

# A Postsecular Look at the Reading Motif in Bahiyyih Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much*

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## *Abstract*

This article is a work of literary analysis. As such, it analyzes the reading motif in Bahiyyih Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much* through a postsecular prism. Nakhjavani's historical novel, as the title suggests, is densely woven with metaphors that underscore a link between the secular and the sacred through the act of reading. Through the metaphors employed in the novel, the act of reading is shown to be both a material and a metaphysical act. This study owes a significant debt to John McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*.

## *Resumé*

Cet article est un travail d'analyse littéraire. Dans une perspective postséculière, l'auteur y analyse le motif de la lecture dans l'ouvrage de Bahiyyih Nakhjavani intitulé *The Woman Who Read Too Much*. Comme le suggère le titre, ce roman historique de M<sup>me</sup> Nakhjavani est imprégné de métaphores qui soulignent un lien entre le séculier et le sacré par l'action de la

lecture. Grâce aux métaphores employées dans le roman, la lecture est vue comme constituant à la fois un geste physique et un geste métaphysique. Cette analyse s'appuie en bonne partie sur la réflexion de John McClure dans son ouvrage intitulé *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*.

## *Resumen*

Este artículo es una obra de análisis literario. Como tal, analiza el motivo de la lectura en la obra de Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, *La Mujer Que Leyó Demasiado*, a través de un prisma postsecular. La novela histórica de Nakhjavani, como sugiere el título, está densamente tejida con metáforas que subrayan una conexión entre lo secular y lo sagrado por medio del acto de la lectura. A través de las metáforas expuestas en la novela, se demuestra el acto de la lectura como un acto tanto material como metafísico. Este estudio le debe una deuda significativa a la obra de John McClure, *Religiones Parciales: Ficción Postsecular en la Edad de Pynchon y Morrison*.

## INTRODUCTION

Postsecular theory is a privileged mode of criticism for works of contemporary, transnational historical fiction whose texts in some way engage with matters of a sacred or a spiritual nature. In this article, we will establish how the spiritual thesis in Nakhjavani's historical novel *The Woman Who Read Too Much* is manifested through the reading motif. As we examine the novel in light of a Bahá'í subtext, moreover, we will also assess how the characteristics of postsecular

fiction that the narrative reveals—specifically, as John McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* contends, an "insistence on the need to articulate the religious with progressive political projects," the "repudiation of fundamentalist prescriptions for social well-being," and the "dramatic disruptions of secular structures of reality" (3)—are manifested through the act of reading. In doing so, we will argue that Nakhjavani's narrative restores the voice of a religious martyr Táhirih Qurratu'l-Ayn, while, at the same time, avoiding the construction of a religious metanarrative in the form of a Bahá'í perspective.

In "The Literary Motif: A Definition and Evaluation," William Freedman argues that "[t]he writer performs a worthwhile function when he attempts no more than to elucidate what he sees in the work, when he seeks to increase the reader's understanding of a work of art" (128). Although this position is never more relevant than when analyzing a work with the density of Nakhjavani's *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, in this article, I expand upon reading as a motif with spiritual implications in order to demonstrate how Nakhjavani's narrative reflects Jürgen Habermas's belief that twenty-first-century society now finds itself in a new postsecular condition.

If we are to examine, as this article intends, Nakhjavani's historical novel through a postsecular lens, the next step is to define what I mean

by the term *postsecularism*. The term postsecular was first coined in 2001 by Habermas in his Peace Prize of German Publishers and Booksellers Association acceptance address titled "Faith and Knowledge." As Michael Reder and Joseph Schmidt summarize in "Habermas and Religion," in "Faith and Knowledge" Habermas develops the idea of postsecularity, calling for a reconsideration of the relationship between the religious and the secular in present-day society. In this speech, Habermas concludes that the secularization narrative has failed (6). The secularization narrative, as defined by postsecular scholar Manav Ratti in *The Postsecular Imagination*, is a theory that posits that "as societies become more modern—from agrarian to industrial to post-industrial—they become more secular, relying less and less on the narratives of religion for a sense of security, increasingly pushing the presence and power of religion into the private sphere" (5). Habermas sees this secularization narrative as proven false, that society is not moving toward the extinction of religion, and that "religion and the secular world always stand in a reciprocal fashion" (Reder and Schmidt 6).

Nakhjavani's novel is set over 150 years ago, yet historical fiction, we recall, is inevitably connected to the present. As Diana Wallace affirms in *The Women's Historical Novel*, "[a]lthough readers are often attracted to historical novels because they believe they will learn about the past time recreated in the novel, any historical

novel always has as much, or perhaps more, to say about the time in which it is written" (4). The time in which Nakhjavani's novel is written sees the burgeoning of postsecular thought in Europe and America, as indicated by the studies that emerge in the first decade of the new millennium in both literary and sociopolitical arenas concerning the postsecular project; to name but a few: Jürgen Habermas's "Faith and Knowledge," Manav Ratti's *The Postsecular Imagination*, and John McClure's *Partial Faiths*. In the present moment, a Google search with the keyword "postsecular" yields over 158,000 results. The digital academic library JSTOR lists 394 entries. This is significant considering that barely thirteen years have passed since the term postsecular was first coined by Habermas.

Nakhjavani's narrative harkens back to McClure's definition of postsecular fiction in *Partial Faiths* as a literary "mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity" (ix). This "mode of being and seeing" is best evinced through the subversive protagonist of Nakhjavani's novel and through its Bahá'í-rooted insistence on universal education that emphasizes the education of women. Unfamiliarity with Bahá'í beliefs, however, may lead critics to suppose that this novel—because of the lack of definition of the protagonist's spiritual creed in anything but the vaguest of terms—is resolutely secular in focus, with its primary concerns social ones: female

literacy and gender equality, for example. Although it is true that the text foregrounds the injustice of women's inequality and illiteracy during nineteenth-century Persia, Nakhjavani's narrative recalls what Manav Ratti affirms in *The Postsecular Imagination*: the postsecular imagination is often conveyed in contemporary literature through representations of "non-religious religion" and "non-secular secularism" (xx).

Nakhjavani's novel polemicizes against the erasure of the voice of a marginalized religious demography. This ability of historical fiction to restore or rescue the voices of those erased by history is not a new function. In *The Historical Novel*, Jerome De Groot identifies this type of fiction specifically as "revisionist" historical fiction. One of the purposes of revisionist fiction writers, he notes, is to rewrite history: they "bring their subjects from darkness to light" (70). Ansgar Nunning's "Crossing Borders and Blurring Genres: Towards a Typology and Poetics of Postmodernist Historical Fiction in England since 1960s" gives a flowchart typology of historical fiction. Although his focus is primarily on postmodernist British historical novels, he makes the point to note that revisionist historical novels "are inspired by the wish to rewrite history, particularly from the point of view of those all too long ignored by traditional historiography" (222). This wish is certainly apparent in Nakhjavani's choice of writing about a protagonist based upon

Táhirih (Qurratu'l-Ayn)<sup>1</sup>, not a well-known figure in the West. Even in Iran, historical sources about Táhirih are silent or skewed. Farzaneh Milani—who dedicates a chapter to Táhirih in her study of women's authorship in *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*—confirms that, generally speaking, Muslim sources either criticize this historical figure or, until quite recently, “relegated her to oblivion” (97).

