Inner and Outer Beauty in Islam: An Introduction

Alireza Maktabdar

Translated by Mohammad Javad Shomali

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This article expounds on the importance of inner and outer beauty in Islam by using verses from the Qur'an and narrations from the Ahlul Bayt.

Ali Reza Maktabdar
Translated by Mohammad Javad Shomali

Abstract

A person’s physical appearance plays a big role in both individual and social situations. Regardless of a culture’s fashionable apparel, particular types of grooming and dressing are universal and can have a drastic effect on a person’s life, such as affecting our self-esteem and giving the people we meet a long-lasting impression on us. The Prophet Muhammad himself was well-known for his striking good looks and hygiene.

Moreover, qualities such as intelligence, sincerity, and compassion give the soul inner beauty. This article expounds on the importance of inner and outer beauty in Islam by using verses from the Qur’an and narrations from the Ahlul Bayt.
Introduction

People naturally seek beauty and dislike untidy appearances. Based on human nature, Islam has taken humankind's tendency towards beauty into consideration and issued helpful guidelines to fulfil this natural need. According to the Qur'an, appreciation for beauty as a God-given blessing is a sign of His wisdom and it goes hand in hand with the existence of beautiful beings in the world. Islam guides its followers to appear neat and tidy in public.

Besides the natural pursuit of beauty, humans have to appear neat and tidy to strengthen and extend their family relationships and social ties. As social beings, people cannot reach most of their goals without having societies, thus it is important to make a good impression by looking presentable.

More importantly, inner or spiritual beauty, such as having knowledge, patience, and faith are some adornments of the human soul. In this article the idea of Islam on appearance and beauty will be discussed, with a further explanation on spiritual beauty.

Beauty in the Qur'an and Hadiths

In the Qur'an, God mentions the beautification of the heavens with stars:

"Indeed, We have adorned the lowest heaven with the finery of the stars." 

Plants and natural scenes are also seen as a way of beautifying the Earth. In one verse, people are asked to look pleasant when going to the mosque. The following verse provides us with a general rule that Islam is not against beauty and adornments. God says:

"O Children of Adam! Put on your adornment on every occasion of prayer, and eat and drink, but do not waste; Say, Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of provision? Say, these are for the faithful in the life of this world, and exclusively for them on the Day of Resurrection." 

As said earlier, there is a deep sense of beauty in human beings. And by displaying beautiful
appearances and avoiding disheveled ones, humans harmonize with nature.

Along with the Qur'an, the traditions received from Imams also indicate great importance for the inner and physical beauty. There is a hadith from Imam Ali that shows how important outer beauty is in Islam. Imam Ali stated,

"God is beautiful and likes beauty, and also likes to see His blessings being used by His servants."

Beautiful appearance was important in our Prophet's lifestyle. Once, as the Prophet was leaving the house, he began combing his hair and beard, using a bowl of water as a mirror. Aisha asked, "You are the best son of Adam and the Prophet of God! Are you combing your hair and beard?" The Prophet answered, "God likes a believer to get ready and adorn when he wants to meet another believers."

The Prophet also said, "When you want to appear in a gathering of believers, choose nice and neat clothes so that you become distinct among people like a beauty spot on one's face, because Allah dislikes unattractiveness and looking repugnant."

The amount of money the Prophet spent on his perfume was more than that which he spent for food. Using perfume was very important to the Imams as well. Regarding Imam Sadiq there are narrations which say people could easily locate him in the mosque by the fragrance of his perfume.

Imam Ali taught us that beautiful appearance is part of a believer's etiquette and advised us saying, "You should adorn yourselves for your brothers the same way you do for strangers who you like to see you in your best appearance." He also described true believers as those who appear neat and adorned even when they are poor.

Some see an opposition between religion (or piety) and beauty and so they object if they see religious leaders in beautiful clothes. This has a long history rooting back to the time of Imams. For example, it is narrated by one of Imam Sadiq's companions, Ibn Qaddah, that one day Imam Sadiq had high-quality clothes on when he came across Abbad Ibn Kasir the Sufi.

Abbad said: "You are from the household of the Prophet and your great father, Imam Ali, always wore burlap! What are these good clothes you have?" Imam replied, "Oh Abbad, be aware! Why do you protest like this? Who has made blessings of Allah impermissible? Allah, the exalted, likes to see His blessings being used."

A believer can avoid all factors that take his attention away from Allah and the afterlife and yet still care about his appearance and adorn it in a way that even his tidiness and neat appearance attracts others to the religion.

There is nothing wrong with pious people having good houses, eating delicious food, enjoying the best drinks, and wearing the finest clothes. It is possible for them to gain pleasure from this world and yet have the best afterlife. These are blessings provided by God for everyone.
Imam Ali said: "Clothes reveal beauty." Unfortunately, some people are not concerned with a tidy appearance, and to make it worse, assume it against their spiritual wayfaring to care about their appearances. This belief is against the teaching of Islam.

