

Aesthetic and Concept of Beauty in Quran

Hasan Bolkhari Ghehi

Professor of University of Tehran, Iran

Abstract Aesthetic surely falls among the most important and complicated issues in domains of art and aesthetic. From Plato who believed “Beauty is a complicated issue” up to now, concept of beauty has gone through a wide variety of discussions. The most prominent question in history of aesthetic is that whether aesthetic is a quality in human conception or a set of factors in objects or the sensible things human observes. There are a large body of discussions and researches still going on about this question. Although it does not seem in first place that a sacred text has ever expressed anything on this issue, as holy book, Quran has offered some great points on this concept that are amazingly similar to the theories of Greek philosophers. The present paper has done some researches on the concept of beauty through the contents of Quran and has investigated about the concept both in its rational and sensible terms. The researcher has been aiming at reaching some principles on aesthetic in Quran.

Keywords Quran, Beauty, Aesthetic, Rational beauty, Sensible beauty

1. Introduction

Expressing the beauty of the world and creatures has been one of the main applications of beauty in Quran. In Verse 7 of Sajdeh Surah, God explicitly refer to such concept:

“He Who has made everything which He has created most good (beautiful: al-Hosn): He began the creation of man with [nothing more than] clay” (32:7). [1]

The word “most good” (in Arabic: al- hosn) here in this verse is the most comprehensive word in Arabic language for expressing beauty. This is a verse in which creation and beauty find an inherent relation. As one of the greatest contemporary commentators, Allameh Tabatabaee states on this issue: “Again He says: Who made good everything that He has created [1] (32: 7). Everything is good because it has been created by Allah and is attributed to Him. In other words, a thing becomes good because it is created by Allah; and everything created by Him is good. Every creature is good and beautiful because Allah has made it so; and every good and beautiful thing is created by Allah, attributed to Him.” [2] (Vol. 1, p. 27).

This Quran commentator deals with nature of beauty in most verses in which the concept of beauty has been referred to, but in commentating the above mentioned verse, he endeavors to discuss beauty concept (al-hosn) by relying to its genealogy that is why he expresses beauty creation in “Mofradat” (Simple Substances) of Raghbi Isfahani. This

book is the most reputed book on Quran terminology. According to Ragheb, beauty is whatever that makes human happy and cheerful and actually offers him what he dreams of and is waiting for. Therefore, he classifies beauty in three levels:

- 1) Rational beauty
- 2) Sensual beauty
- 3) Sensible beauty

Ragheb believes that rational beauty stands for any kind of beauty that is favored by mind or intellect, as sensible beauty is any kind of beauty that is favored by human nature. But sensual beauty is a kind of beauty rooted in human lust. Base on this, Ragheb discuss a variety of Quran verses in which concept of beauty has been referred to, for instance, a verse as follows:

“And speak of goodness to people.” [1] (2: 83)

“Wherever you are, death will overtake you, even if you shall be in the fortified, high towers. If bounty reaches them, they say: This is from Allah.” [1] (4: 78)

Ragheb mostly emphasizes on concept of moral and spiritual beauty and this is of course the approach of Quran. Out of 189 applications of the word al-hosn (goodness) in Quran, only a few of them refer to sensible beauty or beauty in terms of special artistic meaning. Of course, there are a number of synonymous words in Quran such as al-jamal or Zinat but they are used in the same approach. Maybe that is why in sacred texts, life in the next world is more important than life in this world, though in Islam it is so important to pay attention to the worldly life and in other words, a beautiful life in this world is so important and it is an introduction to another beautiful life in another world. It is interesting that in a verse of Quran, the word al-hosn has

* Corresponding author:

Hasan.bolkhari@ut.ac.ir (Hasan Bolkhari Ghehi)

Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/arts>

Copyright © 2017 Scientific & Academic Publishing. All Rights Reserved

been used to denote life.

“But there are others who say: 'Lord, give us a merit in the world and good in the Everlasting Life, and save us from the punishment of the Fire.' [1] (2: 201)

2. Quran and Beauty

We stated in the first part that there is an inherent relation between creation and beauty. The concept of this beauty, as we will state later, is based on symmetry, equality, moderation and coordination, it is interesting to know that this approach of Quran in defining beauty is in line with the definition of some of Greek philosophers (such as Plato, Aristotle) as well as some Muslims philosopher like Farabi, Avcina and Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Safa), without being under the impression of them but it is clear that it has definitely affected Muslim philosophers, though they have had an eye on Greek philosophy in philosophical issues.

