

AESTHETIC CHARACTERISTICS IN THE QUR'ĀN

Iman Al Rujaihi

Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat-Oman

eman@squ.edu.om

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8420-9471>

Abstract

It can be argued that the notion of aesthetics occupies a central place in Islam's revealed text. Discussing the qualities that characterize the notion of aesthetics has attracted the attention of scholarly tradition. In the Qur'ānic discourse, various qualities can be discerned to characterize aesthetics.

To gain a better understanding and to construct a comprehensive image of the Qur'ānic perspective of aesthetic characteristics, the Qur'ān must be taken in its entirety. However, this study is based on the thematic exegesis genre, which aims to present a holistic view of the theme as discussed throughout the entire Qur'ānic text considering selected modern Qur'ānic exegeses, where more attention is given to a number of exegetical aspects considered in thematic exegesis.

Key Words: Aesthetics, characteristics, objective reality, perfection, pleasure

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Introduction

In the Qurʾānic text, several Qurʾānic terms are related to aesthetics.¹ In the same way, the Qurʾān expresses aesthetic concepts using several characteristics. Recognizing and analyzing all these characteristics is critical to developing a complete understanding of the concept of aesthetics in the Qurʾān. These characteristics might not, at times, look completely distinct from each other, with some overlap between them, but they are not synonymous and should therefore be treated as different.

A primary analysis of the qualities characterizing this notion of aesthetics in Qurʾānic discourse will be performed in the next few pages, which may shed more light on the underlying meanings and allow a closer understanding of this key notion. It is essential to note that the aim here is not to reach a definition of “aesthetics” in the Qurʾānic text; rather, it is an attempt to emphasize or determine the prominent or essential characteristics or qualities that characterize “aesthetics” to clarify discussions of the notion of “aesthetics” as it appears in Qurʾānic discourse.

One prominent characteristic is the beauty of “perfection.” “Perfection” is presented as an objective quality, so it is not a matter of personal judgment. Any beauty that the Qurʾān attributes to God is presented as an objective fact, not subject to opinion. Such beauty is presented as something that one ought to learn to recognize and appreciate. It is no surprise, therefore, to see beauty in the Qurʾān presented as something that God deliberately placed in creation.

The second quality that characterizes aesthetics is that it creates a feeling of pleasure in individuals. The third characteristic of aesthetics in the Qurʾān can be described as “goodness” and “usefulness.” Additionally, the Qurʾān stresses that the beauty in God’s creation is something for the human being to contemplate, which may be considered the fourth quality of aesthetics in the Qurʾān.

¹ Aesthetics in the Qurʾān is expressed using a number of terms, all of which have specific connotations. The most often mentioned are *jamāl* and *jamīl* from the root *j-m-l*, derivatives from the root *h-s-n*, those from the root *z-y-n*, those from the root *z-kb-r-f*, those from the root *b-b-j* and those from the root *n-d-r*.

1. Itqān²

The first of these characteristics is *itqān*, which is found in verse Q 27:88, describing God's creation: "this is the handiwork of God who has perfected all things." This Qurʾānic verse asserts that *itqān* is the visible feature of the entirety of God's creation, which reflects excellence and perfection in the whole. In light of its common linguistic meaning and Qurʾānic hermeneutics,³ this feature might be considered an umbrella term that involves all the qualities proposed as the properties of a "beautiful" object.⁴ It encompasses the principles of proportion, harmony, order, equilibrium, perfection, symmetry, etc., which are often expressed as universal criteria of beauty.⁵ In fact, Qurʾānic discourse goes beyond this to emphasize a

² This Qurʾānic term is translated as "perfection" in most Qurʾān translations. See, for example, M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qurʾān: A New Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 243; ʿAbd Allāh Yūsuf ʿAlī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qurʾān* (Maryland: Amana Publications, 1992). All translations of Qurʾānic verses are quoted from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem's *The Qurʾān: A New Translation* unless otherwise stated.

³ See, for example, Abū l-Baqāʾ Ayyūb ibn Mūsā al-Ḥusaynī al-Kafawī, *al-Kulliyāt: Muʿjam fī l-muṣṭalahāt wa-l-furūq al-hughawiyyah*, ed. ʿAdnān Darwīsh and Muḥammad al-Miṣrī, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risālah, 1998), 39; Abū l-Fayḍ Muḥammad al-Murtaḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-arūs min jawābir al-Qāmūs*, ed. ʿAbd al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj et al. (Kuwait: Wizārat al-ʿIlm, 1993), XXXIV, 316; Abū l-Faḍl Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Mukarram Ibn Manzūr al-Anṣārī, *Lisān al-ʿArab*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh ʿAlī al-Kabīr, Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḥasb Allāh, and Hāshim Muḥammad al-Shādhilī (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1981), V, 437; Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), I, 309; Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qurʾānic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 134-135; Sayyid Quṭb, *Fi Zilāl al-Qurʾān*, 32nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003), V, 2669; id., *In the Shade of the Qurʾān*, trans. and ed. Adil Salahi (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2005), XIII, 364; Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī, *Tafsīr al-Shaʿrāwī* (Cairo: Akhbār al-Yawm, 1999), XVII, 10858-10859.

⁴ Carolyn Korsmeyer, "Taste," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2001), 193.

⁵ Scholars have long been concerned with the essential characteristics of beauty. For example, Plato emphasizes proportion and measure. Medieval philosophers, in particular St. Thomas Aquinas, assigned three conditions of beauty: perfection, proportion or harmony, and brightness or clarity. Muslim scholars, al-Ghazālī for example, talk about perfection. Ibn Sīnā considered order, composition, and harmony. Furthermore, Behrens-Abouseif points out that the Arabs inherited from the Greeks the doctrine that proportion was the basis of beauty. See Christopher S. Nwodo, "Philosophy of Art versus Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1984), 200; George Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Pegasus, 1971), 7-9; Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Beauty*

sense of beauty beyond the perfection and excellence of God's creation, explicitly using the term *aḥsana* as seen in verse Q 32:7, "who gave everything its perfect form." Although the translation does not signify the sense of beauty seen in the Arabic term, the sense of beauty is clearly understood from the term *aḥsana*, in addition to its connotation of perfection. This instance justifies the claim to translate the term *iḥsān* and all related derivatives from the root ḥ-s-n as "making beautiful."⁶

In this regard, one might argue that the use of the word *iḥsān* (the infinitive of *aḥsana*) to signify the first quality of aesthetics in the Qur'ānic discourse is more appropriate since it implies the sense of beauty. However, it is worth mentioning that the term *iḥsān* is very comprehensive; thus, the cluster of meanings around it denotes, for instance, beauty, excellence, virtue, doing well, doing good, etc.⁷ This variation in the connotations of this term might create confusion, while the precise meaning of the word *itqān* makes it more appropriate for this context. Certainly, the term *itqān*, when applied to God as mentioned in verse Q 27:88, means beauty since God created the entire universe in a beautiful form, according to verse Q 32:7. Another reason for this preference is that the word *itqān* is used by Arabic lexicographers, such as al-Fīrūzābādī and al-Rāghib, and Qur'ānic exegetes when explaining the word *aḥsana* and all of its related derivatives (*aḥsantum*, *aḥsanū*, *tuḥsanū*, etc.).⁸

As far as Qur'ānic exegesis is concerned, the quality of *itqān* is often mentioned as a basis for aesthetics in the sense of perfection and the absence of shortcomings and confusion. In fact, Quṭb considers this connection to be two sides of the same coin or two

in Arabic Culture (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999), 37; Binyamin Abrahamov, *Divine Love in Islamic Mysticism: The Teachings of al-Ghazālī and al-Dabbāgh* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 105-113.