Imam Hasan always wore his best clothes for prayers and when he was asked about it, he said, "God is beautiful and likes beauties so I adorn myself for my Lord. He orders us to use our adornments for prayers. And because of this, I like to wear my best clothes."

When the Prophet saw an unkempt man wearing dirty untidy clothes, he said to him, "It's a religious act to use and reveal God's blessing." 

As said, when the Imams used fine clothes and faced some complaints as a result, they supported their stance by explaining how other prophets, such as Salomon and David, did the same. One of Imam Ridha's servants, Obayd, said,

"Some people from Khorasan came to him and told him that they did not like him to wear fine elegant clothes. The Imam replied that Joseph had been a prophet and son of the prophets and yet he had worn elegant clothes and participated in Pharaoh's meetings, yet this did not degrade his spiritual level. Buying elegant clothes is wrong if there are unmet needs."

In another story, once a person saw Imam Sadiq in a bright-coloured shirt. He is surprised as he thought that bright colours are only worn by young people. The Imam noticed his reaction and said, "Who prohibited the beautifications that God allows for people? I have got married recently I am expected to wear nice clothes."

Looking presentable is so important in Islam that a person is not considered a spendthrift when he or she buys different types of clothing. Imam Sadiq was asked "Can a believer have two sets of clothes?" to which he replied "Yes." The person went on asking until twenty sets and at last he replied "No, it is not considered extravagance unless you wear your party clothes for work."

There is a similar hadith from Imam al-Kadhim in which he was asked about having ten sets of clothes; he answered, "It is not extravagance; indeed, it may even help your clothes last longer. Extravagance is wearing your formal clothing in an unclean environment." According to this hadith, having different sets of clothes is good both for looking presentable, which is an answer to one's tendency towards beauties, and for keeping clothes for a longer time which is more economic.

Neatness is so important in Islam that there are instructions about the slightest actions such as caring for and combing hair, polishing nails, and trimming nose hairs. There are even teachings about how to decorate a tablecloth.

Though it is important to look presentable in public, there is more flexibility in what a person wears in private. For example, one may wear old or coarse clothes in private and fine and soft clothes in public to
both practice an ascetic life and simultaneously look presentable in the public.

In one narrative, when Sofyan the Sufi saw Imam Sadiq in fine clothing, he told the Imam that none of Imam Sadiq’s fathers had ever worn that. Imam replied, "The holy Prophet lived in the time of poverty and so he lived like other people, but afterwards came times of richness. The best people to use God's blessings are believers." And he recited this verse:

\[ \text{مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ الَّلَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لَعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرَّزْقِ} \]

"Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of His provision?"

and then said, "We are the best to use God's blessings. Besides, what you see of my clothes is what I have worn for meeting people."

Then he showed him the coarse clothes he was wearing underneath, and said, "You wear coarse clothes on top to make people think you have an ascetic life, yet under it, hidden from people, you wear soft clothes that make you comfortable."

**Spiritual Beauty**

Verses of the Qur’an and hadiths were shared regarding physical appearance. Regarding inner and spiritual beauty, God introduces faith as beautification of people's hearts:

\[ \text{وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ حَبِّبَ إِلَيْكُمْ الإِيمَانَ وَزَينَتْهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُم} \]

"God has endeared faith to you and has adorned it in your hearts." (Qur’an, 49:7)

Thus, adornment applies even to the realm of spirituality and faith is one instance of it. Intellect, knowledge, wisdom, good manners, silence, patience, modesty, and gratitude are some examples of spiritual beauties.

In a beautiful hadith where the Prophet lists qualities that result in inner beauty, he mentions that in every situation a virtue that can beautify our lives, such as patience in times of hardship, humbleness when in a high social position, eloquence when speaking, justice of those who are faithful and tranquility in the time of worship.
Keeping a Balance

There are many hadiths regarding the importance of having a neat and beautiful appearance that there remains no doubt about its significance in Islam. This is to bear in mind that Islam is a religion of balance. The Qur'an instructs that people should not be excessive in beautifying themselves or their belongings.

This becomes even more important in societies where the majority cannot afford basic necessities. As explained by Imam Ridha when asked why his clothing differed to that of Imam Ali, and he replied that at the time of Imam Ali people were challenged with poverty and thus had to wear simple clothes; but because people were well-off during Imam Ridha’s period the Imam blended in.

Unfortunately, we fall into the trap of tending towards extremes. For example, some are either too sluggish to even have a simple yet tidy and neat appearance or they go towards the other extreme and spend endless hours on their appearance. A balance is to be made in looking presentable without troubling themselves with complications.

