb's message caused significant disruption in Persia, as the principles, values, and regulations advocated by the Báb challenged the existing societal framework. As a result, the Bábís encountered vehement opposition from authorities.

Táhirih Qurratu'l-'Ayn “is considered the first Iranian woman to preach equality of the sexes and religious freedom” (Schimmel, 1987, Para. 4). However, she was not well-received and appreciated in her mother-land of Persia, and “it was among the women’s avant-garde in Europe that she first gained the stature of a feminist heroine” (Dehghani, 2023, p. 381). Dehghani (2023) examines five cases across Austria, Germany, Russia, France, and Britain to illustrate how Táhirih’s influence transcended cultural boundaries, inspiring Europe’s avant-garde women during the latter half of the 19th century. He also explores factors contributing to the fading of her memory since the Second World War. Dehghani concludes, “Táhirih symbolizes not only the emergence of a new religion but also serves as a catalyst for the advancement of women in modern times” (2023, p. 406).

Despite her significant influence, the only available documentary film solely dedicated to Táhirih is *Dust-Flower-Flame* (2016), written, directed, and edited by Shabnam Tolouei. Another notable portrayal of Táhirih is in the documentary film *The Gate: Dawn of the Bahá’í Faith* (Hercules, 2018), which recounts the story of the Prophet Herald, The Báb, his message, and its impact on world religion. However, Táhirih’s appearance in *The Gate* is brief. This research provides an analysis of Táhirih’s representation in *Dust-Flower-Flame* by examining the cinematic tropes used to reconstruct various facets of Táhirih’s life and legacy.

Shabnam Tolouei is an Iranian actress, theater director, playwright, and filmmaker. However, she faces restrictions on her right to work in her homeland due to her affiliation with the Bahá’í Faith. Bahá’ís in Iran are subjected to systematic state-sponsored sanctions, which has barred Tolouei from pursuing her artistic endeavors in her native country<sup>3</sup>. Tolouei utilizes archival materials, interviews with historians and experts, and re-enactments to recount the story of Táhirih Qurratu'l-'Ayn. Tolouei skillfully weaves historical facts and personal insights into a coherent narrative.

The current research examines the documentary film *Dust-Flower-Flame* not as a direct reflection of reality, but rather as an exploration of the director’s distinctive interpretation of it, utilizing a performative documentary filmmaking style. Embracing subjectivity, the director provides insights into the cinematic process that shapes her unique construction of reality. This investigation delves into how *Dust-Flower-Flame* employs various cinematic tropes—such as archival footage, interviews, and voice-overs—to convey information and evoke emotions. By exploring the intersection of past and present, this research examines the cinematic strategies and narrative techniques filmmaker employs to construct her representation of historical reality.

The next section, *Representing the Past*, explores the intricate relationship between the medium of film and the construction of historical reality. The subsequent section delves into an analysis of Táhirih’s portrayal in film, highlighting historical challenges and controversies in her representation while comparing Tolouei’s depiction.

### **Representing the Past**

Documentary films, while claiming truth, often creatively manipulate realities, sparking debates on credibility and the treatment of actual events. Historians express skepticism towards the idea that filmmaking is a methodologically valid approach to historical analysis, citing the fictional elements inherent in the medium and its widespread popularity (Bell, 2011, pp. 7-8). Documentary filmmaking has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with researchers examining the complex interplay between the medium and the construction of reality.

Many scholars delve into the complexities of capturing and presenting reality on screen, highlighting the challenges filmmakers face in balancing objectivity and subjectivity (Nichols, 1991; Renov, 1993; Winston, 1995; Corner, 1996; Plantinga, 1997). Various studies explore storytelling techniques and their impact on constructing reality in non-fiction films (Bernard, 2022), emerging trends in documentary filmmaking (Bruzzi, 2003), the role of subjectivity in shaping documentary narratives, and how personal perspectives enrich the portrayal of reality (Rascaroli, 2009), along with other aspects of non-narrative filmmaking. Emphasizing the role of construction and

<sup>3</sup> -For more information about the persecution of Bahá’ís in Iran, please visit The Archives of Bahá’í Persecution in Iran, <https://iranbahaipersecution.bic.org/>.

This website serves as a repository containing numerous official documents and evidence of the enduring oppression and persecution faced by the Bahá’í community. As stated on the website, these documents cover a wide range of persecutions, including systematic discrimination, arrest and imprisonment, execution, economic oppression, exclusion from education, acts of destruction and violence, and incitement to hatred.

authorship in shaping documentary narratives, these scholars delve into the artistry involved in crafting documentaries, acknowledging the creative decisions that influence the portrayal of reality.