⁶ Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1994), 269; Reza Shah-Kazemi, "Truly God is Beautiful and He Loves Beauty: Aesthetics and Metaphysics in the Light of *Tawḥīd*," (lecture presented at the Prince's School of Traditional Art, London, November 27, 2013).

⁷ Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 265.

⁸ See, for example, Majd al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Fīrūzābādī, *Baṣā'ir ḍabawī l-tamyīz fī laṭā'if al-Kitāb al-'azīz*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah, n.d.), II, 68-70; al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, *Mufradāt alfāz al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Sayyid Kīlānī (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1999).

facets of a single truth.⁹ Such a connection between *itqān*, referring to complete perfection, and the theme of beauty can be found in Riḍā's exegesis. He points out that "beauty" lies in being associated with perfection. In fact, perfection, according to him, is the quality of "beauty," and imperfection is the quality of "ugliness."¹⁰ In this respect, he perfectly agrees with his teacher, 'Abduh.¹¹ Indeed, through Ibn 'Āshūr's explanation of the word *ḥusn*, he relates that which is beautiful to the quality of perfection and the absence of defects.¹²

Moreover, in the Qurʾānic text, a clear connection between the sense of "beauty" and perfection in terms of the absence of defects is drawn in verse Q 50:6: "*Do they not see the sky above them, how We have built and adorned it, with no rifts in it.*" This verse mentions the beautiful aspects of the sky. It seems to assert that one of the characteristics of "beauty" is the absence of shortcomings and confusion besides its adornment with stars, for instance. This absence of defects can be understood as perfection expressed in another way. Furthermore, it is worth noting here that aesthetic qualities such as brightness and radiance, or splendor, can be understood from the Qurʾānic aesthetic terms *naḍrah* and *nāḍirah* (radiant, glowing, and shining) from the root *n-ḍ-r*.

2. Pleasing the Beholder

The second quality that can be characterized as "aesthetic" in Qurʾānic discourse acts through its impact on the self, as borne out by evidence in Qurʾānic verses. For example, in verse Q 2:69, "*God says it should be a bright yellow cow, pleasing to the eye.*" This sentence alludes to the fact that pleasure results from beholding "beauty." Al-Shaʿrāwī points to this when he states, "Whoever looks at it is pleased with its brightness, cleanliness, the elegance of its appearance, and the symmetry of its body."¹³ In fact, he defines *jamāl* by associating it with the pleasure generated in the self. Furthermore, in describing

⁹ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, VI, 3633; Quṭb, *In the Shade*, XVII, 137.

¹⁰ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ḥakīm al-mushtabir bi-ism Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1947), IV, 238.

¹¹ Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risālat al-tawḥīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1994), 67-79.

¹² Muḥammad al-Ṭahir ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisīyah, 1984), XXI, 215.

¹³ Al-Shaʿrāwī, *Tafsīr al-Shaʿrāwī*, I, 394.

Paradise in verse Q 43:71, “*Dishes and goblets of gold will be passed around them with all that their souls desire, and their eyes delight in,*” an obvious implication is that delight to the eye is one of the effects of beholding “beauty.” Ibn ‘Āshūr elucidates this by stating that the “delight of the eye is caused by seeing beautiful shapes and pleasing colors.”¹⁴ Indeed, for him, the delight of the eye leads to the delight of the self, “pleasure.”¹⁵

Moreover, it can be claimed that the word *bahjab* and its adjective *bahīj* can be considered, according to their linguistic meanings, obvious evidence that pleasure is an essential characteristic of “aesthetics” in Qur’ānic discourse. By association with prettiness, the power to delight and gladden us is more obvious in the connotations of the word *bahjab*. Indeed, it is worth mentioning here that the practice of defining “aesthetics” through its effect governs several discussions on “aesthetics” by both Aquinas and Kant, for example. They claim that “beauty” has a pleasant effect when perceived.¹⁶ With reference to an Islamic context, al-Fārābī associates pleasure with the comprehension of beautiful objects. He claims that pleasure increases according to the intensity of beauty in perceived objects. Behrens-Abouseif states that “the only universal principle that governed beauty in Arabic culture was its association with pleasure.”¹⁷

3. “Beauty” and the “Good”

One of the striking characteristics of “aesthetics” is its relation to the idea of function or usefulness or, in other words, its relation to the idea of “good.” Nwodo summarizes the historical background of the relation between the “beautiful” and the “good” by pointing out that identifying the good with the beautiful has been sustained by several philosophers and scholars since ancient Greece. Plato, for example, identifies the two without hesitation. In fact, Jacques Maritain claims that in Greek writings, the expressions for good and beautiful are equivalent. Indeed, both Aquinas and Scholastics maintain that the

¹⁴ Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, XXV, 255.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See, for example, Nwodo, “Philosophy of Art Versus Aesthetics,” 200; Felix M. Gatz, “The Object of Aesthetics: The Place of Beauty and Art in Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1941-1942), 21.

¹⁷ Behrens-Abouseif, *Beauty in Arabic Culture*, 42.

beautiful, the good, and the true are “convertible.”¹⁸ Rosenthal asserts that the equation between “beauty” and “good” can be found in several languages, one of which is Arabic. He exemplifies his argument by claiming that the term *ḥusn* is used in Arabic to denote the good and *jamāl* to denote beauty.¹⁹

In Qurʾānic discourse, both previously mentioned tendencies can be found. The notion of beauty is mentioned in itself and identified with usefulness and goodness. About the association between “beauty” and usefulness, seen several times in the Qurʾānic text where “beauty” is mentioned, the idea of exercising a function or being useful is highlighted in, for example, verses Q 37:6, Q 41:12, and Q 67:5. Furthermore, derivatives from the root *ḥ-s-n* indicate that the senses of beauty and goodness are intertwined, as can be understood from their linguistic meaning and commentators’ texts. Lexicographers and Qurʾānic exegetes assert that one of the meanings of *ḥasan* and other related derivatives is something connected to utility or usefulness, whether material or abstract. In fact, the sense of usefulness and the good can be seen in this root more than in other “aesthetic” terms used in the Qurʾān. This is what justifies translating the term *ḥasan* and related derivatives in most cases as “good.”²⁰ Izutsu, for example, in his analysis of major concepts in the Qurʾān, treats the root *ḥ-s-n* in the semantic field of the concept of good. Indeed, he considers the derivation of the word *ḥasanah*, which is the feminine form of the adjective *ḥasan*, as synonymous, at least in a certain context, with the word *kbayr*, which is also discussed in the same semantic field.²¹

Another quotation is verse Q 16:5-8, which shows that the sense of “beauty,” as mentioned in Qurʾānic discourse, expresses “being itself” in addition to being identified with usefulness and goodness: “*And livestock, He created them too. You derive warmth and other benefits from them: you get food from them; you find beauty in them when you bring them home to rest and when you drive them out to pasture.*”

¹⁸ Nwodo, “Philosophy of Art Versus Aesthetics,” 201.

¹⁹ Franz Rosenthal, *Four Essays on Art and Literature in Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 12.

²⁰ As mentioned above, Rosenthal uses the word *ḥasan* for “good” and *jamīl* for “beautiful.” See Rosenthal, *Four Essays on Art and Literature in Islam*, 12.

²¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2002), 203-249.