But what is our reason for demanding that Muslim commentators and philosophers have reached some concepts like symmetry and equality? In his *Almizan Commentary*, Allameh Tabatabaee, we spoke of him earlier, provides this definition of beauty: “The truth of beauty is a kind of compatibility among all parts of something with each other and more importantly, compatibility with an extreme limit that is beyond its essence. For instance, compatibility of face parts like eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth and regarding justice, justice is beautiful when it is compatible with the goal set for a civil society. That means in a society, justice will be administered for everyone who is rightful. [2] (Vol. 16, p. 373)

Of course, there is mostly obscenity against beauty in thoughts of Muslim philosophers and obscenity means sin and oppression and there is the same full approach in Platonic and then Neo-Platonism philosophies (like Plotinus).

Here we should emphasize on a point. Divine and commentary approach of Muslim philosophers in defining beauty and obscenity is a Quranic approach, while philosophers have usually a philosophical approach and under the influence of human schools. For instance, in defining beauty, a Quran commentator places Quranic approach as a base, but Muslim philosophers, while referring to Quran, mostly rely to philosophical schools before them in their theoretical definitions, although this research indicates that both reach the same answer. Of course, there are ones who usually combine both approaches and interpret Quran according to philosophical principles. The commentator, we spoke of him earlier (Tabatabaee) usually practices similarly due to his fluency in philosophy. Generally, according to Quran beauty means symmetry and proportion and this is the same philosophical approach in defining beauty, we will explain this concept later.

Rational beauty in Quran

When Quran uses the concept of beauty in cases other than sensible ones, it emphasizes on rational beauty of parts of the

world. For instance, there are some combinations in Quran like beautiful life, beautiful hereinafter world, beautiful loan, beautiful advice, beautiful commentary, beautiful narration, beautiful interpretation and beautiful stories that express rational beauty. Some of such applications are as follows:

* Beauty as rational life:

“But there are others who say: 'Lord, give us a merit in the world and good in the Everlasting Life, and save us from the punishment of the Fire.' [1] (2: 201)

* Beauty as virtue:

“But if you do what is good and are cautious, surely, Allah is Aware of what you do.” [1] (4: 128)

* Beauty in interpretation and commentary:

“They do not bring to you any parable but that which we bring to you is the truth and better in explanation.” [1] (25: 33)

* Beauty in advice and discussion:

“Call to the Path of your Lord with wisdom and fine admonition. Dispute with them in the best manner. Your Lord is well aware of those who have gone astray from His Path and He is well aware of those who are guided.” [1] (16: 125)

* Beauty in expression:

“And, who is better in saying than he who invites to Allah, does what is right, and says: Surely, I am of those who surrender.” [1] (41: 33)

* Beauty in stories:

“In the sending down of this Quran, We will narrate to you (Prophet Muhammad) the best of narratives, of which you were previously unaware.” [1] (12: 3)

* Beauty in manner

“And do not dispute with the People of the Book (Nazarenes and Jews) except in the best manner” [1] (29: 46)

As we already stated, since Quran is a heavenly book, fundamentally aiming at guiding humans toward a true life and living based on honesty and truth, the concept of beauty is mainly applied in moral, theology and spiritual domains rather than sensible affairs. We will explain later that the number of applying the word *al-hosn* is not a lot in sensible domains.

Sensible beauty in Quran

The verse we stated in the beginning of this paper, pays greatly attention to beauty of sensible things:

“Who perfected everything He created. He originated the creation of the human from clay.”

This verse indicates that all sensible things of the world that are created by God are beautiful. According to Plato in *Timaeus* “Since God is good and this is the law that the best creature acts in the best way, therefore God has created the world nicely and beautifully.”ⁱⁱ and there is an amazing proportion between the statement of Plato and the verse of Quran. According to this verse, God has created everything

beautiful because He Himself is the most beautiful. This is the feature that God attributes to Him.