Just as revisionist historical fiction seeks to rescue voices from oblivion, postsecular fiction is also involved in a type of rescue. In “On the Possibility of Elsewhere: A Postsecular Reading of Lois Lowry's *Giver* Trilogy,” Graeme Wend-Walker argues that, as opposed to traditional religious readings or purely secular ones, postsecular readings avoid critical reductionism. The merits of postsecular fiction (or, I would add, a postsecular analysis of fiction) lie, for Wend-Walker, in its ability to create a “productive critical ambivalence” through which “delegitimized modes of interpretation may be reclaimed as tools for thinking of selfhood and otherness” (139). In Nakhjavani's novel, the narrative seeks to rescue a delegitimized religious history through its treatment of the poetess of Qazvin, and it does so by constructing literacy as the metonymic placeholder of spirituality.

As a novel about a woman and a religion that have been the target of

state-sponsored persecution—written by a female author of the same religious persuasion—*The Woman Who Read Too Much* can certainly be read as emerging from a history of delegitimized voices. In terms of religious persecution, this unfortunate state of affairs has yet to be resolved. At the time when Nakhjavani's *The Woman* is being published, Bahá'ís—Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority—are being persecuted in Iran for their religious beliefs, a violation of human rights that has come to the attention of the international community. According to the 18 March 2013 report, “Persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran Extends Across All Stages of Life,” published by the Bahá'í World News Service, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, declares that “[t]he attacks against Baha'is in Iran represent one of the clearest cases of state-sponsored religious persecution in the world” and that this persecution extends through “all areas of state activity, from family law provisions to schooling, education, and security.” Within the United States, House Resolution 109, introduced in March 2013, condemns Iran for its “intolerable state-sponsored persecution of its Baha'i minority and its continued violation of the International Covenants on Human Rights” (H. Res. 109). Likewise, Senate Resolution 75, also in the 113th Congress of the United States, “condemns the Government of Iran for its state-sponsored persecution of its Baha'i minority” (S. Res. 75). This,

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1 “Solace of the Eyes,” one of Táhirih's several titles.

then, is part of the contemporary setting against which the novel is created and published. As such, the author's re-creation of Táhiri's story can be read as serving a political purpose: to bring to the sympathetic attention of Western audiences an Eastern tale, and by so doing, expose to them the ideologies (religious or secular) within a historical setting that may still exist today.

With this in mind, the wisdom of a narrative perspective that emphasizes points of commonality between the pro-literacy beliefs of the protagonist and those of the modern Western reading audience becomes clear. Through such a point of reference, the narrative downplays the foreignness of the poetess of Qazvin's religious beliefs and avoids possibly alienating descriptions of a foreign-sounding "Eastern" religion. The purpose is clear: if the essence of the story is communicated, what matters the name it is given? This narrative technique is supported by the author's avoidance of proper names in the novel. No one, not even the protagonist, is accorded a name; rather, the characters are designated by their political and social functions or relationships; that is, the Mayor's Wife, the Sister of the Shah, the Corpse Washer, the poetess of Qazvin.

Before continuing, however, I think it useful to provide a brief summary of the novel. *The Woman Who Read Too Much* presents a non-chronological, fictionalized account of the life

of the true-historical figure Táhiri,<sup>2</sup> referred to as the poetess of Qazvin in the novel. Meticulously crafted, the narrative is composed of four "books," each taking its title from one of the four traditional roles of women in Persian society: mother, wife, sister, and daughter. Each book, narrated primarily from the points of view of the novel's female characters, is then divided into nineteen chapters, which alternate in time over a span of approximately fifty years. Each book begins with the murder of a man in power: a monarch, a mayor, a minister, and a mullah. The character of the poetess of Qazvin takes shape primarily through what other characters, such as the Queen Mother, the Corpse Washer, and the Sister of the Shah, reveal about her. The events recounted in the novel consistently tie back to the poetess as the trajectory of her life is revealed through the fragmented chronology: her passion for learning and literacy, her accusations of heresy by the religious hegemony, her imprisonment, and her strangulation. The narrative does not end upon the death of the poetess, however; rather, her words and her legacy remain a warning or a source of inspiration for the other characters of the novel.

The poetess's religion (she is a Bábí) is never stated in the novel, and her

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<sup>2</sup> Táhiri's name has various spellings in the West, including "Tahereh" and "Tahiri." For consistency, this study employs "Táhiri," as this is the form that appears most often in Bahá'í scholarship.

beliefs never explained. While the Islamic society of Persia forms the background for the novel—the Qur'an, for instance, is mentioned and quoted—even broad explanations of the poetess of Qazvin's heresy (the belief that Islam's promised Qa'im<sup>3</sup> has returned in the figure of the Báb), remain absent. The murdered Mullah and his son, representatives of dogmatic religion, are portrayed as vitriolic fundamentalists, but the poetess, who represents the spiritual alternative, is a mystery. Although the text reveals that the poetess commits such provoking acts as teaching women to read and removing her veil, the reader is never apprised of the particulars of the poetess's religious philosophies that lead to these revolutionary acts. In this way, and in true postsecular fashion, the narrative stops shy of, as McClure would characterize it, a triumphal "return" of religion. Instead, Nakhjavani leaves a space open for the reader to investigate the historiography behind the story—for those who, as she notes in her epilogue, wish to distinguish truth from creative writing (511)—a historiographical investigation that Nakhjavani further encourages through the bibliography she provides at the end of the work.

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<sup>3</sup> A reference to the One who shall arise from the family of Muhammad, sometimes alluded to as the Twelfth Imam or the Mihdi, the One who would return to reform the world. Táhirih was a follower of the Báb, Who claimed to be this figure, and His followers thus called themselves "Bábís."

The novel challenges the reader to make sense of the poetess of Qazvin's death and of the repercussions of her life, for there is no "happily ever after" for the poetess. She dies by strangulation at the hands of drunken soldiers after years of house arrest. Although the end of the novel offers us her voice in poetry, coming from the other side of death, it is not a song of joy, a declaration of triumph, a confirmation that something better awaits on the other side. Rather, it is a call to remembrance:

Where is my mother to cradle my  
head, to suckle and hold me close?  
For the man I married was always  
a child and the child I loved is a  
ghost.  
Where is my sister to weep at my  
feet and warn the world why I  
died? (308)

Nakhjavani answers this call, constructing herself as this "sister" who communicates the poetess's voice from a vantage point of 150 years from the time of her passing. The narrative, however, does not present the poetess's death as an easy return to an idyllic existence. Although the narrative offers the reader the voice of the dead poetess through her poetry, there is no joyous afterlife presented, and none of the soul's mysteries are revealed. This is not to say that a blissful afterlife is unequivocally denied, rather that the narrative emphasizes the hardships and uncertainties endured on an earthly plane without giving us a religious

space that is familiar and well defined in which to find solace.