They carry your loads to lands you yourselves could not reach without great hardship.” Here, it can be noted that “beauty” is mentioned in the context of two utilities, namely, “*You derive warmth and other benefits from them: you get food from them*” and “*They carry your loads to lands you yourselves could not reach without great hardship.*” At the same time, it can be argued that although “beauty” is mentioned between these two utilities, it is independent of both, in that the feeling of beauty aroused in the beholder when watching them, as it is made obvious in the verse, is not triggered by the utility derived from the cattle, i.e., the cattle are not beautiful in the eyes of people merely because they are useful to them but also because they satisfy a particular emotional need for the beholder.²² It can be concluded that although the verse, on the one hand, does not explicitly connect beauty with usefulness, it does not, on the other hand, separate the two concepts completely. In fact, it considers the feelings concerning beauty aroused by watching them as one of their benefits. That implies beauty is stressed as a distinct value in itself despite or regardless of other benefits, as shown above.

4. “Beauty” is Deliberately Placed

In the Qur’ānic view, beauty is a fundamental component of this universe and is intended in the origin of creation. In other words, it is not a superficial element in the universe but rather “an essential part of its nature.”²³ This view is asserted in several places in Qur’ānic discourse, a few of which are discussed here. First, in verse Q 32:7 mentioned earlier, “*who gave everything its perfect form.*” Clearly, this verse sufficiently emphasizes aesthetics as an indispensable element in the entirety of God’s creation. This conclusion is drawn from the Qur’ānic term *aḥsana*, which signifies the sense of aesthetics in addition to its implication in perfection and excellence. As discussed earlier in the first characteristic of aesthetics, *itqān*, verse Q 27:88 highlights the perfection and excellence of God’s creation, while verse Q 32:7 goes beyond by emphasizing the sense of beauty

²² See, Muḥammad ‘Imārah, *al-Islām wa-l-funūn al-jamīlab* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1991), 18; Šāliḥ Aḥmad al-Shāmī, *al-Ẓābirab al-jamāliyyab fī l-Islām* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1986), 122; ‘Abbās Tawfiq, “Alfāz al-jamāl fī l-Qur’ān al-karīm,” 2-3. مقالة – الفكر القرآني|الفاظ الجمال في القرآن الكريم – (quranicthought.com), accessed March 22, 2021.

²³ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, V, 2984; id., *In the Shade*, XIV, 240.

through the usage of the aesthetic term *aḥsana*. Thus, verse Q 32:7 stresses that the Qurʾān mentions beauty as one of the intended purposes of creation.²⁴

Additional Qurʾānic examples that demonstrate that “beauty” is deliberately placed in the universe are verses Q 50:6 and Q 67:3-5, about the creation of the heavens. The notable point here, however, is that these verses go beyond describing the perfection of the creation of the heavens to emphasize the aspects of their beauty. In verse Q 67:3-5, “*who created the seven heavens, one above the other. You will not see any flaw in what the Lord of Mercy creates. Look again! Can you see any flaw? Look again! And again! Your sight will turn back to you, weak and defeated. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them [missiles] for stoning devils.*” Thus, while the Qurʾān turns our attention to the perfection of heaven’s creation by challenging us to detect any flaw or defect, it specifically addresses its “beauty” and glory.

Considering the attitude of modern commentators, Quṭb, for example, asserts this characteristic several times. He points out that the aspects of perfection and excellence, and not merely what takes place in the existence of the universe, are reflected in the aspects of harmony, accuracy, balance, and perfect function; indeed, “beauty” is attained in the universe as a whole.²⁵ He says, “like perfection, beauty is deliberately placed in the universe.”²⁶

In summary, according to Qurʾānic discourse, beauty is intended in the universe. It is independently deliberated upon, not for the sole enjoyment of humans but rather as an integral component to serve a religious purpose along with the entire Islamic system.

5. Contemplating Beauty

It is worth mentioning that an interesting point in Qurʾānic discourses on “beauty” is that although the Qurʾān portrays instances of the beauty of the universe in extraordinary verses, it also specifically directs our attention to the contemplation of “beauty,”

²⁴ Discussion of the implication of the meaning of the word “everything,” mentioned in verse Q 32:7, is not intended in this regard. The focus here is on the connotations of the term *aḥsana*.

²⁵ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, IV, 2133; id., *In the Shade*, X, 260.

²⁶ See Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, VI, 3633; id., *In the Shade*, XVII, 137.

which, in turn, indicates the significance of the entire concept of “aesthetics” within the fabric of Islam. Indeed, contemplating the beauty of God’s creation is one of the greatest ways of contemplating the universe and, at the same time, is generally considered a form of worship in Islam. This is what Malik Badri stresses in his book *Contemplation: an Islamic Psychospiritual Study* when he counts the observation of the beauty of the universe as one of the main methods to be found in the Qur’ān to encourage the contemplation of the creation of the universe.²⁷

In Qur’ānic discourse on “beauty,” it is clear that, as noted earlier, both “beauty” and the invitation to contemplate it are inevitably linked. Indeed, contemplation is a significant aspect deliberately placed in the discourse of “aesthetics.” This can be seen in verse Q 6:99, “*Watch their fruits as they grow and ripen.*” This verse comes in the context of describing the beauty of plants and therefore emphasizes the contemplation of their beauty more than any other aspect, i.e., that they can be eaten. Quṭb, while interpreting this verse, claims that the emphasis here is on the “splendid aspects of creation,” so we are invited to contemplate “beauty” rather than any other aspect since, through contemplation, the senses will be familiarized to appreciate such “beauty.”²⁸ Moreover, al-Sha‘rāwī has an interesting interpretation of the same verse; he claims that when God asks humans to contemplate “beauty,” He makes this contemplation a basic right for all individuals, whether they can benefit from it or not.²⁹ Indeed, al-Sha‘rāwī claims that the same view can be found in verses Q 16:6-7. He points out that God, before mentioning the benefit gained from horses, i.e., that they can be ridden, mentions their beauty before other benefits, as even if an individual does not own horses, he still can enjoy their beauty.³⁰

In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the significance of the notion of contemplation can be seen in most theories of aesthetics, as

²⁷ Malik Badri, *Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*, trans. Abdul-Wahid Lu’lu’a (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000), 57-58. See also, Javed Jamil, “Purpose of the Creation of Man: Quran’s True Vision of Anthropoc Principle,” *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 15 (December 2019), 54.

²⁸ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, II, 1161; id., *In the Shade*, V, 223.

²⁹ Al-Sha‘rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha‘rāwī*, VI, 3827.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Dickie claims, from the time of Plato, for whom contemplation was a central theme in the theory of beauty.³¹ Furthermore, some scholars, such as Stolnitz and Austin, maintain that the aesthetic experience requires contemplation for its perception and hence its appreciation.³² However, Reid and Richmond, for example, claim that the aspect of contemplation in the experience of aesthetics has, in recent years, been neglected.³³

The notion of contemplating “beauty” or, more generally, contemplating God’s creation is, in Qurʾānic discourse, not for mere enjoyment or to evoke pleasure; it is rather a form of worship, as noted above. Muslim scholars enumerate many religious aspects achieved through contemplation, all of which serve the central theme of Islam: *tawhīd*. This, as Quṭb states, can be summarized as follows: by contemplating the beauty of the universe, “we feel the link between the Creator and creation.”³⁴ More of these religious aspects will be discussed in further detail below.