“Blessed is Allah, the Best of creators!” [1] (47: 14)

Now we can say that based on generality of the word “thing” in the verse of “He Who has made everything which He has created most good.”, this is one of the main reasons of the beauty of sensible things (that are a part of things) in Quran but the question is that what is the meaning and nature of this beauty in the world? We search in other verses in hope of finding the answer. In one of His verses, God speak of creation of human organs and call them “The fairest stature”:

“Indeed, we created the human with the fairest stature.” [1] (95: 4)

Now what are the most beautiful human organs?

According to the commentators, the fairest stature means symmetry and equality in human organs. One of the commentators believes that: “Human existential behavior has the most consistent and beautiful structure and in equality climax. Stature means justice as well as a foundation to a system and whatever that can be a base for standing up. Now stature can be meant equality or organizing the parts of something. In that case, the verse means that human creation system is at the top of beauty.”[3]

This narration can be confirmed by referring to other verses of Quran like Verse 3 of Taghabob Surah:

“He created the heavens and the earth in truth and He shaped you and gave you good shapes. To Him is the arrival.” [1] (64: 3)

According to this verse, while creating human, God made and formed him beautiful. According to other commentaries of Quran, like Tabarsi, the author of well-known *Majma ol Bayan* book, the fairest stature or the most beautiful structure refers to the most beautiful body organs. In expressing portrayal by God and explanation of the fairest stature, he believes that when God in Quran say that: “He has shaped you and made you fine images.” [1] (40: 64), the fairest stature actually indicates the beautiful portrayal of God. According to Tabarsi, God created mankind in the most beautiful form, with a special organization and structure, comparing to other animals. [4] (Vol. 10, p. 448) Of course, some other commentators interpret the fairest stature to both beauty and equality of human body and his intellect. In other words, they believe that the fairest stature expresses both rational and sensible beauty. [5] (Vol. 10, p. 310) Fakhri Razi has the same idea and believes that the fairest stature denotes both rational and sensible beauty. [6] (Vol. 19, p. 212)

But there is a higher emphasize on sensible beauty in Islamic narrations. For instance, there is a narration of Ibn Abbas, the uncle of Prophet Mohammad who says: “The fairest stature means the most beautiful face, with an upright figure, not like animals with a bending figure. [4] (Vol. 27, p. 168) There are other narrations in this regard such as narrations collected by Suyuti in his book all indicating that the fairest stature means the most beautiful face. [7] (Vol. 6, p. 367)

But in addition to the above mentioned verse, there is another verse in Quran that indicates sensible beauty:

“Though their beauty pleases you.” [1] (33: 52)

That refers to the beauty of women.

It could be said that out of 189 applications of the word “al-hosn” in Quran, the above verse [1] (33: 52) is the only explicit verse that is officially speaking of sensible beauty, but since sensible beauty (such as the beauty of human body organs and face) is not lasting, Quran pays more attention to rational beauty and this is the secret of less application of sensible beauty.

Concept of symmetry and equality in Quran

But there is another expression in Quran that can act as a base to perceive the concept of beauty in Quran and that is the word “symmetrical or weighted” in Verse 19 of Hijr Surah:

“We have spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains. Everything we have caused to grow therein is justly weighed.” [1] (15: 19)

Of course, some commentators have interpreted this word as weighted [2] (Vol. 12, p. 204), though he mentions that weighted also means a speech or act or body organs are favored when their parts are in proportion. In addition to him, other commentators have explicitly interpreted weighted as symmetry, equality and beauty. For instance, Fakhri Razi, in His “Kabir Commentary” has initially defined the word weighted as “to the extent of necessity” and then interprets that as in proportion and beautiful by the criteria of intellect and wisdom. [6] (Vol. 19, p. 132).