Nakhjavani avoids the totalizing religious narrative, which is anathema to postsecular thought, through the text's overt silence concerning details about the Bahá'í Faith—particularly striking in a novel based on a woman universally regarded by Bahá'ís as a heroine. In fact, the picture of spirituality that the narrative offers the reader takes shape by the holes its absence causes, rather like a shadow cutout or a stenciled portrait. In this way, the narrative purposefully presents an indeterminate spirituality and avoids the appearance of, to use McClure's words, "the triumphant reappearance of a well-mapped, familiar, religious cosmos" (4).

Viewed through the lens of a postsecular analysis, *The Woman Who Read Too Much* enjoins the reader to acknowledge the preeminence of the faith-based and mystical as inherent to earthly existence and intimately related to the sociopolitical, progressive act of reading. In other words, the reading motif in Nakhjavani's novel functions to narrow that distance between the secular and profane, a reframing of the secular/sacred binary that is one of the significant contributions of postsecular thought to literary and sociopolitical studies (Habermas, Ratti, Kaufmann, Neuman, Maczynska). At the same time, in keeping with postsecular distrust of dogmatic rigidities, Nakhjavani's narrative employs the reading motif to underscore the rejection of fundamentalist prescriptions

for social well-being, specifically in the case of Nakhjavani's novel, hegemonic powers' relegation of women to illiteracy and silence.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND BAHÁ'Í SUBTEXT

As Hayden White succinctly observes in "Historical Text as Literary Artifact," "every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications" (69). Thus, an understanding of the religious ideological basis of the novel is important in a postsecular analysis of the reading motif that pervades the narrative. A familiarity with the history and some key elements of Bahá'í beliefs serves to deepen insight into, and enjoyment of, Nakhjavani's historical novel, as well as to make clear how Nakhjavani's historical fiction effectively presents a spiritual thesis while avoiding a narrative of triumphalism. An understanding of the author's religious background clarifies how Nakhjavani's novel points to the spiritual responsibilities enmeshed in goals and values, such as gender equality and women's education, that have modern secular connotations.

We turn first to the historical context of the novel. The action takes place in Iran from 1847 to 1896 C.E., during the Qajar dynasty focusing specifically on the time period centered on the reign of Nasiru'd-Din Shah, the Qajar ruler who succeeds Muhammad Shah and who rules Iran for nearly fifty years, from 1848 to 1896 C.E. (Avery 174–98). Four years

previous to Nasiru'd-Din Shah's reign, in 1844, a new religion is founded in Persia by a young man from Shiraz, born Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad but called the Báb, a title meaning "the Gate" (Smith 206). This new religion grows by the thousands during Nasiru'd-Din Shah's time and thus comes to the attention of the hegemonic powers of Persia (Smith 206).

Although in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Avery calls the story of Bábís "incidental to the main themes in the religious history of the period" (729), in *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahá'í Faith*, Peter Smith notes that the growth of the Bábí religion in Iran in the nineteenth century was in fact substantial: "the Bábí missionary endeavor gain[ed] converts widely amongst the settled population," and soon after 1844, had "some 100,000 adherents" (206). Although Avery dismissively describes the challenge presented by the Bábís to the hegemony of Iran in the nineteenth century as "never profound" (729), the mass killings and state-sponsored persecutions of the Bábís that began in the nineteenth century, and continue today, indicate they were (and are) regarded as a threat by the ruling order. Historically, these persecutions suggest that the Bábís were considered a destabilizing force, for even after Nasiru'd-Din Shah's government ordered the Báb's death in 1850, the killings of Bábís continued. This historical context is significant because Táhirih—upon whose story the novel is built—is one of the first eighteen disciples of the

Báb, one of the young religion's most vocal leaders, and one of the victims of the mass killings of 1852.

Moojan Momen's *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* provides an interesting if harrowing collection of first-hand accounts of these persecutions. Independent observers document, in the form of Western newspaper articles as well as state and civil correspondence, eyewitness accounts of the persecutions of the Bábís. The following excerpt is from Momen's compilation and helps clarify the historical setting in which Nakhjavani's novel occurs. In a letter written by Captain Alfred von Gumoens, witness to the persecution of the Bábís, and published in *Oesterreichischer Soldatenfreund* on 12 October 1852, we read,

They will skin the soles of the Bábís' feet, soak the wounds in boiling oil, shoe the foot like a hoof of a horse, and compel the victim to run . . . the body cannot endure what the soul has endured; he falls. Give him the *coup de grâce*! Put him out of his pain! No! The executioner swings the whip, and—I myself have had to witness it—the unhappy victim of hundred-fold tortures runs! (133)

Captain von Gumoens ends his letter with the affirmation that he never leaves his house, in order to not "meet with fresh scenes of horror," for after being killed the Bábís are "hacked in two and either nailed to the city gate,

or cast out into the plain as food for the dogs and jackals" (134). Thus begins the state-sponsored directive to eradicate the Bábí religion in Persia, a state of affairs that forms the background of Nakhjavani's novel.

It is important at this point to clarify the connection between the Báb and the Bahá'í Faith, not an inconsequential clarification, as Nakhjavani is a Bahá'í author writing about a Bábí woman who is regarded as a heroine by Bahá'ís throughout the world. As Smith explains, Bahá'ís recognize a two-fold nature of the station of the Báb: first, He is considered as possessing the same authoritative station as other founders of world religions, such as Jesus, Moses, or Muhammad; He is also recognized as the forerunner and herald of Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, much in the same way that John the Baptist heralds the coming of Jesus (58–59). As Bahá'í sociologist Nader Saiedi explains in his introduction to *Logos and Civilization*, his study of Bahá'í cosmology as revealed through Bahá'í canon, "The Báb spoke of the appearance of the Promised One, 'Him Whom God shall make manifest' (*Man Yuzhiruhu'lláh*) as the supreme focus, meaning, and intention of all His writings. He defined Himself as the herald of the Promised One" (3). Thus, Bahá'ís recognize the Báb's writings not only as sacred but also as central to Bahá'í belief.<sup>4</sup>

4 For a thorough and detailed account of Bábí and Bahá'í religious history, see

Milani, approaching the story of Táhírih through a slightly different perspective, discusses her significance in the context of women's authorship in Iran. Despite the overall lack of historiographical documentation of Persian women, Milani writes that "[h]er life is probably the best documented of nineteenth-century Iranian women, although it is fact and fiction compressed into one" (80). Táhírih, Milani continues, is still a controversial figure in Iranian history: "She is saint, whore, sorceress, martyr, and murderer. Invented and reinvented, she is honored and dishonored" (80). Milani ascribes the controversy surrounding Táhírih to a number of interrelated points, not least of which was her education: "First taught by her father [an influential Islamic high priest of his province], and later by a tutor, [Táhírih] continued her studies in theology, Qor'anic exegesis, jurisprudence, and Persian and Arabic literature, an education quite unusual for a women in those days" (83). Perhaps even more significant than this extraordinary education, Milani continues, is the fact that her father often allowed her to participate in his classes and debating sessions, always, of course, behind a modesty curtain to separate her from the men (83). This is significant because, although women might