In addition to how documentary films portray the reality of the past, the manner in which films shape their audiences' connection to the past is significantly important. In his discussion about experimental history films and their approach to historical representation, historian Robert Rosenstone argues that:

"Rather than opening a window directly onto the past, [it] opens a window onto a different way of thinking about the past. The aim is not to tell everything but to point to past events, to converse about history, or to show why history should be meaningful to people in the present" (1995, p. 63).

Hence, although it's impossible to ignore the inherent authorship in depicting history through documentary films, the manner in which these films link historical events with contemporary audiences, and render history meaningful to them, holds significant importance. Creative documentary filmmaking, Bell asserts, "is...doing important historiographical work. It both undermines objectivist historical accounts and encourages the viewer to actively engage with how we make sense of the past" (2011, p. 23).

Rosenstone also clarifies that experimental history films "tend to make bits and pieces of our historical experience accessible, sometimes in all its confusion. Such films rarely claim to be the only or last word on their subject; many hope to make us think about the importance of a subject ignored by written history" (R., 1995, p. 64). This is another less-explored aspect of historical documentary filmmaking that offers the possibility of illuminating aspects of past events that had been previously ignored by written history.

Based on the current discussions, this research poses the question of how *Dust-Flower-Flame* links historical events with its contemporary audiences, and how the filmmaker deals with written history by constructing her own version of it.

### **Constructing the "Lost Object"**

The importance of Táhirih's representation stems from both her profound significance in history and the controversies surrounding her portrayal. Across historical narratives, Táhirih's depiction has been contentious and contradictory, leading to questions about the accuracy and implications of her representation.

According to Banani (2000), for a century since the inception of the Bábí Movement in 1844, discussions on Táhirih in Persia were predominantly condemnatory, except for hagiographic accounts by Bábís and Bahá'ís. In the last 50 years, Persian intellectuals have adopted a new trend of writing, heavily influenced by borrowed analytical frameworks, especially rooted in Marxist thought, applied naively to events and personalities in their society. However, Táhirih is a nuanced and intricate character, and comprehending her mindset and passion requires an acknowledgment of her profound faith in spiritual renewal, her commitment to challenging Islamic law, and her readiness to sacrifice for a new societal order.

Highlighting the "courageous act" of Táhirih in removing the veil from her face in a public gathering of men, Amin Banani (2000) notes that despite her significant influence on notable figures in Europe, India, and America<sup>4</sup>, efforts have been made in her own society to obscure her image by metaphorically covering her "with many layers of veils." (Banani, 2000)

In her discussion on the distorted portrayal of Táhirih, Yazdani (2023) identifies various veils obscuring Táhirih's representations: Firstly, the veil of sexual perversity, stemming from "Táhirih's daring to debate with prominent ulama and challenge them in defense of her beliefs," which intensified after her courageous act of unveiling in a public gathering among unrelated men (p. 361). Secondly, the veil of denying authorship of her poems (p. 367). Thirdly, the veil of portraying her as having a disturbed mind (p. 369). Fourthly, the veil of labelling her as a militant Shī'ī Muslim, a claim propagated in Western academia in the twenty-first century by two Iranian scholars (p. 370). Lastly, the veil of depicting her as fanatically violent and aggressive in the face of accusations of

<sup>4</sup> - For more detailed early references to Táhirih and Bábís and Bahá'ís in the West and in the Indian subcontinent, see respectively Momen (1981) and Áfáqí, (1992).

complicity in her uncle's assassination (p. 375). Some of these veils alluded to in *Dust-Flower-Flame* will be further examined in the subsequent sections of this research.

Understanding the complexities and implications of how Táhirih is portrayed offers insights into broader cultural, religious, and historical dynamics.

### Subjective Narrative

In *Dust-Flower-Flame*, director Shabnam Tolouei adopts a performative documentary style, actively immersing herself in the narrative through her voice and presence. While she refrains from directly discussing herself, her creative approach constructs aspects of her life as a mother, writer, and Iranian woman. Unlike traditional documentaries with didactic arguments delivered through an authoritative voice-over, Tolouei's narrative adopts a subtle and delicate tone, intertwining voice, sound, music, and imagery to craft a unique diegesis. This diegesis exists in a realm between fiction and fact, blurring the lines between the actual and the imaginary. Tolouei eschews the traditional 'voice of God' narration, instead focusing on her inner motivations and insights into Táhirih's story. Her subjective ownership of the narrative is evident, particularly when in some parts of the film, her voice-over actively interrupts and overlaps with fading voices of the interviewees, allowing her to comment and take their discussions further.

