

Review of Lynn Echevarria, *Life Histories of Bahai Women in Canada: Constructing Religious Identity in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing 2011, ix + 229 pp., ISBN 978-1-4331-1457-1

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By opening with the narrative of the life history of not just the 'first Bahai of Canada' (2011: 1), Edith Magee, of Irish Methodist background, but also the first Bahai group in London, Ontario (2011: 1), oral historian (2011: 4) Lynn Echevarria earns not one but several firsts to her credit. This book becomes one of the significant 'first' studies of Canada that approaches 'women's experiences' (2011: 4) through the 'life-history method' (2011: 4) in the broad field of religion and gender studies. In this story of many 'firsts' it was an interesting disclosure that the first Bahai group in Canada was comprised entirely of women living in London, Ontario (2011: 11). Using Plummer (1983) and Thompson's (1992) oral history perspective that seeks to allow for a multiplicity of standpoints about the past to gain a wider historical view (2011: 4), this 'feminist inquiry' (2011: 7) uncovers an understanding of women's agency in Bahai community life (2011: 4). An astute inclusion is a discussion and recording of men's perspectives too, that adds to the verve and depth of the study. It also displays a mature handling of the subject under scrutiny.

The theoretical fulcrum on which the study rests is a kind of a tripartite agreement between symbolic interactionism, feminist perspectives and the theology of Bahai religion. The well staked out claim of the author that she has used the sociological approach of 'symbolic interactionism, an interpretative approach, well-suited to the study of a human group life' (2011: 6) is found to be extremely useful, both as an orientation to conducting research and as a theoretical perspective. In addition, it provides a framework through which to understand the worldview of the informants, in particular, the manner in which they define their environment and also how they actively construct their lives

(2011: 6). On the same register, Lynn consciously uses traditional interactionism which argues for a primacy of the subject, the existence of an everyday world and a belief that language is a social product and process constructed by real people. By doing so, Lynn joins those ethnographers who prefer to focus on these constructs and inter-subjectivity and are interested in entering the world of people they study to discover first-hand their concerns, subjective meanings and activities (2011: 6–7).

The book unveils through its five chapters five strands of thought and discussion points. Chapter 1, 'The Bahai Faith' established the origins of the Canadian Bahai community from 1898 to 1948. The section entitled, 'Mentors & Heroes: Kill me... But you cannot stop the emancipation of women' clearly sets up the tonal quality of the text itself apart from doing many things: inspire a whole generation of not just the Bahais, but also indulge in a public-private partnership of sharing the accounts of four women heroes (2011: 9) of the Bahai Faith, two from the Middle East and two from North America.

Zarrin Taj (to be translated as Crown of Gold), later named Tahirih, of Persia, a 'paradigm of Womanhood' (Susan Manek, 1989, quoted by author, 2011: 17) and a 'role model for change' (Eileen Anderson 1992, quoted by author, 2011: 17) presents a 'startling contrast to prior models of the "ideal woman" in other religious faiths' (Manek, quoted by the author, 2011: 17). But without getting into a comparative analysis, Lynn tells us that most of the Baha'i historical writings commend Tahirih's, 'courage', 'audacity', 'remarkable intellectual ability', 'love of God', 'piety', 'chastity', 'holiness' and 'beauty' (Abdu'l-Baha 1971, quoted by author, 2011: 18). The next story is of Bahiyyih Khanum (1846–1932), daughter of Baha ullah and Navvab, who renounced matrimony and worked for her father's faith. Though not so learned or educated in the worldly sense, the author tells us that she was full of profound spiritual virtues. She was 'the outstanding heroine of the Bahai dispensation' (2011: 19), a title bestowed on her by Shoghi Effendi, her great-nephew. Her accomplishments travelled the spiritual plane in the realm of the pure and the serene. Most importantly, her role in the humanitarian activities carried out by Abdu'l-Baha during the first World War are well remembered by the poverty-stricken Palestinians of that time (Khan 2005, quoted by author, 2011: 19).

Though both Tahirih and Khannum led different lives, expressing their spirituality through the prism of traditional and non-traditional modes of behaviour, their models stand out as exemplary examples of a wide range of spiritual qualities of women.