1. The Qur’an 37:6
2. The Qur’an 10:24
3. The Qur’an: 18:7
4. The Qur’an 7:32
6. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Raziudd-Din Hasan ibn Fadi, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi publication, pp. 96–97
8. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Raziudd-Din Hasan ibn Fadi, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi publication, p. 43
10. Sayyed Radi, Nahjul-Balaghah, Hijrat Publications, p. 305
من طبيعتهما يشتركون، وليسوا من أفضل ما يشتركون، وسكتوا من أفضل ما يشتركون، ووزعوا ممن أفضل ما يوزعون، وركبو من أفضل ما يركبون، وأوصوا لذة الدنيا، فهم هذا جيران الله يتميزون عليه، فيجعلهم تنعيمهم ما يتميزون لا ترد لهم دعوة ولا ينالهم نفسهم من النذرة.

15. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi-ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi Publication, p. 96


كان الحسن بن علي عليه السلام إذا قام إلى الصلاة ليس اجود ثيابه، قبل له يا إخو رسول الله ﷺ لم يلبس اجود ثيابه؟ قال: إن الله جميل يحب الجمال، فاتجه لزيتيه، وهو يقول: خذوا زينتك عند كل مسجد، فأعجب أن ليس اجود ثيابه.

17. Al-Hayat, vol. 6, p. 217

أبصر رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم رجلًا شاهد رأسه وسمه ثيابه، سيئة حاله، فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: من الذين المنعة وإظهارهم.


دخل قوم من أجل خراسان على أبي الحسن عليه السلام، فقال له: إن الناس قد أنكروا عليك هذا اللباس الذي تلبسه، فقال: أليس من يوسف بن عقوب كان نبى أبن النبي نبي، وكان يلبس البجاية، ويتردد بالalse، ويجلس مجالس ألق قرطون، قل بمفهومه ذلك، وإنما بئس لأني احتيج منه إلى قسطه.

Ibid. p. 105

دخلت على أبي جعفر عليه السلام وهو في بيت من مدينة، وعليه فقم بإطافته وملحفته معرفته قد أثر الصيغة على عناقه فيجعله أنظر إلى البيت، الواقع إلى مئته دعا يا حكم ما تقول في هذا؟ فعلته وما تكلم أن أقول أبا أرأيه، وما عدنا إذا فإنا نعمل الشاب المحروق، فقال لي: يا حكم من حكم زينة الله التي أخرج عباده والطيبات من الرزق وهذا مما أخرج الله لعباده، فأنا هذا البيت الذي فيه أوتت المرأة، وأنا قريب العبد بالرس.

Ibid. p. 98

فكون للمؤمن عشرة أقسام متعددة: قال: نعم، نعم، نعم، ليس ذلك من الصرف، إنما الصرف أن يجعل ثوب صوون تركه بذلك.

This means that it is important for a person's clothes to fit the right occasion.

21. Ibid.

الرجل يكون له عشرة أقسام: أي يكون ذلك من الصرف؟ فقال: لا ولكن الصرف أن تلبس من صوون في مكان المقام.


23. Ibid. p. 123

24. Ibid. p. 109

قال للرجال فسوا وأظافركم - وللنساء ترك فكان أنزى لكن

Ibid. vol. 59, p. 300

زينوا موانئكم باللباس فائتكم خفية للجاهلين، تعالى التسمية.

26. The Qur'an 7:32

فل من حرم زينة الله التي أخرج لعباده الطيبات من الرزق، فإن هي للذين أنمو في الحفاظ والطيبات خالصة، يمهم الزيامة: كذلك تفصل الآيات الأقوم المعظم.


28. Tamimi, Abdul Wahid, Tasnif Ghuraru-Hikam, Daftar Tabliqhat Publications, p. 51

29. Ibid. p. 281

30. Ibid. p. 58

فلم على محالبكم فائتكم خفية للجاهلين، تعالى التسمية.

31. Ibid. p. 247

لا يزيد كاذب.

32. Ibid. p. 216


الحليمة:

34. Payande, Abul Qasim, Nahjul-Fasahat, Danesh Publications, p. 453

الحليمة.

35. Al-Irsad fi Marefat Hujajj-Illah li-Ibad, vol. 1, p. 300

المرآة الفناني والصبر زينة البالغ.

36. Shu'ayri, Jami' ul-Akhbar, Radi Publications, p. 123
العفاف زينة البيان، والوقت زينة الجسد، والفصاحة زينة الكلام، والعدل زينة الإيمان، والسكينة زينة العبادة، والحفظ زينة الروية، وحفظ الحجاج زينة العلم، وحسن الأدب زينة العقل، وسط الوجه زينة الحلم، والإثارة زينة الزهد، وينقل الموجود زينة البين، والقلق زينة القناعة، وترك المن زينة المعروف، والخشوع زينة الصلاة، وترك ما لا يعني زينة الورع.

37. Qur'an: 7:31
بَيْنَيْنِ َاِنْ خَذُوا زِيَنَتَاهُمْ عِنْدَ مَا سَمَحَ ِۡنَّهُمْ بِمَّا أَخْرَجَوا وَلَا تُسَرَّفوا إِنَّهُ لَيَبِيعُ الْمَسْرَفِينَ


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