The voice-over featuring the director's voice takes on the tone of personal letters addressed to Táhirih, creating the impression that Tolouei is engaged in direct communication with her. The first voice-over states:

“I was Seven. One morning on a Naw-Ruz holiday, my father opened up his history book and began to read to me. Your life story, which was not like any children's story, gripped me in such a way that for nights, my dreams were filled with the traces of your footsteps.”

This voice-over is accompanied by close-up shots of a red fish swimming in a bowl, a symbolic element traditionally included by Iranians in their Haft-sin, the ceremonial arrangement for Naw-Ruz. Through dissolve transition, Tolouei's hands are depicted writing letters as she converses with Táhirih. The accompanying image of the red fish and Tolouei's writing serve as motifs, as it is repeated in other sections of the film, connecting the audience to Tolouei's solitary dialogue with Táhirih. This imagery evokes childhood memories of Iranian women associated with the sweetest moments of Naw-Ruz, drawing viewers into a nostalgic reverie.

The opening voice-over establishes a connection between the footsteps of Táhirih in the director's childhood dream and the subsequent appearance of several similar reenactments later in the film. The director's reminiscence of Táhirih's story intertwines with personal childhood memories, creating a deeply intimate connection between the filmmaker and the subject. The reenactments, where the camera follows the steps of Táhirih, seem to invite viewers to share the director's dreamlike journey. This blending of personal narrative with historical reenactments blurs the boundaries between past and present, inviting the audience into a shared exploration of Táhirih's legacy and significance.

The first voice-over unfolds to reveal two additional flash memories from the filmmaker's childhood: At the age of 10, her friend's mother recounted a story depicting Táhirih as aggressive<sup>5</sup>, while at 13, her literature teacher dismissed Táhirih as a discredited poet unworthy of discussion. These memories insightfully highlight the conflicting narratives surrounding Táhirih, portraying her alternatively as an aggressive fanatic figure and a discredited poet; two of the previously-mentioned veils which obscure Táhirih's representations as Yazdani (2023) identifies.

Tolouei's voice continues:

“Time passed, and I learned that no history is unbiased. But beyond its twists and turns, there's surely some hidden truth, and that's you. You whom they strangled secretly in an orchard one hot summer's night, you whose lifeless body they threw down a well. Your name: Fatimih, Your nationality: Iranian, Your place of birth: Qazvin, and your title: Qurratu'l-'Ayn.”

<sup>5</sup> -The story the mother read is from a pamphlet, implying it is one of the condemnatory writings published about Táhirih. Reading this to a child from a Bahá'í family subtly exemplifies the act of persecution against Bahá'ís, even by a non-Bahá'í mother of the filmmaker's friend, presumably in an attempt to persuade her against the faith.

Accompanying these voice-overs are a series of desaturated point-of-view shots, from inside a vehicle passing through a tunnel, streets, and trees along a road with a background of a gloomy sky. These voice-overs reveal Tolouei's perspective on the function of her cinematic representation of Táhirih as a search for hidden/manipulated truth through her own subjective lens as an Iranian woman and artist.

Throughout the film, Tolouei intertwines moments from Táhirih's life with her own experiences. For instance, the dramatic voice-over recalls Táhirih's marriage at the age of 14 or 17 to her cousin, who later disapproved of Táhirih and showed hostility towards her. The story of Táhirih's three children is recounted as if Tolouei is recalling Táhirih's memory herself. Immediately after mentioning the death of Táhirih's 15-year-old daughter due to her emotional suffering after the execution of her mother, the edit transitions to a shot of Tolouei's son lying in bed while she strokes his head before his bedtime. These juxtapositions between Tolouei's life and Táhirih's story underscores Tolouei's personal connection to the narrative.

### Biographical Accounts

Táhirih's birth in 19th-century Qazvin<sup>6</sup>, a city rife with religious turmoil, occurred amidst a backdrop described by Momen (2023) as a "maelstrom of religious controversy and conflict" (p. 285). Born in either 1814 or 1817, according to varying sources (p. 293), Táhirih hailed from a Twelver Shī'ī clerical family, immersed in the religious divisions prevalent in Qazvin. Momen's depiction of the religious landscape of Qazvin during this period outlines the deep-seated tensions between the Akhbārī and Uṣūlī factions, later compounded by the Shaykhī-Uṣūlī divide.