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also Shoghi Effendi's *God Passes By* and Adib Taherzadeh's *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, as well as Nábíl Zarandí's *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabíl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*.

be allowed opinions within the home, in the public sphere, to quote Milani, “interpretive power was strictly a male prerogative” (79). Prayer books and book of religious instruction were allowed to women, but women were not permitted “sermons” or “doctrinal statements” (Milani 79). As Milani further describes, women’s public discourses on religious issues were taboo: “In the society of mid-nineteenth-century Iran, knowledge, like a child, was only legitimized if properly fathered by a man. In the hands of a woman, it became an unnecessary tool, a dangerous tool, even a sign of the end of time, of apocalypse” (77–78). Thus, Táhirih’s reputation as “a thinker in her own right” (Milani 83–84) was a dangerous reputation to have.

To complicate matters, and as Milani affirms, Táhirih is the first woman in Iranian history known to have publicly unveiled (27). The import of this crystallizes when one considers that veiling is much more than a religious ordinance in Islamic countries. Even today in Iran, veiling is a “cultural trait” that makes clear the “disjunction between the private and the public” (Milani 23). The virtuous woman is one who maintains “Sharm,” or traditional propriety, by remaining hidden from the outside world; Milani explains: “Traditional propriety, *Hojb-o-Haya*, or *Sharm*, demanded that a woman’s body be covered, her voice go unheard, her portrait never be painted, and her life story remain untold. Public disclosure of any of these aspects of a woman’s life was considered an

abuse of privacy and a violation of societal taboos” (46). In other words, a woman’s place, as symbolized by the veil, is in the private sphere, and a woman’s silence in public necessary for keeping her good name.

Táhirih, however, not only spoke publicly, argued with male classmates and mullahs, advocated literacy, and spread the teachings of the Báb, but she also unveiled herself at the Bábís’ Conference of Badasht in 1848. As Janet Ruhe-Schoen recounts in her biography *Rejoice in My Gladness: The Life of Táhirih*, Badasht was a small town in Persia where Táhirih and Bahá’u’lláh met with approximately eighty other Bábís, all guests of Bahá’u’lláh, and all men except for Táhirih and her maid (231–32). In *God Passes By*, a history of the Bábí religion, Shoghi Effendi discusses the purpose of the meeting, planned in collaboration with the Báb: it was to implement the new dispensation of the Báb through a “dramatic break with the past—with its order, its ecclesiasticism, its traditions, and ceremonials” (31). In effect, Táhirih’s unveiling has a religious pulsion, something that Milani’s chapter understates. In unveiling, Táhirih shocks not just those present but scandalizes the nation and draws further attention to a new spiritual dispensation.

Milani draws a connection between women’s literacy and unveiling in her study of Iranian women’s authorship. She writes that traditional Persian culture maintained an interdiction to any form of female public self-exposure, be it physical, written or spoken: “Just

as a wall of fabric surrounds [a woman's] body, so a wall of silence encloses the details of her life. She is the personal, the private. She is the secret" (23). The traditional Persian ideal woman of the nineteenth century, Milani continues, is "solemn and silent" with the "body" of her writing, just like her physical body, hidden from the outside world (50–51). This culturally rooted confinement of women's bodies and voices has a long history. The male thirteenth-century Persian poet Owahad ed-Din Owahadi, for instance, prefers a woman's death over her literacy: "The shroud her paper, the grave her inkpot/ They should suffice if she insists on knowledge./ Keep away from the pen woman's obstinacy/ You write, why should she?" (qtd. in Milani, 54). What can be more disturbing to secular or religious nineteenth-century society, then, than a woman who unveils her face even as she refuses to stay silent?

Considering the taboo of unveiling in public that existed in nineteenth-century Persia, coupled with Táhirih's extraordinary education and her public reputation as a thinker and orator, it is perhaps not such a surprise, then, that many conservative Persian historians characterize Táhirih as a "symbol of spiritual and moral wickedness" (Milani 81). As a woman who desired to speak publicly, to voice her opinions, to transgress into the traditionally male realm of religious interpretation, Táhirih was labeled promiscuous; after all, she refused to be confined by Persian gendered conventions of what

a virtuous woman should be and the silence in which she was expected to live. In point of fact, Milani cites her as the precursor of Iranian women's literary tradition:

By her conduct, she subverted not only the established religion but the whole fabric of androcentric society. . . . She eschewed the feminine virtues of submissiveness, 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 values of the established order. (94)

As Milani points out, Táhirih disrupted the established religious and secular order of Persian society, offering new interpretations of past traditions (94). She enjoined others by her words and actions toward the Báb's innovative teachings.

In historical and biographical documents, Táhirih's subversion of societal norms is underscored by both her advocates and her critics. Ruhe-Schoen's biography recounts Táhirih's public unveiling at the Conference of Badasht as the embodiment of the "liberating reality of her religion" (233). Conversely, according to the introduction to *Baha'ism, Its Origins and Its Role*, Táhirih's actions necessarily prove her a "prostitute" of whom "history is ashamed to relate" (qtd. in Milani 81). Milani notes that Táhirih's leadership position among men would

be revolutionary “even today” when “no woman in Iran occupies her position—that of a teacher and a leader in centers of higher religious learning for men” (84). It is understandable, then, that Táhirih is a problematic figure in Islamic-Iranian historiography. She is, however, acclaimed by Bahá'ís as a “great heroine,” admired for her courage and certitude, and equated in Bahá'í scholarship with such honored women of previous religious dispensations as Sarah, the Virgin Mary, and Fátimih (Shoghi Effendi 75).

This being the case, one might assume that in *The Woman Who Read Too Much*, Nakhjavani—herself a Bahá'í—would present a strongly religious image of her protagonist. This, however, is not the case. Rather than a focus on the details of the protagonist's religious beliefs—details one might expect from a Bahá'í author writing about a character based on Táhirih—Nakhjavani focuses on literacy as the metonymic vehicle for the poetess of Qazvin's spiritual subversiveness. As such, the reading motif becomes central to the novel, both in terms of the literal act of reading as well as in reading's metaphorical meaning as an act of spiritual discernment.