Concept of courtesy and its relation to beauty in Quran

In Almazan Comentary, while interpreting verse 116 of Maede surah, Allameh Tabatabaee provides an interesting cementation of the relation between courtesy and beauty that is so important in perception of aesthetic basics in Quran:

“And when Allah said: '(Prophet) Jesus, son of Mary, did you ever say to the people: "Take me and my mother for two gods, other than Allah?" 'Exaltations to You, ' he said, 'how could I say that to which I have no right? If I had said that, You would have surely known. You know what is in myself, but I do not know what is in Yours. Indeed, You are the Knowledgeable of the unseen.' [1] (5: 116)

Tabatabaee believes that Jesus has spoken so politely in this regard and according to him, courtesy is a beautiful and desired act favored by people. In other words, courtesy is an act delicately carried out and naturally, when an act appears beautiful and delicate that is done voluntarily and it is not forbidden. Therefore, any act that is in line with the goal of life can be deemed beautiful. According to Tabatabaee, all religions and people acknowledge that beauty is alignment of an act with extreme limit of human life. But the examples of such alignment are the subject of dispute. He emphasizes that courtesy in essence is a beautiful figure that justifies to be acted according to that and all people accept the relation between courtesy and beauty. [2] (Vol. 6, p. 361)

Of course, further example can be found in Quran on

tangible beauty and the most important one, according to verse 44, surah 27, is Islamic architecture aesthetic:

“It was said to her: 'Enter the pavilion.' And when she saw it, she thought it was a pool of water, and bared her legs. But he said: 'It is a pavilion smoothed with crystal.' She said: 'My Lord, I have wronged myself, and I become a Muslim (submissive) with Solomon to Allah, Lord of the Worlds.'” [1] (27:44)

This verse shows how Prophet Solomon astonished Saba Queen by showing her a so beautiful architecture.

This is an issue that Gonzalez has deliberately expressed in his book named “Beauty & Islam”:

“Finally, Quran 27:44 contains sufficient evidence to merit the conclusion that it is vested with an aesthetic cognitive function and that it has exerted a paradigmatic influence on Islamic art and architecture. This is apparent from its semantics, through the artistic modes it suggests, the image of the glasswork recalling similar aesthetic principles in the reality of the works of art. There is also the evidence of the cultural context in which numerous references to the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba can be found. Actually, our discussion has taken its standpoint from the perspective of a tradition deeply marked by a Solomon aesthetic consciousness which reveals itself through inscriptions, literary quotations and evocations of the king's tales, as well as by an ancient habit of princely representation and symbolism involving his artistic mythology- a cultural habit which seems to have been established since pre-Islamic times and continued into the modern period. For the future, it will be necessary to grasp the precise relationship emanating from these aesthetics contained in the Islamic scriptural sources and the exiting works of art themselves, in order to arrive at a better understanding of artistic practice. Nevertheless, we must take into account the fact that the modalities of cognitive interaction between text and visual form in Islam remain difficult to decipher.” [8].

3. Research Results

1) Thinking about Quran indicates that the expressions on beauty like Hosn, Jamal and Ziant all encompass both rational and sensible beauty. Quran emphasizes on this principle that the beauty of sensible things of world is derived from a rational and true beauty and this interpretation is fully similar to Platonism and Neo-Platonism approach toward beauty. In Quran, rational affair dominates sensible affair, therefore rational beauty is flowing in all sensible parts. This is exactly where the secret of the verse on creation and beauty (“Who perfected everything He created.”) is laid. Whatever god has created is beautiful, because He created a sensible form out of rational being. This concept can be seen in a narration of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) that is “God has made it mandatory beauty in creation of everything.”

2) The concept of beauty in Quran is symmetry and

equality but in two domains:

* Equality and symmetry of sensible world with rational world. This is what Ghazali has nicely explained in his *Mishkat ol-Anwar* thesis. Every sensible thing can be realized and measured in proportion to its rational aspect.

* Symmetry and equality of parts of a thing with each other. Therefore, beauty in Quran means that human may realize both symmetry of exterior world and hidden world and find all parts of being symmetrical and weighted. In a verse of Quran, the idea has been expressed so: “Who created the seven heavens, one above the other. You cannot see any inconsistency in the creation of the Merciful. Return your gaze, do you see any crack! Then return your gaze once more and yet again, your gaze comes back to you dazzled, and tired.” [1] (67:4)

This is interesting that God use the words beauty and zinat after the above mentioned verses:

“We have adorned the lower heaven with lamps, and We made them a stoning for the satans, We have prepared the punishment of the Blaze for them.” [1] (67: 5)

The narration quoted by one of Shiite Imams, Imam Sadigh, addressing one of his students Mofazzal, is a thoughtful interpretation of this verse of Quran by relating to view points of Greek philosophers:

