

Inner and Outer Beauty in Islam: An Introduction

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Publisher(s):

Ahlul Bayt World Assembly [4]

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Category:

General [6]

General [7]

Journal:

Vol. 15, no. 4, Winter 2014 [8]

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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:

إِنَّا زَيْنَّا السَّمَاءَ الدُّنْيَا بِزِينَةِ الْكَوَاكِبِ

"Indeed, We have adorned the lowest heaven with the finery of the stars¹."

Plants² and natural scenes³ 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:

قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ ؟ قُلْ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ
آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا خَالِصَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ؟ كَذَلِكَ نَفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

“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 Resurrection4.”

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 servants5."

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 believers6."*

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 repugnant7."*

The amount of money the Prophet spent on his perfume was more than that which he spent for food8. 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 perfume9.

Imam Ali taught us that beautiful appearance is part of a believer's etiquette10 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 appearance11."* He also described true believers as those who appear neat and adorned even when they are poor12.

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 Suffi.

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*¹³."

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.¹⁴

Imam Ali said: *"Clothes reveal beauty*¹⁵." 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*¹⁶."

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*¹⁷."

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*¹⁸."

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*¹⁹."

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*²⁰."

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*²¹.*"* 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 hair²², polishing nails²³, and trimming nose hairs²⁴.

There are even teachings about how to decorate a tablecloth²⁵.

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:

مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ

***"Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of His provision*²⁶?"**

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*²⁷.*"*

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:

وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ حَبَّبَ إِلَيْكُمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَزَيَّنَهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ

"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. Intellect²⁸, knowledge²⁹, wisdom³⁰, good manners³¹, silence³², patience³³, modesty³⁴, and gratitude³⁵ are some examples of spiritual beauties.

In a beautiful hadith where the Prophet lists qualities that result in inner beauty³⁶, 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 belongings³⁷.

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 in³⁸.

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

5. Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, Bihar ul-Anwar, Islamiyyah Publications, vol. 10, p. 92

ان الله عز وجل جميل يحب الجمال ويحب أن يرى أثر نعمته على عبده

6. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Raziud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi publication, pp. 96-97

وقف رجل على باب النبي (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) يستأذن عليه ، قال : فخرج النبي (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) فوجد في حجرته ركوة فيها ماء ، فوقف يسوي لحيته وينظر إليها ، فلما رجع داخلا قالت له عائشة : يا رسول الله - أنت سيد ولد آدم ورسول رب العالمين - وقفت على الركوة ، تسوي لحيتك ورأسك ، قال : يا عائشة إن الله يحب إذا خرج عبده المؤمن إلى أخيه أن يتهبأ له وأن يتجمل

7. Javadi Amuli, Abdullah, Mafatihul-Hayat, Isra Publication, p. 161

إنكم قادمون على إخوانكم، فأصلحوا رجالكم، وأصلحوا لباسكم حتى تكونوا كأنكم شامة في الناس، فإن الله لا يحب الفحش ولا التفحش

8. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Raziud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi publication, p. 43

كان رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وآله) ينفق في الطيب أكثر مما ينفق في الطعام

9. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Raziud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi publication, p. 42

كان يعرف موضع جعفر عليه السلام في المسجد بطيب ري

10. Javadi Amuli, Abdullah, Mafatihul-Hayat, Israa Publication, p. 160 التجمل من أخلاق المؤمنين

11. Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, Bihar ul-Anwar, Islamiyyah Publications, vol. 10, p. 91

ليتزّين أحدكم لأخيه المسلم إذا أتاه ، كما يتزّين للغريب الذي يحب أن يراه في أحسن الهيئة

12. Sayyed Radi, Nahjul-Balaghah, Hijrat Publications, p. 305

من علامة أحدهم أنك ترى له قوة في دين ... وتجملا في فاقة

13. Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, Bihar ul-Anwar, Islamiyyah Publications, vol. 47, p. 361

كان أبو عبد الله عليه السلام متكيا علي - أو قال علي أبي - فلقية عباد بن كثير وعليه ثياب مروية حسان، فقال: يا أبا عبد الله! إنك من أهل بيت نبوة وكان أبوك وكان؟ فما هذه الثياب المزينة عليك فلو لبست دون هذه الثياب؟ فقال أبو عبد الله عليه السلام: ويك يا عباد من حرم زينة الله التي أخرج للعبادة والطيبات من الرزق؟ وإن الله عز وجل إذا أنعم على عبده نعمة أحب أن يراها عليه ليس به بأس

14. Mufid, Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Nu'man, Al-Amali, Congere-ye Shaykh Mufid, p. 263

ان المتقين ... سكنوا الدنيا بأفضل ما سكنت ، وأكلوها بأفضل ما أكلت ، شاركوا أهل الدنيا في دنياهم ، فأكلوا معهم من طيبات ما يأكلون ، وشربوا من طيبات ما يشربون ، ولبسوا من أفضل ما يلبسون ، وسكنوا من أفضل ما يسكنون ، وتزوجوا من أفضل ما يتزوجون ، وركبوا من أفضل ما يركبون ، وأصابوا لذة الدنيا مع أهل الدنيا ، وهم غدا جيران الله يتمنون عليه فيعطيه ما يتمنون ، لا ترد لهم دعوة ولا ينقص لهم نصيب من اللذة

15. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi-ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi publication, p. 96 الثياب تظهر الجمال

16. Ayyashi, Muhammad ibn Mas'ud ibn Muhammad, Kitabut-Tafsir, Elmiyye Publications, Tehran, vol. 2, p. 14

كان الحسن بن علي عليهما السلام إذا قام إلى الصلاة لبس اجود ثيابه، فقيل له: يا بن رسول الله لمن تلبس اجود ثيابك؟ فقال: إن الله جميل يحب الجمال، فاتجمل لربي، وهو يقول: خذوا زينتك عند كل مسجد، فاحب ان ألبس اجمل ثيابي

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

أبصر رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم رجلاً شعراً شعر رأسه، وسخة ثيابه، سيئة حاله، فقال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم: من الدين المتعة وإظهار النعمة

18. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Raziud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi Publication, p.98

دخل قوم من أهل خراسان على أبي الحسن عليه السلام فقال له : إن الناس قد أنكروا عليك هذا اللباس الذي تلبسه ، قال : فقال لهم : إن يوسف بن يعقوب كان نبيا ابن نبي ابن نبي ، وكان يلبس الديباج ، ويتزرر بالذهب ، ويجلس مجالس آل فرعون ، فلم يضعه ذلك ، وإنما يذم لو احتيج منه إلى قسطه

19. Ibid. p. 105

دخلت على أبي جعفر عليه السلام وهو في بيت منجد(1) وعليه قميص رطب وملحفة مصبوغة قد أثر الصبغ على عاتقه فجعلت أنظر إلى البيت وأنظر إلى هيئته فقال: يا حكم ما تقول في هذا؟ فقلت وما عسيت أن أقول وأنا أراه عليك وأما عندنا فإنما يفعلها الشاب المرهق(2) فقال لي: يا حكم من حرم زينة الله التي أخرج لعباده والطيبات من الرزق وهذا مما أخرج الله لعباده فأما هذا البيت الذي ترى فهو بيت المرأة وأنا قريب العهد بالعرس

20. Ibid. p. 98

يكون للمؤمن عشرة أقمصه ؟ قال : نعم ، قلت : عشرين ؟ قال : نعم ، وليس ذلك من السرف إنما السرف أن يجعل ثوب صوتك ثوبك بذلتك

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

21. Ibid.

الرجل يكون له عشرة أقمصه ، أ يكون ذلك من السرف ؟ فقال : لا ولكن ذلك أبقى لثيابه ، ولكن السرف أن تلبس ثوب صوتك في المكان القذر

22. Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, Bihar ul-Anwar, Islamiyyah Publications, vol. 73, p. 116

23. Ibid. p. 123

24. Ibid. p. 109

قال للرجال قصوا أظافيركم - وللنساء اتركن فانه أزين لكن

25. Ibid. vol. 59, p. 300

زينوا موائدكم بالبقل فانها مطردة للشياطين مع التسمية

26. The Qur'an 7:32

قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ ﴿٣٢﴾ قُلْ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا خَالِصَةً يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ﴿٣٣﴾ كَذَلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

27. Majlisi, Muhammad Baqir, Bihar ul-Anwar, Islamiyyah Publications, vol. 47, p. 360

28. Tamimi, Abdul Wahid, Tasnif Ghurarul-Hikam, Daftar Tablighat Publications, p. 51

العقل زين لمن رزقه

29. Ibid. p. 281

العلم أشرف حلية وعطية

30. Ibid. p. 58

عليك بالحكمة فانها الحلية الفاخرة

31. Ibid. p. 247

لا زينة كالأدب

32. Ibid. p. 216

الصمت زين العلم وعنوان الحلم

33. Daylami, Hasan ibn Abul-Hasan, Irshadul-Qulub, Sharif Radi Publications, vol. 1, p. 199

الحلم زينة

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

الحياء زينة

35. Al-Irshad fi Marefat Hujajj-illah lil-Ibad, vol. 1, p. 300

الشكر زينة الغنى والصبر زينة البلوى

36. Shu'ayri, Jami' ul-Akhbar, Radi Publications, p. 123

العفاف زينة البلاء، والتواضع زينة الحسب، والفصاحة زينة الكلام، والعدل زينة الإيمان، والسكينة زينة العبادة، والحفظ زينة الرواية، وحفظ الحجاج زينة

العلم، وحسن الأدب زينة العقل، وبسط الوجه زينة الحلم، والإيثار زينة الزهد، وبذل الموجود زينة اليقين، والتقلل زينة القناعة، وترك المن زينة

المعروف، والخشوع زينة الصلاة، وترك ما لا يعني زينة الورع

37. Qur'an: 7:31

يَا بَنِي آدَمَ خُذُوا زِينَتَكُمْ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا وَلَا تُسْرِفُوا ۗ إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ

38. Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi-ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, Makarimul-Akhlaq, Sharif Radi publication, vol. 1, p. 183

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