The incorporation of such a metonymic relationship between reading and religion is more than a deft narrative manipulation, however. Research into Bahá'í beliefs reveals that universal education, and the gender equality it underscores, are key concepts in Bahá'í belief. In *Promulgation of Universal Peace*—a collection of the

discourses that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Son of Bahá'u'lláh, gave during His travels in the United States and Canada at the turn of the last century—universal education is consistently presented as a spiritual principle. In the 15 November 1912 talk in New York City, recorded in this collection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that “[Bahá'u'lláh] has . . . proclaimed the principle that all mankind shall be educated and that no illiteracy be allowed to remain” (435). In His 6 May 1912 speech in Cleveland, He affirms that “[n]o individual should be denied or deprived of intellectual training . . . none must be left in the grades of ignorance, for ignorance is a defect in the human world” (108). On 1 September 1912, in Montreal, He makes clear that “[u]niversal education is a universal law” (300). To be sure, in the Bahá'í sacred text, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, Bahá'u'lláh writes that every “son and daughter” must be taught “the art of reading and writing” (par. 48). Beyond this, however, there is the special emphasis on women's education in the Bahá'í Faith. Still in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, for example, “Note 76” clarifies that the education of girls must take precedence: “If it is not possible . . . for a family to educate all the children, preference is to be accorded to daughters since, through educated mothers, the benefits of knowledge can be most effectively and rapidly diffused throughout society” (199–200). In reference to Nakhjavani's narrative, then, understanding the Bahá'í subtext is revelatory of the metonymic role of literacy as a sacred and spiritual endeavor.

The author plays with two meanings of the act of reading throughout the text: on the one hand, it is the literal decoding of symbols on a page; in light of the cultural taboo against women's education, this is in itself a potentially revolutionary act. At the same time, reading is the interpretation of extratextual signs, the spiritual ability to "read" the truth of the world, to read the past, present, and future and understand their spiritual implications. Literacy thus incorporates both a material and a mystical meaning, and in this way serves to blur the secular/sacred binary.

The mystical notion of reading signs is not a new concept for Western readers. Appearing in the Gospel of Mark (16:3) as well as, more recently, in the writings of the Second Vatican Council—"the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing *the signs of the times* and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (emphasis added)—it also resonates with Islamic beliefs, a relevant observation considering the background against which the novel unfolds. According to Mohja Kahf's lecture "The Qur'an," in Arabic, the word "sign," or "aya," specifies a sign that reveals God in His creation. As Kahf affirms, in the Islamic paradigm, an *aya* is a self-revelation of God, regarded as ontological proof of His Own existence, found both in the Qur'an and in nature. Likewise, Bahá'í Writings contain many references to reading spiritual signs in the material world. For example, Bahá'u'lláh writes, "He hath endowed every soul

with the capacity to recognize the signs of God" (*Gleanings* 252). In short, Nakhjavani's reading motif points to the sublime—the poetess, after all, teaches that "[t]o read is to pray" (309)—revealing the reality of the text to be, to use McClure's words, "shot through with mysterious agents and energies" (2).

With the above examples in mind, some might assess the reading motif to be a religiously multivalent symbol in Nakhjavani's narrative, particularly since the poetess's religion is never identified by name. Care must be taken, however, not to base this assessment on the assumption that all religions are fundamentally distinct, a notion contrary to Bahá'í beliefs. In his exploration of the Bahá'í social and spiritual paradigm, *Revelation and Social Reality*, Paul Lample discusses how Bahá'ís regard all world religions as facets of one ever-evolving religion; as a consequence, Baha'is wholeheartedly acknowledge the "divine origin and truths" of other religious communities (223). As Lample further notes, the Bahá'í teachings do not advocate that the followers should "assume a position of superiority to judge, criticize, or define the beliefs of others," even as it is "incompatible with a form of religious relativism," because Bahá'ís "do not believe that the diverse religious perspectives are incommensurable" or that "all contemporary teachings of all religious communities can be accepted at the same time" (223). Thus, the religious language with which the reading motif is treated in *The Woman*

may indeed resonate with various religious traditions, yet as the author is a Bahá'í, these resonances are symptomatic of the inclusive Bahá'í religious paradigm, which emphasizes the unity underlying the teachings of all world religions. In *Islam and the Bahá'í Faith*, Moojan Momen clarifies this relationship among religions as per Bahá'í belief. He notes that religious founders—called “Manifestations of God” in the Bahá'í Writings—such as Jesus, Moses, Mohammad, the Buddha, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh are understood as “confirming and expanding upon the teachings” of those Who came before Them, a concept Bahá'ís call “progressive revelation” (18–19). Thus, although the act of reading in *The Woman* is religiously inflected and evokes the language of the Qur'an, the Bible, and the Torah, it can be regarded as an inflection specifically evocative of a Bahá'í perspective.

This is further evidenced in the language with which the author describes literacy in the novel. Paraphrasing the lessons she was taught by the poetess, the Corpse Washer says, “Illiteracy is fear. She wanted us to be fearless, to see with our own eyes, hear with our own ears and read the books of creation and revelation for ourselves. She taught us to take risks” (309). Although no specific religion is mentioned, we see an obvious allusion to religious scripture in the reference to “books of creation and revelation.” The passage resonates even further with scriptural phraseology as it continues: to “see with one's own eyes” and “hear with one's

own ears” is imagery present in the sacred texts of the Bahá'í Faith, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>5</sup> Thus, as this passage illustrates, reading in the narrative is not meant to be seen as a purely material or secular act; it is couched in language that evokes the sacred and alludes to more than one religion's scripture. In the novel, literacy, therefore, is both understanding words on a page *and* reading the world and one's place in it, and doing so with an eye to the ineffable, to the spiritual.

Reading imagery is ubiquitous and powerful. For instance, it is central to the description of the poetess when she first appears in the narrative: “una mujer velada como un libro cerrado [a woman in a veil was like a book with covers closed]” (139); she looked like “una mancha de tinta en la nieve

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5 Just a few examples: in the Torah, see Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 32:3; in the Bible, see the Gospel of Matthew 13:14–17; in the Qur'an, see Sura 7:179. I include full citations from Bahá'í texts due to the more limited accessibility: in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, Bahá'u'lláh writes, “Notwithstanding the divinely-inspired admonitions of all the Prophets, the Saints, and Chosen ones of God, enjoining the people to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears, they have disdainfully rejected their counsels . . .” (164). In the “Tablet of Ahmad,” Bahá'u'lláh likewise writes that “the people are wandering in the paths of delusion, bereft of discernment to see God with their own eyes, or hear His Melody with their own ears” (210).

[a stroke of ink against the snow]"<sup>6</sup> (140). The reading motif, as this description illustrates, infiltrates the author's narrative vocabulary as well as her own commentary on the novel. In her interview with *Pars Times*, for example, Nakhjavani explains that her novel is about "the crisis and challenge posed by one woman [the poetess of Qazvin] who decided to *read* life, to *read* history, to *read* herself and others around her" (emphasis added). As the above suggests, and as we shall see below, in *The Woman*, the author estranges<sup>7</sup> the act of reading and emphasizes that reading is pervasive, infiltrating all aspects of life, infusing mundane activities with metaphorical and metaphysical meaning, for it is not purely secular act; rather, it is resonant with mystical implications.

THE READING MOTIF:  
CLOAKED SPIRITUALITY

In keeping with the ambivalence common in postsecular fiction, the exact

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<sup>6</sup> Both of these English citations are from Nakhjavani's podcast, from her UCLA lecture "Novels and Iranian History: Beyond Diaspora." See bibliography for full citation.