Táhirih's familial and religious background plays a significant role in shaping her worldview. Recognizing this importance, Tolouei employs range of social and cultural historians, in order to provide informed opinions about the historical contextualization of the period in which Táhirih was living. This is a standard and useful documentary didactic strategy. Tolouei juxtaposes available image of Táhirih's family tree with the intertwined discussions of the interviewees to provide information about her ancestors, family members, and even educated women in her family. Tolouei briefly touches upon the religious conflicts of the time but opts to put more emphasis on the oppressive conditions endured by women, who were marginalized and silenced within society. This thematic focus allows Tolouei to delve into the societal constraints faced by Táhirih and other women of her era, highlighting their struggles against status quo.

Although Twelver Shī'ī clerics generally believed that women should not receive education, Táhirih's family, the Baraghānī, diverged from this norm. This topic is also addressed in *Dust-Flower-Flame*, highlighting the privilege Táhirih enjoyed in receiving religious education, which was unconventional for women of her time. Despite this deviation from the norms of the society in providing women with the right to education, the traditional society and family she emerged in did recognize her autonomy within the accepted limited scope of being a daughter, a wife and a mother. Her father, her husband and her uncle/father-in-law were all renowned Uṣūlī Twelver Shī'ī clerics who couldn't approve Táhirih's conversion first to the Shaykhī movement and then the Bábī religion. She was one of the original eighteen disciples of the Báb, despite never having encountered him in person.

Táhirih, who referred to as the "Bahá'í Paradigm of Womanhood" (Maneck, 1994), stands apart from other female religious figures by not being idealized solely as a mother, daughter, or wife (Nasehi, 2018). She departed from societal norms by leaving her family to propagate the message of her newfound faith. "At a time when women were not allowed to set foot outside their homes without their husbands' permission, she left her husband and children to become one of the Bábīs' most effective and outspoken leaders" (Nafisi, 2003).

The topic of Táhirih's departure from her family and the ensuing conflict between her familial duties and spiritual beliefs receives significant attention in the analyzed film. The filmmaker deliberately explores various facets of Táhirih's decision, highlighting its complexity and resonance with contemporary women's struggles, particularly the balancing act between family life and professional aspirations. This thematic exploration is underscored by a poignant scene depicting Tolouei's own late-night work session interrupted by her son waking up. The juxtaposition of Táhirih's narrative with Tolouei's personal life adds depth to the film's portrayal of women's experiences, highlighting the enduring relevance of Táhirih's story in today's world.

<sup>6</sup> - Qazvin is a city in the central district of Qazvin province in Iran.

Furthermore, the discussions regarding the historical circumstances of Táhirih's departure from her family lead to a brief mention of the condemning "veil of sexual perversity" and accusations of fanaticism introduced by Yazdani (2023) as the veils obscuring Táhirih's portrayal. Interviewees provide their perspectives on refuting these accusations, shedding light on the complexities surrounding Táhirih's historical representation.

Her most courageous deed was the act of unveiling in a meeting of Báb's followers in the 1848 Conference of Badash<sup>7</sup>. Eighty-one of the Báb's most distinguished followers, including Táhirih, come together for a period of three weeks to discuss the future of their faith. Following her revolutionary act of unveiling and the subsequent controversy, the Báb bestowed upon her the title "Táhirih," signifying "the pure one." She stood as the sole woman among the earliest and most distinguished followers of the Báb, who were collectively known as "hurúf-i-hayy", the "Letters of the Living" (Editors).

The act of Táhirih's unveiling is depicted in *Dust-Flower-Flame* through the filmmaker's voice-over, as if she is narrating the incident directly to Táhirih. The editing juxtaposes a series of pages from a book that records the same event. Various aspects of this incident are discussed through interviews with experts from different fields, raising questions about Táhirih's chastity and condemning accounts about her in the film. Instead of delving into specific details, such as the nature and extent of the unveiling, the filmmaker chooses to focus on the significance of her deed. Further discussion about the representation of Táhirih's association with feminism and the women's movement is deferred to in the next section.