“Know it Mofazzal that this world is named Cosmos in Greek language and it means beauty and Greek philosophers have given this name to the world because they have observed the most beautiful geometry and discipline in the world. So they did not want to name it a system or geometry, but they preferred to call it Cosmos or beauty, because it enjoys a well-established, beautiful and disciplined structure.”[9]

3) The secret of beauty of Islamic art works and architectural figures is in manifesting such symmetry and proportionality. These figures are limitless, in one hand that express God indefiniteness, and on the other hand, they enjoy very beautiful discipline and proportionality that indicate the beauty of God and the world He has created as home to humans: “Indeed, We have created all things according to a measure.” [1] (54:49)

4) More importantly, human is required to reach equality in the relation of himself and the world in order to realize his beauty and the world beauty. In *Timaeus* and *Republic* theses, Plato has emphasized on establishing a relation between human and the world. The idea is clearly there in Hindu wisdom as well.

5) Now what is the answer of Quran to the question that we stated in the abstract part? Is beauty is a subjective or objective issue? In other words, is beauty a quality in human perception or total elements in sensible things? Beauty exists both in human heart and mind and in creatures of God in this world. Human is required to have a pure and clean heart and see the world as a beautiful creature of God. Likewise, whatever human creates is required to be symmetrical, with beautiful and equal elements, following the regulated world.

Islamic thought requires human to purify his soul then see the world, that is when he would see everything beautiful and in its right place, as Iranian great poet Hafiz says:

“I am the infamous lover in this town

My eyes, evil seeds have never sown” [10]

So in Quran aesthetic, soul purifications and body equality are the conditions and these two conditions together motivates sense of beauty in human.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper has been published by Iran National Science Foundation (INSF) support.

Notes

- i "Beauty is difficult".
- ii "If the world be indeed fair and the artificer good, it is manifest that he must have looked to that which is eternal; but if what cannot be said without blasphemy is true, then to the created pattern. Everyone will see that he must have looked to, the eternal; for the world is the fairest of creations and he is the best of causes. And having been created in this way, the world has been framed in the likeness of that which is apprehended by reason and mind and is unchangeable, and must therefore of necessity, if this is admitted, be a copy of something" (Plato, 27c-34a).

- [2] Allameh Tabatabaee (Muhammad Hossyain), *Almizan*, World Organization For Islamic Services (Board of Writing, Translation and Publication, 1981, Iran, Tehran.
- [3] <http://www.hashemirafsanjani.ir/fa/tafsir/7910>.
- [4] Abu Ali Fadhl ibn Hasan Tabarsi, *Majma al-Bayan fi-Tafsir al-Quran*, farahani press, 1981, Iran, Tehran, vol. 10, p. 448.
- [5] Naser Makarem Shirazi, *Al-Amsal fi Tafsir Ketab al Allah al Monzal*, Imam Ali pub, 2000, Iran, Qom, Vol. 10, p. 310.
- [6] Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Tafsir Al-Kabir (The Great Commentary)*, Al-matba ol Bahieye press, Egypt.
- [7] Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Al-Durr Al-Manthur Fi Tafsir Bil-Ma'thur (The Scattered Pearls: Intertextual Exegesis)*, Ayatollah Marashi Najafi Library press, 1983, Iran, Qom, Vol. 6, p. 367.
- [8] Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam, Aesthetics in Islam Art and Architecture*, I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2001, London, p.41.
- [9] Tohid-e-mofzzal, Translated by Allameh Majlesi, ministry of Culture press, 1999, Iran, Tehran.
- [10] Hāfīz Shirazi, *The Divan of Hafez: A Bilingual Text, Persian-English*, Translated by Reza Saberi, University Press of America, 2002.
- [11] *Timaeus*, Plato, Translated by B. Jowett, see: <http://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/physics/plato-timaeus>.
- [12] *Greater Hippias*, Plato, see LOEB CLASSICAL LIBRARY.
- [13] Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani, *Al-Mufradat fi Gharib al-Quran*, Ahlolbait Pub. 1995, Iran, Qom.

REFERENCES

- [1] Quran, English Translation of the Meanings by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, From a version revised by the Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance. Published and Printed by the King Fahd Holy Quran Printing Complex, 1987.