<sup>7</sup> Here I use the definition of estrangement as per Carl Freedman's usage in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*: to estrange means to take something ordinary or mundane (and therefore often invisible), and present it in such a way that it is visible or no longer taken for granted (16–17).

nature of the protagonist's religion in *The Woman* is never revealed beyond a very clear advocacy of women's education. This study does not assume that Nakhjavani set out to write a work of postsecular fiction; however, a postsecular analysis of her novel yields insights into how a novel about a heroine of a marginalized religion in Persia can maintain the richness of a spiritual message without pushing a religion onto the reader. Nakhjavani accomplishes this feat by making the act of reading a fluid metaphor, symbolizing spiritual acuity at the same time it is invested with secular transgressive power.

In this section, then, we turn first to John McClure's *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* in order to illustrate precisely how the act of reading functions in a postsecular capacity throughout Nakhjavani's novel. Published in December of 2007, *Partial Faiths* is the first book-length study dedicated to contemporary postsecular fiction. In his overall positive review of McClure's *Partial Faiths*, Timothy Aubry begins by voicing the most common objections to postsecular thought, namely its apparent "explicit return to religiosity," which can appear as a "dangerously anti-intellectual development." For this reason, he asserts, "of all the cultural trends announced by neologisms containing the prefix 'post,' postsecularity may well be the most unpalatable to twenty-first century scholars." In "History, Community, Spirituality: Keywords for

Rethinking Postmodernism,” Daniel Grausam presents the counter-position, justifying the usefulness of postsecular theory. Grausam affirms that one of the merits of postsecular analysis lies in its ability to “[recover] the textual content that has largely been obscured by canonical theories of the postmodern” (401). Postmodern theories, Grausam clarifies, although useful in the questioning of grand narratives, have left us with “an impoverished sense” of the work of authors whose novels are animated by profound spiritual questions (399). This echoes McClure’s position that postsecularism is an alternate framework to an unnecessarily limiting secularized postmodernism, as described by scholars such as Frederic Jameson. For example, in his analysis of Thomas Pynchon’s *Vineland*, McClure writes that unlike Jameson, Pynchon maintains “the postsecular sense that spiritual resources, as well as rational ones, will be needed to check the onslaught of capitalist institutions, technologies, and ideas” (49).

Wend-Walker articulates this tension between religion and critical discourse as the “genesis” for many of the postsecular readings that are recently emerging in critical theory:

Criticism bound to the Western philosophical tradition . . . tends not merely to the secular but to the *ideologically secularist*. Necessarily operating, as George Steiner puts it, by virtue of ‘secular presuppositions,’ such criticism is liable to

‘usurp’ religious metaphor even where attempting to engage it, displacing it with language that better approximates ‘the order of remove most appropriate to clarity’ (445, 437, 423). (138)

Thus, Wend-Walker argues the merits of postsecular analysis, particularly when one analyzes novels whose textual realities are rife with issues of a spiritual nature, where God is more than an exclamatory phrase, and where ordinary life is shot through with the mystical and miraculous, sometimes with great fanfare, other times through magnificent understatement. Nakhjavani’s *The Woman* is an example of the latter, where the narrative’s spiritual themes are both consistently extant and magnificently understated—one could almost say “cloaked” in reading imagery.

The narrative’s descriptions of the poetess’s beliefs purposefully avoid details of Bahá’í theology, and this is germane to a postsecular reading of *The Woman*, for as McClure’s survey of contemporary novels point out, postsecularism is set apart from fundamentalist fiction and from fiction of triumphant religious return by an “insistence on stubborn spiritual obscurity” (6). Magdalena Maczynska would agree. In “Toward a Postsecular Literary Criticism: Examining Ritual Gestures in Zadie Smith’s *Autograph Man*,” Maczynska notes that there exists the tendency in postsecular fiction to value “ambiguity over certainty” (81). This element is evident in the

novel when the poetess teaches the women of the court to read; the narrator describes this as instruction in how to “discern the future and interpret the past” (189). There is no direct mention of progressive revelation—to which, arguably, this could be a reference—and no negation of specific religious traditions beyond the encouragement to read. Indeed, even though the narrative informs us that the poetess “was advocating justice; she was challenging the old ways” (108), the exact traditions this rejection encompasses are left unsaid. This purposeful vagueness harkens back to the predilection of the postsecular movement in fiction for privileging opaqueness, even as it points to spiritual realities.

De Groot writes that the subgenre of historical fiction, from its beginnings, “has queried, interrogated and complicated fixed ideas of selfhood, historical progression, and objectivity” (137). He goes on to specify that historical fiction contains within it the potential of a “disruptive genre,” which “destabilizes cultural hegemonies and challenges normalities” (137). This potential feature of historical novels functions in tandem with postsecular fiction, which, as McClure affirms, is specifically characterized by its twin rejection of the “stifling routinization of the sacred” and of the “fiercer enclosures of fundamentalism” (6). Further, the sense of removal inherent in historical novels serves to enable not a frontal-attack on hegemonic structures but a stealthier one; De Groot’s potential for disruption enters cloaked

in the passage of time, in the garb of other lands, a fertile matrix for the estrangement of such an ordinary act as that of reading.

The poetess of Qazvin, arrested as a heretic and forced to travel to the capital, teaches her captors to read:

They [the soldiers] reddened, at first, when she showed them how to pull the syllables apart with their tongues; they did not immediately believe her when she assured them that the letters would come together again, in a blink of an eye. They scratched their heads in wonder at the thought of holding words in their minds even as they let them go]. (35-36)

With this passage, Nakhjavani effectively estranges the act of reading, even as she constructs it as worthy of amazement, an expedient that, as we will see below, will play into the mystical quality that the act of reading possesses in this novel.

Indeed, in *The Woman*, reading is understood as possessing a profound transformational potential with which it challenges cultural hegemonies—both of the state and of the clergy—even as it blurs the lines between the spiritual and the secular. For instance, when the poetess teaches the soldiers who hold her captive how to read, the narrative stresses the materiality of the act by describing reading as “pull[ing] syllables apart with their tongues” (35); yet immediately thereafter, the author renders the act of reading as imbued with nearly magical

powers, for reading effects a transformation on the brutish soldiers: they go from calling the Poetess a “bitch” and a “witch” (34) to lauding her as “an excellent teacher” (36). To be sure, the narrative underscores the soldiers’ transformation in language that hints at the mystical: “the escort had fallen under their captive’s spell” (36). The author, in this way, connects the ability to read with powers that goes beyond deciphering words on a page.