6. Nature is the Vast Domain of Physical “Aesthetics”

The beauty of the universe or its natural beauty, in terms of physical beauty, in Qurʾānic discourse, is emphasized more than any other kind of physical beauty. Qurʾānic verses in different *sūrah*s refer to the wonders of the whole universe in its various physical phenomena. Qurʾānic discourse on the aesthetics of nature can be seen in a number of verses considered in this study, notably verses Q 16:6 and Q 16:8, which mention beauty in the creation of animals. In addition, beauty constitutes an essential aspect in the creation of the heavens and the earth, as seen in several verses, for instance, Q 15:16, Q 37:6, Q 41:12, Q 50:6, Q 10:24, and Q 27:60. In this respect, the beauty of humankind is emphasized as an object of special wonder, since, as al-Ghazālī claims, it is the “key to knowing the

³¹ Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction*, 8.

³² Jerome Stolnitz, *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism: a Critical Introduction* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 35; M. R. Austin, “Aesthetic Experience and the Nature of Religious Perception,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 14, no. 3 (1980), 22.

³³ Louis Arnaud Reid, “Knowledge, Morals, and Aesthetic Education,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 2, no. 3 (July 1968), 50; John W. Richmond, “Reconsidering Aesthetic and Religious Experience: A Companion View,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 33, no. 4 (Winter 1999), 42.

³⁴ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, V, 2808; id., *In the Shade*, XIII, 364.

greatness of the creator.”³⁵ The Qur’ānic references to the “beauty” of the human body can be seen in verses Q 33:52, Q 40:64, Q 64:3, and Q 95:4. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that derivatives from the root *z-y-n* are often used in the context of the beauty of the heavens and the earth, while derivatives from the root *h-s-n* are used when referring to the beauty of human beings.

There is yet another aspect of the physical aesthetics mentioned in the Qur’ānic text; that is, the aspect of man-made beauty or what may be called “art.”³⁶ This kind of aesthetics is mentioned less often than the aesthetics of the natural world. It can be argued that the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba mentioned in verse Q 27:44 is the first verse that one might turn to in the Qur’ān for its implications about art. As Gonzalez claims in this regard, the aesthetic principles found in the *ṣarḥ* (palace) prepared for the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon are widely applied in Islamic art and architecture.³⁷ In addition, the references to an ‘artistic aesthetic’ in Qur’ānic discourse include indirect references to what might be considered the Qur’ānic “consideration for art and architecture.”³⁸ These indirect implications can be seen, for example, in verses Q 7:74, Q 13:71, and Q 34:31. Hence, it should be remembered that, as Oleg Grabar observes, Qur’ānic discourse in this context does not contain what might be construed specifically as a theory of visual art; rather, a number of disjointed observations can be inferred that might have implications for art and architecture.³⁹

It is worth mentioning that the question of appreciating nature and art or defining the realm in which aesthetics can present itself has always been a matter of debate in Western aesthetics. Scholars such

³⁵ Carole Hillenbrand, “Some Aspects of al-Ghazālī’s Views on Beauty,” in *Gott ist schön und Er liebt die Schönheit: God is beautiful and He loves beauty: festschrift in honour of Annemarie Schimmel*, ed. Alma Giese and J. Christoph Bürgel (Bern: Peter Lang, 1994), 251.

³⁶ Ralph B. Winn, “The Beauty of Nature and Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2, no. 5 (Spring 1942), 8; See also, Mojib Alzahrani, “The Concept of Esthetics and Beauty in Islam as One of the Components of Islamic Art,” *Journal of Education* 2, no. 88 (August 2021), 62.

³⁷ Valérie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: I. B. Tauris: 2001), 37.

³⁸ Oleg Grabar, “Art and Architecture,” in *The Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), I, 162.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

as Carlson and Hepburn claim that philosophical aesthetics neglected natural beauty and was dominated by an interest in art. Nature was appreciated through its representation in art and literature, although individuals have always responded aesthetically to the nature surrounding them.⁴⁰ In this context, Brady reminds us that in the classical period, the aesthetics of nature were of little interest and that philosophical aesthetics were equated with the philosophy of art. This position did not change until the eighteenth century when the appreciation of natural aesthetics reached a turning point. Kant was the first to represent a theory of the aesthetical appreciation of nature. Schelling and a few other thinkers in the nineteenth century were followed by a wider discussion of environmental aesthetics.⁴¹

7. “Subjectivity” and “Objectivity” of Aesthetics

An important characteristic of aesthetics in Qurʾānic discourse is what is famously known as subjective and objective theories, which Moore considers “the leading theories of beauty.”⁴² The question revolves around the idea that beauty can be identified both as an object in a substance (objective) or as referring to the experience of beauty (subjective), which means that beauty is merely an idea in the mind or a personal feeling toward an object. If so, the object itself cannot be described as beautiful or ugly, but only appears so according to our feelings.

When considering this issue from a Qurʾānic perspective, it may be said that although beauty in the Qurʾān is identified with emotional feelings, as indicated earlier, it can still be asserted that beauty in the Qurʾānic discourse is an objective reality inherent in a substance and not merely an impression formed by the beholder. This assumption can be substantiated through several pieces of evidence in the Qurʾānic text.

Through Qurʾānic discourse on identifying beauty by its effect on beholders, it can still be seen that these effects are phrased in a general pattern so that they encompass all beholders. In verse Q 2:69,

⁴⁰ Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2002), 5.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 32.

⁴² Jared S. Moore, “Beauty as Harmony,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2, no. 7 (Winter 1942-1943), 41.

for example, “*God says it should be a bright yellow cow, pleasing to the eye,*” al-Sha‘rāwī asserts that it “includes anyone who looks at it.”⁴³ Apparently, if beauty were not a quality inherent in the object looked at, the pleasure would not involve any beholder. The same view is found in verse Q 43:71: “*Dishes and goblets of gold will be passed around them with all that their souls desire and their eyes delight in.*” Thus, the delight appeals to every eye. In addition, scholars such as al-Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī mention that “*al-*” (the definitive article “the”) in the Qur’ānic word *al-a‘yun* (the eyes) refers to *istighbrāq*, which they take to mean that it encompasses all the addressees, in this case, all eyes that see Paradise.⁴⁴

As mentioned earlier, several terms are used in the Qur’ān to indicate a sense of aesthetics, each of which has its specific perspective in expressing one sense of the term. The concern here is that the term *ḥusn* and the other derivatives from the root *ḥ-s-n* denote an intrinsic quality in a “beautiful” object; therefore, its beauty is an objective quality.

With the use of the concept of *itqān* as an obvious element in the notion of aesthetics as presented in Qur’ānic discourse through the use of derivatives from the root *ḥ-s-n*, it can be asserted that the availability of such characteristics in a given object offers clear evidence that beauty represents an independent fact rather than a contingent feeling or emotional effect whose existence or nonexistence depends on the beholders.

Several verses in the Qur’ānic text invite us to contemplate the beauty inherent in God’s creation, as seen, for example, in verse Q 50:6: “*Do they not see the sky above them, how We have built and adorned it, with no rifts in it.*” Accordingly, if beauty is claimed to be an idea in the mind or a mere emotional feeling derived from a beautiful experience, such an invitation to contemplate the universe would have been preposterous or unachievable. For Muslims, according to verses Q 23:115 and Q 44:38-39, Allah transcends vanity, and His commands are free from such absurdity.

⁴³ Al-Sha‘rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha‘rāwī*, I, 394.

⁴⁴ Abū l-Faql Shihāb al-Dīn al-Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-ma‘ānī fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘azīm wa-l-sab‘ al-mathānī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, n.d.), XXV, 99.

