

Tahireh Qurrat-ul-Ain, the Iranian Joan of Arc

In 1848, in a conference in Badasht in northeast of Iran, Tahireh Qurrat-ul-Ain, the Iranian Joan of Arc, the revolutionary leader and mystic poet, by removing the veil from her face, proclaimed the new era of justice and the manifestation of women's liberation.

Her courageous act, along with her revolutionary manifestation in a public gathering of men, shocked the nation and had a great impact on men and women ever since.

Influenced by Tahireh's emancipation for women, I wrote "Behind the Curtains", a play based on her life in 1990, when I was studying playwriting at the University of Iowa. This play had two productions in New York and Chicago, directed by Melody Brooks at New Perspective Theatre and Hanna Gale at the Green view Art Center.

Here is the first scene of Behind the Curtains.

Behind the Curtain

By: Ezzat Goushegir

Before Scene 1

(A white transparent curtain covers the stage. From behind the curtain a melody on a harp is heard. Lights up on Kaffieh, wrapped in a black veil. A white veil covers her face. As she starts to speak to the audience, she slowly lays aside the veil.)

Kaffieh

Behind the walls...behind the doors...
Behind the curtains,
There is always something you can never know...
In the garden, there has grown a pomegranate tree
Which is always pregnant with red flowers.

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(She takes out a pomegranate
from under the black veil.)

Have you ever taken a journey inside it?
Under its crown...it's skin...it's curtains?

My lady taught me how to travel inside the pomegranate
And reach its mystery...

Open it, break it, taste it...

My lady is pregnant with words, the songs, the unknowns.

(She listens to the melody.)

Can you guess who is behind the curtains?
Who is playing the music?

(Kaffieh puts the pomegranate on
a small platform on the stage. She
begins to pull aside the curtains.
Behind the curtain, Tahireh
Appears in a room constructed of
White curtains.)

Scene 1 Tahireh's room

(Tahireh, tall, beautiful, in a light
dress with a white scarf, in her early
twenties, is playing a melody. She
stops, writes some words and reads
them aloud, makes some corrections
then whispers the poem with satisfac-
-tion. She continues to play the harp
and starts to sing in Masnavi style.
She stops, then sings again in
Mahoor style.)

Tahireh

Like the eastern wind
I blow from house to house
Door to door
Wandering from alley to alley
In search of you

To be lost in your eyes

If I see you face to face
I will express my sorrows to you
Softly,
Tenderly.

Burst and broken by our separation
My tears,
An ocean of blood
Flow from my eyes
Streaming to the seas
From the seas to the rivers
From the rivers to the springs
From the springs to the brooks

Kaffieh

Outside the room, something is happening. No silence, no serenity, no tranquility outside the Room.

(Mourning voices are heard from faraway.
Kaffieh hurriedly enters the room.)

My lady...my lady...

Tahireh

Yes, kaffieh.

Kaffieh

Do you hear them?

(Tahireh looks at her questioningly.)

Kaffieh

Listen...

(Kaffieh points toward the window as the
mourning voices get closer.)

Tahireh

Is someone dead?

Kaffieh

No my lady. Something is dead!

(Tahireh walks to the window, tries to see
through the curtain.)

Kaffieh
They are burying an empty coffin...

Tahireh
An empty coffin?

Kaffieh
Yes my lady, empty, but full of winsome melodies.

Tahireh
What does it mean?

Kaffieh
By the order of the new king the music is forbidden.

Tahireh
The music has been forbidden for the centuries. The birds are only allowed to sing in cages.
Give me my veil.

(Kaffieh hands her the veil. They cover their faces.
Tahireh draws the curtain aside. Both are like two
ghosts on the stage.)

Kaffieh
They are the musicians, burying their instruments under the soil...in the cemetery...

(A man with a black flag marches from behind the
audience onto the stage. Four men carrying a
coffin in silence. The musicians, dressed in black
following the coffin, while carrying their
instruments. The man with the black flag recites
mourning prayers. The rest of the group, repeat
the lines in the different tones.)

Kaffieh
There are tears in their eyes!

Tahireh
It's blood Kaffieh...I can see an ocean of blood! They are burying their children.

(The musicians continue the mourning march
as they disappear to the left of the stage.)