The 3rd and 4th stories are of the two Western women, May Maxwell, one of the first western Bahais (2011: 21), and Dorothy Baker, an early American believer. The inclusion of these two stories is also with a purpose. They bring out the difference in the Eastern and Western strands of the development of Bahai religion. All these stories showcase the evolution of and the radical changes that are reflected in the historiography of religions, in which Bahai is no exception.

I have stayed far too long on Chapter 1, but with a purpose. Chapter 1 sets the tone for the chapters to follow. Chapter 2 pans out the social and religious landscapes in Canada during the 1940s–1960s. With a strong focus on experientiality of women in churches, exploring sacralisation and the female self (2011: 54), as well as on images and perceptions of femininity in Canada during that period in Chapter 3, an examination of Bahai's life through women's life histories in Chapter 4 provides religious succour to the curious reader by now

sufficiently interested in the Bahais. Chapter 5 entitled 'Moving Beyond Belief: Fields of Service' talks about the three realms of service of the Bahais, primarily teaching, pioneering, and administration and governance (2011: 142). Lynn concludes by claiming that this research has been in many ways a kind of 'sharing' which would explicate 'central features of Bahai women's lives' (2011: 165).

In this process, the book becomes a fine feminist enquiry (2011: 7) by a woman who reads other women. The choice of subjects under scrutiny has been purely on the basis of their 'advanced' age, and not their contribution to religion or society, so avers Lynn. Though she does not attribute any specific reason for this preference, it will be worthwhile to refer to another such life-history documentation of an ethnographic kind, of women's oral culture called *Chamba-Achamba: Women's Oral Culture* (2012) in which the editors, Lal and Kumar, attribute a rock solid reason for their choice of elderly women of the Gaddi tribe as the subjects of their study. According to them, the stories of these women are 'soon to disappear' narratives that provide cultural markers of their tribe and thus require urgent documentation. Most of the authors have picked up woman subjects whose creases on the forehead and wrinkles in the hands are sufficient indicators of their wisdom and age.

The masterly story writing tradition, story within a story and narrativising the life histories, has been a significant stylistic intervention by the author. Interesting insertions like a 'commentary' after a set of stories, for example, the two stories of Zarrin Taj and Bahiyyih Khanum, add significantly to the repertoire of the author's compendium of original thought and critical statements. Another major stylistic embellishment are the little asides on the Bahai religion, for example, 'Backbiting is considered a sin', 'personal aggrandizement a non-virtue, and therefore discouraged' and the guidance in the religion is 'to look for the positive qualities in another individual instead of dwelling on the negative' (2011: 21), and many more that make the book a compelling study and a 'must have' for followers of the Bahai religion and scholars of religious studies. In the book's list of Appendixes towards the end, particularly in Appendix 1 on methodology, the concept of the exotic tourist (Silverman 1993, quoted by Echevarria 2011: 170) has been very ably presented. The table on identity construction is well thought out and uncovers a feminist studies researcher. Comparative statements build a commentary on the East and the West, which in turn create international readership constituencies.

Life Histories of Bahai Women in Canada: Constructing Religious Identity in the Twentieth Century promises to be of utmost relevance to the oral historian. But more specifically, the relevance of this book for the sparsely populated field of the study of women and religion within the gamut of the broad realm of Religious Studies cannot be denied. In demolishing the concept of 'separate spheres' of influence for men and women, Sarah M. Grimke in *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes and the Condition of Women* (1838) argued for the larger issue of equality for women in her anti-slavery discourse by using religion as the fulcrum to rest her case. In the present age of breakdowns and disbandings of hierarchies, another wall has been broken by the challenging and methodological contribution of this book. The book plugs a hole. Often, in religious history studies, to understand the 'totality of any tradition', women are physically included within recorded history but are often emotionally and intellectually outside of it. The most important set of information – the actual lives, attitudes and activities of women – is often overlooked, an omission which represents an

obvious problem. The soteriology and the transcendental aspects of the religion should be studied with respect to the lives of women. And it is here that this book in its simple, engaging and bold style bordering on anti-androcentricism (Gilman, 2009) has managed to raise new questions for further research. In oral traditions, stories are kept alive by being told again and again. This book tells a story untold. And the 'story must pass on' (Morrison, 1987).

In all, the book is a fine addition to the library shelves of theology, life histories, women's and gender studies, and religious studies.