8. Religious Function of the Notion of Aesthetics

It can be argued that the notion of aesthetics in Qurʾānic discourse is not there for mere enjoyment or to evoke pleasure or simply a psychological state brought on by an eschatological form. Rather, it is always connected with moral and religious purposes and is not solely of emotional or eschatological concern. Indeed, Qurʾānic discourse concerning aesthetics aims to lead us to believe in God's existence and serve all Islam's commands and rituals. According to the verses under consideration in this study, it can be claimed that some religious purposes are fulfilled by the notion of aesthetics as presented in the Qurʾānic text; these are as follows.

8.1. *Tawḥīd* (Oneness of God)

As the most fundamental Islamic doctrine, which encapsulates the core of the Islamic faith, divine oneness is consistently asserted in various ways by the Qurʾān. The most obvious is by reflecting the beauty of the creation of the vast universe, including the creation of the human race. Reflecting on the beauty of God's creation, according to Qurʾānic discourse, brings us to know God, the Creator. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that in His creation and its beauty, Allah reveals himself, and the beauty of this universe is a reflection of divine beauty.⁴⁵ All the verses describing the beauty of nature reveal that this marvelous creation in its perfect form is a sign of Allah. Indeed, it shows not only God's existence but also His oneness, sovereignty, and unlimited power.⁴⁶ However, it is important to highlight here that this is one of the three basic features characterizing the doctrine of *tawḥīd* (in full, *tawḥīd al-rubūbiyyah*, the oneness of lordship), which signifies believing in one God: the sole Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe; *tawḥīd al-ulūbiyyah*

⁴⁵ See, for example, Daniel A. Madigan, "Themes and Topics," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 83; K. K. Aziz, *The Meaning of Islamic Art: Explorations in Religious Symbolism and Social Relevance* (Lahore: Al-Faisal, 2004), 1:9; Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *al-Islām wa-l-fann* (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 1995), 9.

⁴⁶ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 67. See also, Shaibatul' Islamiah Che Man et al, "'al-Jamaal' as a Concept of Islamic Aesthetics: From the Perspective of Religion and Art," *Journal of Computational and Theoretical Nanoscience* 13, no. 12 (December 2016), 2; William Chittick, "Love in Islamic Thought," *Religion Compass* 8, no. 7 (2014), 231-234.

(oneness of worship) also implies that Allah is the only deity worthy of worship and *tawḥīd al-asmā' wa-l-ṣifāt* (the oneness of God's names and attributes)⁴⁷ is to be discerned in Qur'ānic considerations of the notion of aesthetics embodied in the universe as a whole. The term *rubūbiyyah* is derived from the word *rabb*, which means "lord," "master," or "owner." This concept denotes the fact that there is only one God who created everything and who manages that creation. All manifest and subtle actions ultimately belong to this one God; nothing can be attributed to anyone other than Him.

This Qur'ānic fact, related to taking the beauty of the vast universe as proof of Allah's existence –that is, as a manifestation of God's other attributes, such as His power– is rehearsed many times in the Qur'ānic text, as seen in verse Q 37:4-6: *"Truly your God is in unity as well as sovereignty One, Lord of the heavens and earth and everything between them, Lord of every sunrise. We have adorned the lowest heaven with stars."* Hence, it follows that highlighting the beauty discerned in the universe, i.e., the heavens being adorned with stars, is mentioned in the context of the oneness of God: the Creator and Sustainer of the diverse universe. Similarly, in verse Q 67:1-5, *"Exalted is He who holds all control in His hands; who has power over all things; who created death and life to test you [people] and reveal which of you does best; He is the Mighty, the Forgiving; who created the seven heavens, one above the other. You will not see any flaw in what the Lord of Mercy creates. Look again! Can you see any flaw? Look again! And again! Your sight will turn back to you, weak and defeated. We have adorned the lowest heaven with lamps and made them [missiles] for stoning devils."* Here, the same argument is presented, the beauty of the universe is addressed in the same breath as God's power and sovereignty, which extends to the furthest universe in this worldly life and Hereafter. Thus, addressing beauty in the context of God being the single Creator of all this beauty surrounding human beings, in turn, will assert the oneness of God. In this regard, Quṭb presents the same view when he argues that what is mentioned in verse Q 67:3-11 signifies what was mentioned at the beginning of the *Sūrat al-mulk* (Dominion: Chapter 67), that the beauty of creation is an aspect of "God's complete

⁴⁷ Hussein Abdul Raof, "Tawhid," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 651.

dominion of the universe.”⁴⁸ Elsewhere, he points out that appreciating the beauty of creation leads to knowing the Creator’s own beauty.⁴⁹

It might be claimed here that the most important conclusion in the relationship between the Qurʾānic notion of aesthetics and the doctrine of *tawḥīd* is that God consistently describes His divine names and attributes in the Qurʾān with the quality of *ḥusn* on four occasions in the same statement, *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*, as seen in verse Q 7:180, “The Most Excellent Names belong to God,” in verse Q 17:110, “the best names belong to Him,” in verse Q 20:8, “the most excellent names belong to Him,” and in verse Q 59:24, “The best names belong to Him.” While Abdel Haleem translates the word *al-ḥusnā* as excellence and superiority, it is often translated as “beautiful.”⁵⁰ Hence, it can be argued that both translations are acceptable since the word *al-ḥusnā*, the feminine form of *al-aḥsan*, means “good” in addition to the quality of “beauty,” as established above; the word *ḥusn* denotes both the meanings of beauty and goodness. A similar argument is presented by Oliver Leaman. He claims that, although the word *al-ḥusnā* is frequently translated as “beautiful,” the sense of “goodness” might be considered the most appropriate meaning of the word *al-ḥusnā*.⁵¹ Likewise, Adil Salahi, in his translation of Quṭb’s exegesis, points out that “the Arabic adjective *al-ḥusnā*, translated as ‘the most gracious,’ also means “beautiful,” “attractive,” etc.”⁵²

Indeed, the most deep-seated quality subsumed in the meaning of the word *al-ḥusnā*, particularly when referring to God’s names and attributes, is the quality of “perfection.” In this regard, the qualities of

⁴⁸ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, VI, 3631; id., *In the Shade*, XVII, 134.

⁴⁹ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, VI, 3634; id., *In the Shade*, XVII, 138.

⁵⁰ It is widely known that the most famous translation of *al-asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* is “the beautiful names.” This translation can be found in several writers. See, for example, Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God: al-Maḥṣad al-asnāʾ fī asmāʾ Allāh al-ḥusnā*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1992); Gerhard Böwering, “God and His Attributes,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 2:317; Zeki Saritoprak, “Allah,” in *The Qurʾān: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman, (London: Routledge, 2006), 39.

⁵¹ Oliver Leaman, “Al-Rahman,” in *The Qurʾān: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 528.