After being under house arrest for approximately three years in Tehran, the government grew increasingly concerned about the public execution of the influential 36-year-old Táhirih. In a clandestine operation, they orchestrated her demise, leading to her strangulation and subsequent disposal in a well. The accounts of her house arrest and execution are primarily narrated by Tolouei's voice-over, addressed to Táhirih. These voice-overs are accompanied by poetic and stylized reenactments, offering more symbolic value than referential or indexical connotation.

### **A Feminist or a Religious Figure?**

Before the outbreak of the First World War, the suffragist media prominently featured Táhirih presenting her as a herald to their cause and a heroine to be emulated (Egea, 2023, p. 433). She was "regarded by the movement as a heroic example of the struggle for the emancipation of women" (p. 434), and received attention in Europe.

During the era before the Second World War there have been several artistic and literary works in which Táhirih has been depicted with theatre as the preferred genre (Mottahedeh, 2023, p. 426)<sup>8</sup>. However, her name appears to have vanished from Europe's collective memory following World War II. Deghani (2023) identifies three factors contributing to this disappearance: Firstly, "feminism" has often been associated with a Western concept of liberated womanhood, resulting in what is known as "hegemonic feminism." Secondly, confining Táhirih's relevance solely to one religious community or academic discipline denies her broader universal impact and lasting legacy. Lastly, Táhirih did not openly address feminism or women's suffrage, a topic also explored in Toloui's film. Contrasting two divergent perspectives regarding Táhirih's association with advocating for women's rights, one interviewee suggests that Táhirih aimed to pioneer a broader sense of modernism beyond gender boundaries, with no explicit mention of women's rights in her writings. Following this assertion, Tolouei shifts to another interviewee who suggests that while Táhirih may not have been fully conscious of the future impact of her actions, her mere existence has left a profound influence.

Farzaneh Milani, one of the interviewees in the film, asserts this perspective, which is also reflected in her writings (2004):

“...In fact, by her conduct, she subverted not only the established religion but the whole fabric of androcentric society. She rejected the traditional female occupations and the attributes of femininity by departing from existing gender roles. She eschewed the feminine virtues of submissiveness,

<sup>7</sup> - A village in the Semnan province of Iran.

<sup>8</sup> - In listing some of these works of art, Mottahedeh mentions Nicolas's *Qourret-oul-aïne* (1905), Laura Barney's *God's Heroes* (1910), Published in English in "Nicolas, A. L. (2004). *Qourret-oul-aïne*. In S. Afaqi (Ed.), *Táhirih in History: Perspectives on Qurratu'l-'Ayn from East and West* (P. Terry, Trans.). Los Angeles: Kalimát Press."

domesticity, absence from the public view, and silence. Articulate rather than silent, transgressive rather than obedient, mobile rather than walled in, she challenged the prevailing norms of the established order..." (p. 176)

Táhirih's act of unveiling serves both dramatic and symbolic functions, transcending patriarchal norms, challenging societal structures, and symbolizing the emergence of a new faith. Primarily, Táhirih's unveiling aligns with feminist ideals of women's emancipation and empowerment, symbolizing a profound assertion of autonomy and agency within a patriarchal society<sup>9</sup>. Despite the fact that her fervent advocacy for abolishing entrenched religious laws notably had the potential of establishing gender equality, equating Táhirih's endeavors with "feminism" solely fails to recognize sacred aspects of Táhirih's unveiling and also her broader historical significance. Going through a detailed accounts of Bedasht conclave, Mottahedeh concludes: "Beyond feminism, then, Qurrat al-'Ayn Táhirih's role, in the published words of her contemporaries, is an unequivocal charge to overthrow tradition and to serve as the condition of "the new" (2023, p. 430).

A comprehensive portrayal of Táhirih, therefore, involves acknowledging her as a theologian with unorthodox tendencies, while also avoiding reducing her solely to a passionate feminist trailblazer, as this disregards her profound spiritual motivation.

The film initially highlights the historical context of women's marginalized status in Persian society during the 19th century under the Qajar dynasty's rule. While it emphasizes Táhirih's pivotal role as an advocate for women's rights and equality, the documentary goes beyond portraying her solely as a women's rights activist. By delving into the reformist ideals propagated by The Báb, the film underscores the spiritual motivations behind Táhirih's endeavors to challenge patriarchal structures. Through its exploration of principles such as women's participation in public life, the abolition of temporary marriage, and the equitable distribution of inheritance, the documentary showcases Táhirih's multifaceted legacy as both a social reformer and spiritual advocate.