Kaffieh
They started marching early this morning, from the outside of the gate of Qazvin into the city...

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Through the streets and the alleys... They have dug a vast, deep grave in the cemetery. I heard that the king has laughed cheerfully and said, "Bury them deep down in the soil."

(Tahireh draws back the curtain. Both take off their veils. Tahireh passionately plays a melody on the harp. Kaffieh tries to stop her and covers the harp.)

Kaffieh

No, my lady... it's dangerous. It's better to hide it!

Tahireh

No, let me play, let it be.

Kaffieh

They will break it into pieces, and burn it.

(Tahireh stops playing,)

Tahireh

I will never let them touch mine.

Kaffieh

I have lived three decades more than you, my daughter. I know the wrath of the kings! And the wrath of the followers. I know that...

Tahireh

The king's palaces are built with the people's bones...

Kaffieh

...they have no mercy on anyone.

Tahireh

I know Kaffieh. How many people in the country are aware of what's going on?

Kaffieh

A few!

Tahireh

If you ask them: "What does our country belong to?" They would reply, "Why the king, of course!"

Kaffieh

My skin has suffered their lashes for years, but I could never raise my voice. We must live in an absolute silence. It's our fate... our destiny... it's the duty of a woman...

Tahireh

Ignorance keeps you silent. Knowledge makes you strong.

Kaffieh

Your blood is so warm, the blood of youth!

Tahireh

It's both, the youth and knowledge.

Kaffieh

Oh, my dear...you were never afraid of anything. Ever since you were a little girl!

Tahireh

I'm filled with lights of belief, filled with the untold words...I need a vast sky to free an ocean of stars, which are hidden inside my heart.

Kaffieh

Be careful, my lady...you are a woman!

Tahireh

That is why I must not be careful. My sisters have been careful for centuries. It's time to free them from their prisons, from behind the walls and curtains.

Kaffieh

You're putting me in the middle of hope and fear.

Tahireh

What is it kaffieh?

Kaffieh

My religion...

(Noises are heard from behind the stage.)

Tahireh

Listen...

Kaffieh

There is a commotion in the street again...my lady, I beg you, let me hide your harp.

Tahireh

No, it's not about the music...

Kaffieh

They are assaulting people in their houses, attacking them...

Tahireh

They are whipping someone...

Kaffieh

A criminal... maybe...

Tahireh

Listen.... someone cries out, "I'm a believer!"

(She covers her face with the veil and rushes to the window.)

Kaffieh

My lady... I believe he is a sinner...

Tahireh

(whispers) A sinner? What's sin Kaffieh? What is it ...really?

(The sound of lashes and screaming are heard.)

Kaffieh

God have mercy on his mother!

Tahireh

They are pulling him on the soil and stone... His face is bloody...

Kaffieh

Has he been injured by a club? I can only see a fuzzy picture, as if God has blinded me for Not seeing this kind of cruelty.

Tahireh

They have chained his feet to a stick and someone is whipping him.

Kaffieh

Maybe he has drunk wine...

Tahireh

Nobody deserves such punishment for drinking wine!

Kaffieh

Perhaps he is a converter.

Tahireh

A converter is not a sinner. What is sin really? Who is a sinner?

Kaffieh

Today I hear strange words from you, which no Muslim would dare say!

Tahireh

At the doorway of the house of God, they are spilling a man's blood on the ground,
Who is skeptical about conventional religious law...who is trying to find the truth. (whispering)
I can see the dawn of a new era, ...ah...look!

Kaffieh

My lady...is it true what I'm seeing?

Tahireh

Definitely! Kaffieh...

Kaffieh

My master!

Tahireh

My uncle!

(A baby cries from behind the stage.)

Tahireh

My daughter is crying kaffieh...my dear daughter!

Kaffieh

I will take care of her, my lady...as my eyes...

(Kaffieh exits.)

Tahireh

Bring my children in...I want to embrace them, my two little sons and my daughter. Hold them
In my arms and show them the real face of my uncle, my father-in-law, their grandfather...on
such a day when they bury love and beauty deep down in the grave, he, Hagi-Mulla-Taqi, in the name
Of God starts to torture the people who search for truth!