Recalling the characteristics that McClure identifies as central to post-secular fiction, Nakhjavani’s narrative upholds a spirituality that is progressive and that results in the disruption of secular states of reality. Reading is the placeholder for this spirituality and is, therefore, fraught with the danger inherent in the anti-hegemonic status it possesses in the novel. Because of her passion for literacy, the narrative reveals, the poetess is not safe, and neither are those whom she teaches how to read. She is cognizant, for example, of the peril in which her reading lessons have placed the soldiers; upon reaching the capital, she refuses the soldiers’ request to be her honor guard while she is under house arrest: “She had jeopardized their future by teaching them how to read the past so let them protect themselves, for the present” (36). This suggestion that reading encompasses more than deciphering words on a page but is a reading of “the past” is a veiled allusion to the Bahá’í concept of progressive revelation. Thus, the narrative creates an alignment between spiritual

discernment and reading and links progressive politics to it by portraying literacy as such a progressive act that it can elicit drastic reprisals from hegemonic powers.

Reading as a placeholder for a progressive and subversive spirituality in the text is further evidenced in the antagonism of the state government and the *úlama* toward the Poetess. When the narrative tells of the rumors circulating about the poetess’s arrest, no mention is made of the religious beliefs that occasion—as documented by such scholars and historians as Milani, Smith, and Shoghi Effendi—the true-historical arrest. Instead, the narrator tells us that “[w]hen the poetess of Qazvin was taken captive, it was evident that literacy itself, especially among women, was a crime” (158). In other words, although the historical figure is taken captive for her role as a Bábí in Persian society, in the novel, it is her literacy that is criminalized.

The narrative, however, in its representation of state powers, avoids oversimplification and sexual binarism by presenting a powerful female, rather than one of the men of the novel, as the first and most vehement of the poetess’s critics. The Mother of the Shah, serving as queen regent and pondering the state of civil affairs, is disturbed by rumors of the Poetess, whom she calls “a serious threat” and a “rebel” (8). The queen sees in the poetess a threat to her own regency and to her son’s reign, but what the narrative demonstrates is that this judgment is a projection of the queen’s

own ambition. Perhaps most significant to this study, however, is the way religious vocabulary and the reading metaphor intertwine in the queen's criticism of the poetess: "She had been preaching dangerous reversals; she had been teaching new ways to read the rules. The name and fame of her gospel was spreading rapidly" (8). Even as the Mother of the Shah worries about the spread of the poetess's "gospel," no mention of any religious points of contention is made.

McClure emphasizes postsecular fiction's resistance toward serving as an "agent of closure," referencing Edward Said's criticism that religious discourse functions to shut off human investigation and critical thought in deference to an other-worldly authority (101). Nakhjavani's narrative, as the above passage exemplifies, consistently resists any formulation as an agent of closure by making no explicit religious claims on the nature of spiritual truth. A further example: the Mother of the Shah later states that the poetess is "dangerous" and "[h]er heresy was insidious" for "the influence of reading was subtle and spread imperceptibly" (205). Once again, heresy and literacy go hand in hand, but the specifics of the poetess's heretical ideas remain cloaked in obscurity.

Ratti describes the postsecular imagination as engaging in a "negotiation with the secular" (21). Nakhjavani's narrative contains a harsh criticism of those unable to negotiate the secular and religious without resorting to violence in the name of one or

the other. The Queen is a perfect example: her greatest joy and exultation comes from ordering the death of the poetess (235). The novel makes it clear that the queen regent can read and write and yet alludes to her illiteracy. If the Mother of the Shah, ambitious and power-hungry, is a foil to the poetess, then the queen's illiteracy is more properly identified as an illiteracy of a spiritual nature. Upon the death of the Mother of the Shah, her daughter washes the royal corpse for burial and witnesses that

the queen was opaque with neglect; her transgressions were ingrained. Her daughter had to instruct the corpse washers to scrub her with horsehair and use pumice stones to dislodge the dirt . . . But it was evident from her mottled skin that though she was long-versed in dying, she had never learned to read her wrongs. (234)

The filth encrusted in the queen's skin can be read as symbolic of the effects of her spiritual illiteracy, the deprivations of her soul. The body of the Mother of the Shah is noxious and soiled, but the narrative meaning is crystal clear in its critique of the systems of belief that resort to violence in the name of ideologies. This line of criticism continues in the narrative's depiction of all institutionalized authority, whose secular and religious representatives are, significantly, consistently portrayed as spiritually illiterate.

For example, the Grand Vazir—who initially orders the poetess's arrest and spearheads "reforms" in the capital, which fill the city's prisons with "visionaries, scholars and poets" (157)—is another wielder of secular power. Until the moment of his death, he is blinded by his desire for power, prestige, and position, a blindness that his wife characterizes as follows: "Despite his intelligence, she [the wife] realized he [the Grand Vazir] was illiterate when it came to intuitive matters. . . . He had been unable to read the signs of danger lying ahead" (189). The wife of the Grand Vizier realizes that her husband's death is the direct result of his illiteracy, his inability to "read the signs" around him, for the Grand Vizier takes a royal pardon at face value and is unable to discern the death warrant behind it. As this passage reveals, the narrative utilizes religiously inflected language to denote this lack of discernment. Likewise, the Mayor, in whose house the poetess is imprisoned and in whose basement many have been tortured, is portrayed as unable to read the signs of his demise. Despite the poetess's prophesy that the Shah will betray him, the Mayor is not only blind, he is deaf to his wife's reminders of the poetess's warnings, or as he carelessly admits, he "found it hard to distinguish prophecies from recipes when his Wife was talking" (143). Indeed, his inability to heed the warnings result in death; the Shah has him strangled to death, the scapegoat for the Tehran bread riots.

In *The Woman*, literacy is a progressive act and a destabilizing force in terms of the secular status quo, yet it also serves as a tool to critique narrow religiosity. This idea crystallizes in the analysis of the narrative's treatment of the Mullah. It is significant, for instance, that the Mullah criticizes his brother—the poetess of Qazvin's father—for allowing the poetess to learn how to read and for giving her leave to study with her brothers and male cousins:

It was bad enough that he had allowed her to be literate from a tender age but to let her sit among her brothers and her cousins, to allow her to study philosophy and jurisprudence with them, was the worst. . . . He should never have encouraged her to debate the nature of the soul or measure the temporal limits of justice in sentences and phrases. It was beyond all decency, all reason. What did a woman have to do with resurrection? (242)

Besides encapsulating the general attitude held in nineteenth-century Persia regarding the education of women—"it was believed that education was useless for women as well as an agent of corruption" (Milani 55)—the passage is illustrative of the narrative's criticism of the dogmatic religiosity that postsecularism stands against. After all, to quote McClure, postsecularism warns against "turning [the] cosmic house of the spirits

into a prison house of religious dogma" (100). Indeed, the author is quite scathing in its presentation of the vitriolic cleric. When the Mullah denounces the poetess from the pulpit, the narrative presents the Mullah's words as noxious and corrupt—his sermon making of "an art of execration" (242). There is no move to create sympathy toward this character, for the Mullah is the embodiment of fundamentalist forces too blinded by hatred, greed, and envy to discern any merit in the words of the poetess. It is important to note, however, that Nakhjavani's criticism of the Mullah has everything to do with his narrow religiosity and his disdain for the poetess, not his adherence to Islam, per se. To be sure, the text does not uniformly vilify Islam; on the contrary, the narrator presents the poetess's own father, an Islamic religious scholar himself, as kind and honorable, known for his sincere religious piety (274). The religious villains in the text are, like the Mullah and his son, those who harbor beliefs of a fanatical or fundamentalist nature.