#### **A Discredited Poet**

beside her heroic deeds, another important aspect of Táhirih's life is her powerful literary oeuvre. As Ghaemmaghami (2023) mentions "Táhirih wrote at least twenty-six apologetic treatises, letters, homilies and prayers, about two-thirds of which are, by word account, in Arabic and the rest in Persian" (p. 336). while delving into Táhirih's writings in order to "allow her own voice, through her poems," Banani (2000) recognizes concepts of "renewal and resurrection" through which Táhirih's poems explicitly proclaim "the coming of a new age of social and spiritual vigor. They signal the end of the era of expectations, the advent of the Promised One, and the arrival of the Beloved." Exploring the focused themes and principles concerns of Táhirih's body of prose work, Ghaemmaghami identifies three central and interconnected themes present in her writings: "the renewal of revelation, the dawn of a new day and the appearance of the promised one" (2023, p. 338). As Shayani (2023) clarifies, Táhirih's poetry can be divided into two main categories: romantic verses imbued with mystical elements and poems that serve as a rallying cry for the dawn of a new spiritual epoch (p. 308).

Female poets in Persian literary history have frequently faced unwarranted discrediting owing to a lack of primary sources and prevailing traditional perspectives on women's societal roles (Shayani, 2023). Furthermore, Táhirih Qurrat al-'Ayn's historical and literary legacy has been consistently subjected to denial and censorship. This suppression is not only a result of gender discriminatory treatment towards female poets but also stems from politico-religious intolerance towards her, given her role as a prominent religious figure associated with the women's emancipation movement.

The analyzed film also explores Táhirih's artistic identity as a poet and recognized the veil of denying authorship of her poems. While the documentary juxtaposes statements from interviewees regarding the historical evidence of Táhirih's literary contributions, it also addresses the notion that poetry may not have been a central focus for Táhirih. Banani emphasizes this perspective, suggesting that Táhirih's primary identity was that of an activist rather than a poet. (2000, para. 4).

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<sup>9</sup> - Mottahedeh suggests the identification of Táhirih with feminism stems partly from the orientalist association of female veiling with oppressive structures in the Muslim world (2023, p. 411) which is rooted in misunderstanding about the function of veiling in Islamic context during the dawn of Islam.

Despite lack of coverage of technical aspect of Táhirih's literary oeuvre, however, Tolouei turns discussion about one of Táhirih's poet into a poetic association between Táhirih and herself. Celebrating the endurance of the legacy of Táhirih, an interviewee raises the issue of the "Campaign for One Million Signatures" which was inspired by Táhirih's poem "Point by Point." The "Campaign for One Million Signatures" launched in 2006 used street strategies that mirrored Táhirih's bold approach. This campaign, as acknowledged by its founder Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani, exemplifies the enduring influence of Táhirih's legacy, which has seen a resurgence in popularity in recent decades.

### Archival Photos and Reenactments

The picture archives serve as an expressive resource for visual story-telling in the hand of filmmakers (Bell, 2011, p. 14). Despite the fact that "the indexical character of the photographic image is seen to underwrite the documentary film's claim to facticity" (Bell, 2011, p. 14), the new digital manipulation tools in the hand of filmmakers through the post production process, may make the evidentially of the photographic images vulnerable. They are fragmentary survivors of the past which are mingled with other cinematic troops in the film in order to create their own stories.

Almost all of the archival photos used in *Dust-Flower-Flame* are not directly related to the events discussed but rather elaborate on the historical context. For instance, the combination of the filmmaker's voice-over with expert interviews describes the condition of women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Persia, while the accompanying images depict picture archives of women from the discussed period.

Therefore, due to the lack of iconic access to the found archival material related to the mentioned events in the film, the usage of these photographic images serves specific functions. They established a figurative rather than referential relationship to the past events, with their meaning constructed through representational and cultural processes. Despite the indexicality of the still archive photographs, their relations with the narrative and voice-over of the film carry more symbolic value, akin to reenactments, as they serve as a replacement for the "lost object" and contribute to the subjective nature of the representation.