⁵² Quṭb, *In the Shade*, XVI, 448.

beautiful, good, and perfect can be found in the interpretations by exegetes of the four verses mentioned above. Ibn ‘Āshūr, while interpreting the meaning of *al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*, states several times that the quality of *ḥusn* is an inherent quality and an essential property of the object in question, not a transient feature that might not be appropriate or accepted by everyone. For him, the meaning of *al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā* indicates perfection since it refers to actual perfection. This perfection in God’s names and attributes can be discerned on two levels: first, that some of these names cannot be understood in any complete or comprehensive way except as describing God, such as *al-‘Azīz* (The Eminent), *al-Ḥakīm* (The Wise), *al-Ḥayy* (The Living), and *al-Ghanī* (The Self-Sufficient). Second, the meanings of other names will not be good or acceptable unless by the side of such divine names as *al-Jabbār* (The Compeller) and *al-Mutakabbir* (The Proud). Such names, as Ibn ‘Āshūr claims, cause corruption on the part of human beings, while on the part of the Divine, they signify justice.⁵³ Moreover, al-Sha‘rāwī expresses another aspect of perfection embodied in the meaning of *al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*. He claims that the meaning of certain names in the mouths of human beings may not be identical to the condition of the person named. He gives the example of someone called *sa‘īd* (happy), who might be otherwise. For him, the excellence or the “beauty” in names rests in their being identical to the object named. However, as stated by Ibn ‘Āshūr, the name may be identical to the object named but not on the same high level, which will still be a kind of deficiency.⁵⁴ Thus, the account from al-Sha‘rāwī of a name’s meaning or not meaning a quality possessed by its owner does not require discussion. However, the most important aspect to mention here is that the divine names and attributes as described in the Qur’ān are the most beautiful, excellent, and perfect names, showing the appropriateness of these names to describe and praise God.

A different aspect can be discerned in the Qur’ānic discourse of aesthetics that may be included among the “tenets of faith,”⁵⁵ that the notion of aesthetics addressed within the context of God’s favors enumerated in the Qur’ānic text can be seen, for example, in verses

⁵³ Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, IX, 186-187.

⁵⁴ Al-Sha‘rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha‘rāwī*, XIV, 8808.

⁵⁵ Abdul-Raof, “Tawhid,” 651.

Q 16:2-18, Q 35:12, and Q 13:17. Hence, addressing aesthetics within the context of enumerating God's favors and blessings granted to all human beings in the heavens, the earth, and even in themselves implies that aesthetics is one of those favors that satisfies not only bodily needs but also all necessities and desires. However, as mentioned in the Qurʾānic text, verse Q 16:18, these uncountable favors function as reminders of God's blessings and mercy and are also signs for us to comprehend. Accordingly, reflecting on these favors or graces around us causes us to be grateful for such blessings and to express our gratitude toward God. More importantly, it turns us to believe in God. Thus, this conclusion of thankfulness to God and belief in him is frequently mentioned in Qurʾānic discourse on God's grace. For example, the words *tasbkurūn* (to be grateful), *tadbakkarūn* or *yadbdbakkarūn* (to reflect, take heed), and *yatafakkarūn* (to think) are all used to invite human beings to express gratitude and deep comprehension and contemplation when they realize that beyond this wonderful creation is God with no partners, which signifies the crux of Islamic faith in *tawḥīd*.⁵⁶

8.2. Trials

According to Qurʾānic discourse, there is no doubt that trials and tribulations are aspects of God's law in creating this life, as seen in verses Q 11:7 and Q 67:2. Indeed, human beings as individuals or even nations are subject to trials and tribulations in this worldly life. The Qurʾānic text portrays from time to time different forms of trial by evil, as seen in verse Q 2:155, "*We shall certainly test you with fear and hunger, and loss of property, lives, and crops.*" Furthermore, different perspectives on the purposes behind all kinds of trials afflicting human beings are taken in the Qurʾānic passages. An example can be seen in verse Q 29:2-3: "*Do people think they will be left alone after saying 'We believe' without being put to the test? We tested those who went before them: God will certainly mark out which ones are truthful and which are lying.*" Another use of the Qurʾānic perspective on the reasons for the trials that afflict human beings, particularly believers, is shown in verse Q 47:31: "*We shall test you to see which of you strive your hardest and are steadfast; We shall test*

⁵⁶ See, for example, Quṭb, *Fī Zīlāl*, IV, 2161; id., *In the Shade*, XI, 2; XIV, 143; Oliver Leaman, "Nature Live and the Qurʾān," in *The Qurʾān: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 2006), 452.

the sincerity of your assertions.” Thus, these verses make it quite clear that the purpose behind trials is to test human faith and submission to God’s will and power.

However, trials in the Qur’ānic concept are not limited to evil and hardship alone; they are extended to trials by what is good, as stated clearly in verse Q 21:35, “*We test you all through the bad and the good, and to Us, you will all return,*” and in verse Q 7:168, “*We tested them with blessings and misfortunes so that they might all return.*” Accordingly, one of the aspects of being tried by what is good, in Qur’ānic discourse, is trial by the notion of aesthetics. This is seen, for example, in verse Q 18:7, “*We have adorned the earth with attractive things so that We may test people to determine which of them do best,*” and in verse Q 20:131, “*and do not gaze longingly at what We have given some of them [other people] to enjoy, the finery of this present life: We test them through this, but the provision of your Lord is better and more lasting.*” Hence, it may be noted that the sense of aesthetics is expressed in the first verse by the word *zīnah* (adorned) and in the latter verse by the word *zabrah* (finery), which occurs only in this location. Ibn ‘Āshūr explains the purpose of trials by the form of good, in general, and by aesthetics, in particular. He points out that this kind of trial arouses some people to contemplate their Creator and be thankful to Him, which will lead to the enhancement of faith in and worship of God. What matters most is to deal with it according to God’s commands. To do otherwise would be to deny the Creator and the wisdom behind creation. People may also submerge themselves in sensory enjoyment without expressing their gratitude to and worship of God or with no concern for what God had made in the Hereafter of sublime splendors.⁵⁷ Moreover, Quṭb considered being tried by what is good and pleasurable to be more difficult than being tested by hardship. For him, being tested by something with evil and hardship is still endurable; one is not overawed and maintains one’s dignity. In contrast, few can withstand being tried by something good since it tempts one to continue, despite the loss of dignity or the bearing of humiliation, to acquire it and not to lose it.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, he adds that trials by all the wonders, comforts, and pleasures God bestows on us in this world prove which of us are

⁵⁷ Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, XV, 257.

⁵⁸ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, IV, 2377f.; id., *In the Shade*, XII, 24f.

good and which will deviate from the right path.⁵⁹ Indeed, this kind of trial segregates those who pursue worldly pleasures from those who are preoccupied with the noble rewards that God has guaranteed for people who have withdrawn their desires from the chance of being controlled by earthly wonders and pleasures.⁶⁰

Thus, it should be clear through this aspect in Qurʾānic discourse that aesthetics can be seen as a form of trial and that the notion of “aesthetics” deliberately placed in this universe is not unworthy of inclusion in the Qurʾān. Quṭb claims, in this regard, it is:

an encouragement to hold on to true and lasting values, to maintain one’s ties with God, and be contented. This is the best way to resist the temptation of the splendor and attractions of this life. When we maintain such values, we are free to rise above the lure of false temptations, splendid as they may appear.⁶¹

Indeed, he maintains that this aspect of aesthetics in the Qurʾānic outlook purifies and exalts the human soul, prevents it from being ridden by physical earthly pleasures, and enables people to experience earthly pleasures and the benefits of them appropriately, according to the Qurʾānic view of them as *zabrah*, things whose splendors fade before long. Indeed, it will maintain the link with God, as He promotes those who fall under the spell of worldly splendors at the cost of the noble and sublime wonders provided in the life Hereafter.⁶²

8.3. Worship of God

In Islam, the sense of aesthetics has an essential role in the concept of worship; it is considered a requirement that must be fulfilled in performing worship to be accepted by God. The Qurʾān confirms this accompaniment to prayer as a kind of worship, with the notion of “aesthetics” in verse Q 7:31, “*Children of Adam, dress well whenever you are at worship.*” In this verse, the Qurʾānic word *zīnah* is translated, by Abdel Haleem, as “dress well,” and this translation can be understood according to the jurisprudential interpretation of the meaning of the word *zīnah*, according to the interpretation of

⁵⁹ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, IV, 2258; id., *In the Shade*, XI, 194.