McClure discusses the "repudiation of fundamentalist religious prescriptions of social well-being" as a key feature of postsecular fiction (3). He further defines religious fundamentalism as a form of religious resurgence interested in protecting the "purity" of its community through exclusivist doctrines and practices, intolerant of other world views (8). In *The Woman*, the Mullah and his son are the characters that most strongly express an

exclusivist directive against the poetess. Once again, it is not religion but literacy that receives the brunt of these characters' criticism. The Mullah, for example, rants regarding the poetess's education and insists that "a woman should know her place" (242). This phrasing is not arbitrary. Through the Mullah's clichéd objection to gender equality, Nakhjavani emphasizes the positive value of literacy, a secular point of commonality between the beliefs of the protagonist and of the majority of the contemporary Western reading audience. In so doing, the author builds upon the sympathies of a Western audience in the telling of this Eastern tale and, by aligning the reader with the poetess, legitimates the voice of this religious historical figure.

To be sure, the author never condones a fundamentalist stance. Just as the Mullah is vociferous in his condemnation of women's education, the narrative consistently portrays the Mullah as deficient in noble qualities—"quick to offend and slow to forgive his enemies" (242). In this way, the narrative can be seen to follow the postsecular thematic as discussed by Jonathan Bowman. In his article "Extending Habermas and Ratzinger's *Dialectics of Secularization*: Eastern Discursive Influence on Faith and Reason in a Postsecular Age," Bowman reviews Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger's<sup>8</sup> call for the recognition of the contribution of spiritual

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8 Pope Benedict XVI.

world views to social solidarity, and explores the repercussion of post-secular thought through the Eastern spiritual traditions of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Although not based in literary analysis, Bowman's study is useful for clarifying the post-secular position in regard to dogmatic religiosity. In his study, Bowman reiterates Ratzinger's stance that "religion unchecked by sustained rational critique can become ideological to the point of inducing wide-scale social pathology" (40). This idea is significant for the analysis of Nakhjavani's novel, for the author constructs the poetess of Qazvin and her passion for literacy as precisely this "rational critique," this "check," to the Mullah's pathological religious ideology.

By juxtaposing the Mullah's fanatical thinking to the poetess's spiritual discernment/literacy, the narrative rejects spirituality's function in service of fundamentalist religiosity. Indeed, through the Mullah, Nakhjavani's text implies that fundamentalism itself is a betrayal of religious ideals, once again suggestive of her Bahá'í world view, which defines the purpose of religion "to promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 29). By doing so, the narrative demonstrates postsecularism rejection of religious fundamentalism. In an apparent paradox, then, through the Poetess, the narrator both re-enchants the world of the text—the character teaches a literacy that is mystical and spiritually inflected, reading signs and

prophesying the future—as well as provides a rational critique to narrow religious directives.

#### CONCLUSION

One of the challenges in studying novels written in the twenty-first century is that the contemporary moment—the time from which the authors write—has yet to be defined historically. Jaap Den Hollander examines this issue from a historiographical standpoint in his article "Contemporary History and the Art of Self-Distancing." According to Hollander, if first-order observation is seeing the world, then second-order observation is seeing the world with ourselves, as observers, included in the picture. Consequently, second-order observation "shows the contingency and relativity of all our knowledge" (Hollander 62). Literary criticism in general, as modern historiography, follows in this mode of observation.

Because postsecularism is a novel phenomenon, one that has only received detailed attention as a literary phenomenon in the last two decades, it shares the problem that Hollander sees for contemporary history: "historians are able to discern historical ideas or forms only from a certain distance in time" (66). As Hollander notes, observation does two things at once: draws a distinction and indicates one side of the distinction (61). The use of historical fiction to express postsecular thought, then, is vital to the enterprise because it provides a

temporal space—even if obviously a constructed one—from which distinctions can be drawn. De Groot would agree, writing that “meditation upon the past” already has a history of being used as a tool for the understanding or “reconceptualization” of the present (101). Through historical fiction, the new postsecular consciousness of the twenty-first century, one that rejects religious fundamentalism *and* recognizes the need for critical discourse to engage with the existence of the non-quantifiable in the universe, finds a mode of expression. It is a mode of expression that, due to the sense of removal inherent in historical fiction, allows for engagement with religious concepts with a sort of safety valve present.

In Nakhjavani’s novel, what emerges through the historical imagination is an awareness of reading couched in religious terms, an act that is explicitly material yet that consistently points to the mystical and the ephemeral. This coheres with the text’s substrata of Bahá’í belief without imposing it upon the reader with heavy-handed religiosity. At the same time, with historical fiction as the vehicle for the narrative, the author relieves any tension implicit in the otherness of the marginalized spirituality communicated in the text. In *The Woman*, the act of reading transgresses the lines between secular and religious, between material and mystical, between a primarily physical activity and one charged with spiritual implications; the effectiveness of reading as a spiritual placeholder is

increased since the motif appears in a historical context that permits the reader a level of distancing, or estrangement, from the act of reading. This process of the estrangement of reading, which likewise facilitates a reconceptualization of the religious/secular binary, as well as the “reading of the past” itself, can be seen in the poetess’s lessons, as remembered by one of her pupils, the Corpse Washer: “If you want to read the next word, the poetess used to tell us, let go of the last one. If you want to know what lies ahead, love and leave what came before. There is no denying that reading is a risky business” (310).

The mystical and mundane connotation of reading are contrasted and juxtaposed, not to affirm one over the other but to mark that an easy separation of these two meanings is impossible; and just as the poetess teaches the characters in the novel how to read, Nakhjavani structures her novel so as to call attention to the reader’s own reading of this work of historical fiction. In the above passage, for example, the Corpse Washer shares with the reader the lessons about “reading” that she herself was taught. The lesson transfers from this character who inhabits a distant land in a distant time to the present reader, a lesson as solid as a book yet as ephemeral as the spiritual truths that the novel never reveals beyond a call to literacy, a lesson as much remembered by the Corpse Washer as directed to the reader of the present.

To conclude, the reality expressed in *The Woman* can be seen to revolve around reading as a progressive sociopolitical act that undermines both the secular and religious hegemony at the same time that it is equated with spiritual discernment. Reading within this transnational work of historical fiction is an act that can result in imprisonment and death and, in this way, it is estranged from the mundane and safe act that it is regarded to be in the West. The estrangement of the act of reading functions to support a post-secular interpretation of the novel, where reading brims over its secular meaning and flows into the mystical. This interpretation of the reading motif also points to the rejection of narrow religiosity. This analysis, in short, shows how Nakhjavani's narrative rescues the delegitimized voice of a Bahá'í heroine by affirming the act of reading as a vehicle for, and expression of, spirituality.

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