Reenactments in documentary filmmaking were once prevalent and utilized in early films such as Robert Flaherty's ethnographic documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922), primarily due to technological limitations that compelled filmmakers to reconstruct past events and actions before the camera (Burton & Thompson, 2002). The expressive tool of reenactment were rejected by the "vérité boys" in the 1960s (Nichols, 2008, p. 72), coinciding with technological advancements that enhanced the mobility of cameras and facilitated access to subjects as events unfolded (Nichols, 2001, p. 109). The dismissal of reenactments as inauthentic and manipulative was challenged in the 1980s with the advent of postmodernism and its critique of positivist claims of objectivity and the objective representation of truth and reality. Contemporary documentaries now creatively incorporate reenactments and recognize them as a crucial storytelling element, exemplifying this shift in perspectives and approaches within the genre.

With the new perspective, reenactments serve not merely to recreate past events, but also function as aesthetic tools that offer filmmakers self-reflexive possibilities. As Nichols insightfully argues "reenactments are clearly a view rather than the view from which the past yields up its truth" (2008, p. 80), and "the documentary voice is the embodied speech of a historical person—the filmmaker, caught up in the syntax of enacted or reenacted images through which the past rejoins the present" (p. 79).

This perspective precisely captures the function of reenactments in *Dust-Flower-Flame*, encapsulating the filmmaker's imaginative vision and fantasy. As mentioned earlier, the filmmaker draws us into her dream of Táhirih's footsteps and poetic presence. The camera does not serve an omniscient or third-person narration; instead, it offers an imaginative perspective reflective of the filmmaker's point of view. She emphasizes truth over mere veracity.

Nichols (2008) suggests a nuanced categorization within the cinematic practice of reenactment; "Realist Dramatization", characterized by suspenseful, dramatic reenactments in a realist style, raises contention due to its resemblance to conventional fictional representations; "Typifications" involve reenactments devoid of specific historical references, focusing on typifying past patterns rather than singular occurrences; "Brechtian Distanciation" heightens the separation between the reenactment and the specific historical moment, emphasizing social gestures; "Stylization" employs highly stylized techniques, introducing a sense of separation; while "Parody and Irony" adopt



a humorous or critical tone, questioning reenactment conventions (pp. 84-87). These categories underscore the multifaceted nature of reenactments, each offering unique perspectives on historical representation within the documentary genre.

The reenactment scenes in *Dust-Flower-Flame* exhibit a blend of Realist Dramatization and Stylization techniques. While they do not fully adhere to the conventions of realist dramatization, which typically aim for a suspenseful resemblance to the past in a fictional mode, they offer a more poetic association with historical events. Through stylized vignetting, the reenactments establish their identity as fragments of the filmmaker's imagination, resembling pieces of her childhood dreams about Táhirih, rather than strict recreations of historical events. This departure from realism encourages viewers to engage with the narrative on a more abstract and interpretive level, inviting reflection and contemplation.

Nichols (2008) suggests that the "fantasmatic" power of reenactments lies in their capacity to depict not only a "lost object" - the events from the past - but also its absence. According to him, the fictionalization of historical events could enhance the image's persuasiveness by appealing to emotions rather than just facts, providing insight into the emotional experience of the event.

In the analyzed documentary, the filmmaker grapples with the challenge of reconstructing the enigmatic figure of Táhirih, who exists as a "lost object." In a scene where Tolouei faces a computer monitor displaying photos attributed to Táhirih, her voice-over dominates, expressing the realization that many images purported to depict Táhirih are not authentic:

"all the pictures that for years have been identified and even praised as 'Qurratu'l-'Ayn are not of you... but I think perhaps history itself has scattered and concealed your life so that its traces might be painstakingly recovered, its fragments safely reassembled once again."

In *Dust-Flower-Flame*, there is an additional layer of absence surrounding the "lost object," Táhirih. This absence is not solely due to the scarcity of archival materials but also because of the reverence Bahá'ís hold for her. While Táhirih's face has been revealed in another documentary, *"The Gate"* (Hercules, 2018), Tolouei deliberately chooses not to show it in her film. This intentional omission adds a layer of inaccessibility to Táhirih's character, thereby enhancing her mystique and reinforcing her enigmatic presence.

The reenactment scenes in Tolouei's film thus serve to depict this "inaccessible object", Táhirih, in a manner that is shrouded in both poetry and aversion. By choosing not to show Táhirih's face, Tolouei emphasizes the elusive nature of her character, inviting viewers to engage with her essence rather than her physical appearance. This portrayal underscores the complex interplay between historical representation, reverence, and artistic interpretation, challenging conventional approaches to depicting revered historical figures on screen. Through the lens of poetry and aversion, Tolouei constructs a multifaceted portrayal of Táhirih, one that resonates with the viewer on a symbolic and emotional level, transcending mere visual representation.