⁶⁰ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, I, 373f.; id., *In the Shade*, II, 29f.

⁶¹ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, IV, 2357; id., *In the Shade*, XI, 368.

⁶² Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, I, 374; id., *In the Shade*, II, 30f.

most scholars.⁶³ However, others, for instance, Riḍā, claim that, rather than being well-dressed, the meaning of *zīnab* in this verse can be understood in a comprehensive way, which includes several kinds of *zīnab*, according to what is known in each community.⁶⁴ This may extend to the width of Ali's application:

Beautiful apparel: *zinah* adornments or apparel for beautiful living: construed to mean not only clothes that add grace to the wearer, but toilet and cleanliness, attention to hair, and other small personal details which no self-respecting man or woman ought to neglect when going solemnly even before a great human dignitary, if only out of respect for the dignity of the occasion. How much more important it is to attend to these details when we solemnly apply our minds to the presence of God.⁶⁵

Considering the circumstances in which this verse was revealed, an important inference about aspects of the Qur'ānic outlook on the notion of "aesthetics" must be drawn. Al-Wāḥidī (d. 468/1076) reports that in pre-Islamic days, Arab pagans, except the *Ḥumayy* (the people of *Quraysh* and their descendants), used to perform a *ṭawāf* (circumambulation) around the *Ka'bah* (the Sacred House) in stark nakedness. This verse was revealed to prohibit a pre-Islamic Arab practice and command people to adorn themselves when at worship.⁶⁶ Scholars such as Riḍā and Quṭb comment that this immodesty was found in the pre-Islamic era, not only among Arabs but also among many nations, which even currently indulge in similar practices (nakedness).⁶⁷ Thus, Qur'ānic discourse makes clear throughout this verse and the preceding verses (Q 7:26-29) that nakedness and the immodest exposure of the body are not aesthetic practices or kinds of adornment but rather the evil influence of Satan, as stated clearly in these verses. These verses refer to an essential aspect of the story of Adam and Eve, in which they are sent down to

⁶³ See, for example, Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, VIII, 92-94; Quṭb, *Fi Zilāl*, III, 1282; id., *In the Shade*, VI, 63; Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, VIII, 380f.

⁶⁴ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, 8:381.

⁶⁵ 'Alī, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān*, 351.

⁶⁶ Abū l-Ḥasan 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Kamāl Basyūnī Zaghlūl (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1991), 228-229.

⁶⁷ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, VIII, 382f.; Quṭb, *Fi Zilāl*, III, 1283; id., *In the Shade*, VI, 52f., 58. See also Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding the Qur'ān: Abridged Version of Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, trans. & ed. Zafar Ishaq Ansari (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2006), 309.

earth because, under Satan's influence, they went about naked. Indeed, these verses comment on human beings, that beautifying their bodies not only covers their private parts but, as most scholars and Qurʾān exegetes agree, for instance, Riḍā and Quṭb, requires them to wear proper apparel, which gives them a decent appearance.⁶⁸

According to Quṭb, human beauty is the beauty of dress and cover. In contrast, appearing naked is not beautiful, and those who consider it so “suffer from a distortion of human taste” and a corrupted human nature, which intrinsically abhors the exposure of bodily nakedness.⁶⁹ For Riḍā, Qurʾānic guidance on the prohibition of nudity in public and the commands for adornment are basic aspects of the Islamic vision of religious and secular reformation. This aspect can be understood in light of ancient civilization. Even in our own day, human civilization sometimes departs from modesty and indulges in revealing nakedness. However, when Islam penetrates a society, it promotes the values of modesty and reserve, which are not mere aspects of civilization but aspects of faith and worship.⁷⁰

8.4. Pure and Ultimate Rewards for Believers

A cursory look through the Qurʾānic text reveals that the Qurʾān promises, via the aesthetics of Paradise, pure and ultimate rewards for believers in the Hereafter, as well as the secular “aesthetic” pleasures created for them and all human beings to enjoy in this world. This function is stated in verse Q 7:32, “Say [Prophet], ‘Who has forbidden the adornment and the nourishment God has provided for His servants? Say, ‘They are [allowed] for those who believe during the life of this world: they will be theirs alone on the Day of Resurrection.’” This verse, however, promises that pure aesthetics, using the Qurʾānic word *kbāliṣab* (pure), in all its various forms, will be there in the Hereafter for all who offer their submission to God during the life of this world.

Regarding the meaning of the word *kbāliṣab* in this verse, the Qurʾānic exegetes chosen for this study all agree that “the adornment and the nourishment” mentioned are exclusively for believers on the

⁶⁸ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, VIII, 380f.; Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, III, 1283; id., *In the Shade*, VI, 63. See also Mawḍūdī, *Towards Understanding the Qurʾān*, 310.

⁶⁹ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, III, 1275; id., *In the Shade*, VI, 51f., 58.

⁷⁰ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, VIII, 382f.

Day of Resurrection. Unbelievers will not deserve such rewards.⁷¹ Another aspect of the meaning of the word *kbāliṣab* is added by exegetes such as al-Sha‘rāwī: that this ultimate reward, for believers exclusively, will be pure and devoid of all circumstances that might lessen their enjoyment, as seen in the earthly life. Al-Sha‘rāwī exemplifies that these circumstances are of individual conditions which might prevent a person from complete enjoyment, such as sickness, weakness, or poverty.⁷² The Qur’ān, however, vividly portrays the beauty of Paradise in several passages.

9. Negative Aspects

In Qur’ānic discourse, negative aspects of the notion of aesthetics are addressed. This is known by scholars, both Qur’ānic exegetes and Arabic lexicographers, as *zīnab ma’tbūmab* (blameworthy adornment). This duality in the notion of “aesthetics” from the Qur’ānic perspective results from the nature of the duality of good and evil in creation. It relates to the fact that human beings in this world, as discussed, are subject to trials by both aspects of aesthetics.

It is worth mentioning that the negative aspects of aesthetics in Qur’ānic discourse are expressed through the derivatives of the roots of both *z-y-n* and *z-kb-r-f*, which denote additional qualities in a substance that are not recognized as original. This result confirms that the negative aspects of aesthetics are not original features inherent in the purpose of the existence of aesthetics; they are rather external influences, or more precisely, evil acts either from *shayṭān* (Satan) or another unnamed agent, as can be found in the Qur’ānic discourse shown below.

Another essential aspect should be mentioned regarding using derivatives of the root of *z-y-n*, particularly, to express negative aspects of aesthetics. This is because since such aspects are negative, they need to be adorned, decorated, and embellished in terms that will make them acceptable and enjoyable to human beings. In fact, as Quṭb and Riḍā claim, human beings will not commit wicked deeds unless they are made to seem fair and attractive by the Devil’s agency, whether it is by Satan’s devilish whispers or by human beings

⁷¹ Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr* VIII, 96f.; al-Sha‘rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha‘rāwī*, VII, 4115; Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, VIII, 390.