### **Intergenerational Exploration**

In an early scene of the film, a young child's hands are depicted excavating a digging brick with a brush and a chisel, symbolizing the spirit of exploration. He sits back to back with his mother, the filmmaker, who appears deeply engrossed in a pile of papers, on a bench along the bank of a river in France<sup>10</sup>. This imagery carries profound metaphorical implications, emphasizing the significance of cultural and historical heritage. Additionally, it highlights the intergenerational aspect of exploration, suggesting a transmission of knowledge and legacy from one generation to the next. Both mother and son engage in excavation and exploration, albeit in different ways, reflecting the diverse approaches to understanding their shared heritage.

The concluding part of the voice-over states:

"The story of your life ends here, with all the questions unanswered, with the whys and wherefores left behind, and all trace of you lost, possibly eradicated in your own country."

<sup>10</sup> - The body of a boat sailing in the river bears the written text "Le Francilien." Additionally, the child begins speaking in French. Throughout the film, he converses in both French and Persian.

Tolouei's voice proceeds to unravel the destinies of some of Táhirih's family members, particularly her children. This is the moment when the deep-rooted mother-son relationship from the annals of history resurfaces in Tolouei's bond with her son in the final scene—a poignant parallel that subjectively links Tolouei to Táhirih. However, in this instance, the new generation, symbolized by Tolouei's son, assumes an active role.

Following the harrowing account of Táhirih's martyrdom, where she is suffocated and cast into a well in Tehran, the closing scene of *Dust-Flower-Flame* echoes the film's opening scene, marking the culmination of Shabnam's subjective narration of Táhirih's story. Shabnam, visibly moved by Táhirih's glorified martyrdom, remains engrossed in her papers. Her son, witnessing his mother's sorrow, offers a reassurance: "Don't worry Mom! They taught us at school that whatever you plant in the earth sprouts up again someday." While in the film's initial scene, mother and son sit back to back, absorbed in their individual explorations, this final parallel scene sees them face each other and share a tender embrace. The papers that had been a constant companion throughout the film are left on the bench, carried away by the wind.

The final scene of the film comprises two shots that encapsulate a profound symbolic narrative regarding Táhirih's legacy. The first shot portrays Táhirih's lifeless hand resting on the cracked earth, gradually obscured beneath a cascade of white flowers in a series of dissolve shots until it vanishes entirely. This imagery suggests the burial of Táhirih's physical form, symbolizing her transition into memory and history.

In stark contrast, the subsequent shot presents Táhirih's bare foot, vibrant and animated, striding away from the camera, accompanied by the presence of doves in the background. This visual metaphor evokes the resurrection of Táhirih's legacy, symbolizing the enduring impact of her thoughts and actions on history and societal transformation.

### Conclusion:

*Dust-Flower-Flame* presents a compelling reinterpretation of recorded history, skillfully reconstructed by Shabnam Toloui to illuminate the life and legacy of Táhirih. Through a blend of subjective narrative techniques, archival photos, and reenactments, Toloui creates a narrative that invite viewers to explore Táhirih's story on emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels. The historical accounts provide a nuanced understanding of Táhirih's life, emphasizing her familial and religious background, her departure from societal norms, and her pivotal role in advocating for women's rights and spiritual renewal. These accounts underscore Táhirih's multidimensional identity as a religious leader, poet, and social reformer.

*Dust-Flower-Flame* employs a subjective narrative style, blurring the boundaries between fact and interpretation. Director Shabnam Tolouei intertwines personal reflections with historical reenactments, inviting viewers into her imaginative journey of exploring Táhirih's legacy. Through voice-over narration, symbolic imagery, and poetic associations, Tolouei constructs an intimate and emotive portrayal of Táhirih, emphasizing her enigmatic presence and enduring impact.

Furthermore, Tolouei's construction of the relationship between the audience and the "lost object" of Táhirih's legacy is characterized by reverence and introspection. Through deliberate omissions and symbolic imagery, Tolouei accentuates the elusive nature of Táhirih's character, inviting viewers to engage with her essence rather than her physical attributes. By emphasizing Táhirih's enduring influence and spiritual significance, Tolouei fosters a sense of connection and empathy among the audience, encouraging them to reflect on themes of identity, empowerment, and societal transformation. Through this transcendent journey, Táhirih's buried legacy is unearthed, paving the way for societal transformation and collective empowerment.

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