⁷² Al-Sha‘rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha‘rāwī*, VII, 4115.

themselves to each other, known as *quranāʾ* (companions) or *shurakāʾ* (partners), as mentioned in verses Q 6:137 and Q 41:25, or as *hawāʾ*, which are a person's own Satanic desires, as seen, for example, in verse Q 47:14.⁷³ Riḍā stresses that without the *tazyīn* for these negative aspects of aesthetics, whether physical or moral, one might refuse to commit them and might comprehend their harmful and negative traits and thus their consequences both in this world and in the Hereafter.⁷⁴ In this regard, Quṭb concludes that human beings need to keep in mind when they find something attractive that this weapon may come from Satan to deceive them.⁷⁵

Another important aspect should be stated regarding Qurʾānic discourse on the negative aspects of the notion of aesthetics, which is that it applies to the moral context as well as the physical. In terms of the moral context, it can be noted that what is addressed as a negative aspect of aesthetics is evil deeds and disobedience to God's commands and obligations. Examples of these deeds are arrogance and not turning to God (see verse Q 6:43), permitting what God has forbidden (see verse Q 9:37), and abandoning the way presented by Messengers (see verse Q 16:63). However, few details are given about what can be considered the negative physical aspects of the notion of aesthetics articulated in Qurʾānic discourse. The aspect most often mentioned is, according to the Qurʾānic statement, *zīnat al-ḥayāh al-dunyā* (the attractions of this worldly life), as in verses Q 2:212 and Q 18:28, 46. A similar statement, *al-ḥayāh al-dunyā wa-zīnatubā* (the life of this world with all its finery), is found in verses Q 11:15, Q 28:60, and Q 33:28. As pointed out by Qurʾānic exegetes such as Ibn ʿĀshūr, *zīnat al-ḥayāh al-dunyā* encompass all worldly desires, splendors, lusts, and all of this world's various enjoyments.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the attractions of this worldly life can be seen in the greatest detail in verse Q 3:14: "*The love of desirable things is made alluring for men –women, children, gold and silver treasures piled up high, horses with fine markings, livestock, and farmland– these may be the joys of this life.*" Other blameworthy aspects of physical aesthetics are the kinds that are set out for unbelievers and

⁷³ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, IV, 2141; id., *In the Shade*, X, 274; Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III, 238.

⁷⁴ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III, 238.

⁷⁵ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, IV, 2141; id., *In the Shade*, X, 274.

⁷⁶ Ibn ʿĀshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, II, 294.

disobedient human beings, such as Pharaoh and Qārūn, mentioned in verses Q 10:88 and Q 28:79. Very closely connected to the negative physical aesthetics mentioned in the Qurʾānic passages are the commandments to believing women not to reveal their adornment before others, except a number of their relatives and other persons, as listed in verse Q 24:31. Hence, it must be stated that these kinds of aesthetics are blameworthy since female beauty is not being used according to God's commands and guidance but instead for temptation and leading others astray.

Thus, by highlighting two distinct aspects of the Qurʾānic outlook on the negative aspects of the notion of aesthetics, we may conclude the following. First, that worldly aesthetics is not forbidden or undesirable in principle since it is Allah who has brought it forth for His creatures to enjoy, so obviously it is not intended to be forbidden. It is prohibited when it does not fulfill its religious purpose, when it tempts human beings away from the right path revealed by God, or when it is used to lead others astray. It is forbidden when it leads people to become overwhelmed by earthly splendors and not see God's greater rewards in the life Hereafter.⁷⁷ Second, in several passages in which these worldly aspects are disdained, the Qurʾānic text transfers attention to the greater and sublime pleasures granted by God in the Hereafter to those who guard themselves against evil whispers by obeying God's guidance and worshipping him (see verses Q 18:46, Q 28:6 and Q 57:20).

Furthermore, unbelievers and unfaithful servants are those addressed in these negative contexts, as shown in verse Q 15:39: "*Iblīs then said to God, 'Because You have put me in the wrong, I will lure mankind on earth and put them in the wrong, all except Your devoted servants.'*" The same meaning is found in verses Q 2:212, Q 6:122, Q 10:12, and Q 47:14 as well. There seems to be no doubt that all human beings are subject to the Devil's temptation, except God's devoted servants. They guard themselves against evil by obeying God and following the divine path of right, looking forward to what God has granted for them in the Hereafter.

Moreover, it can be noted that in Qurʾānic discourse, such negative aspects of the act of adornment are ascribed in two verses to

⁷⁷ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, I, 214f.; id., *In the Shade*, I, 262f.

Allah (see verses Q 6:108 and Q 27:4). The Qur'ānic exegetes under consideration are in consensus that this kind of ascription cannot be understood as its literal meaning but is better understood in light of human nature, which has the intrinsic quality of being inclined to aesthetic objects, whether they are acceptable and permissible or of the forbidden and false kind; Allah is the only One who has created this human quality, so the term refers to this inner quality, created by Allah, not to the act that shows it.⁷⁸ Quṭb comments that God has molded humans' nature in such a way that they love pleasure, good or bad, and each one thinks he has done well and defends his actions.⁷⁹ A similar view comes from Ibn 'Āshūr that it is a human propensity to be tempted by what is aesthetic. However, people exaggerate their impulse to pursue such pleasure without heeding God's guidance.⁸⁰ Elsewhere, he makes the same point, claiming that it is God who endows human beings with the ability to make their deeds seem fair and attractive even when they are not.⁸¹ Thus, parallel with this view, it should be mentioned that although God molds human nature with the ability to love and enjoy what is aesthetic, he does not leave people without guidance to the right path in enjoying what he has created for their pleasure. This fact is asserted several times in the Qur'ān, for example, in Q 18:66. Another essential aspect should be addressed here, that as a matter of fact, as seen in the implications of verse Q 7:32, the fundamental perspective in the Qur'ānic outlook on the notion of aesthetics is that the beauty of the world is created for human beings to enjoy and to satisfy their needs. It is, initially, permissible unless it contradicts God's commands. Hence, human beings are naturally created to love and adore these worldly enjoyments.

However, the adorning of negative kinds of aesthetics is ascribed mainly to *shayṭān* (Satan or the Devil), as seen, for example, in verses Q 6:43, Q 8:48, Q 16:63, and Q 29:38. What has been ascribed to the Devil in the Qur'ān is notably that he can make evil deeds seem good, fair and attractive, as in verse Q 6:43, "*If only they had learned*

⁷⁸ See, Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III, 239; VI, 667f.; Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, II, 294; VII, 433; al-Sha'rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sha'rāwī*, II, 898.

⁷⁹ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, 2:1169; V, 2627; id., *In the Shade*, V, 232; XIII, 85.

⁸⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, II, 294.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, VII, 433.

humility when suffering came for Us! But no, their hearts became hard, and Satan made their foul deeds alluring to them,” and in verse Q 27:24, “*I found that she and her people worshipped the sun instead of God. Satan has made their deeds seem alluring to them and diverted them from the right path: they cannot find the right path.*” Ibn ‘Āshūr claims that this act by the Devil of alluring human beings is a metaphor for sins, evils, and false deeds.⁸² Moreover, in Qur’ānic discourse, in verse Q 15:39, “*Iblīs then said to God, ‘Because You have put me in the wrong, I will lure mankind on earth and put them in the wrong, all except Your devoted servants,’*” the Devil declares that his weapon is to deceive and lead human beings astray from God’s guidance through *tazyīn* (adorning, alluring and tempting), according to the Qur’ānic text. Quṭb, in his interpretation of the same verse, states that it is *Iblīs* himself who has chosen the battleground, which is the earth, and he also states what he will use for a weapon. He will simply tempt mankind by making what is foul appear fair so that they are tempted to engage in it.⁸³

In several verses, the agent who tricks out evil, the negative kind of aesthetics, is left unnamed, as in verses Q 2:212, Q 2:14, and Q 10:12. Accordingly, the Qur’ānic exegetes selected for this study ask who makes these negative aspects seem fair and attractive. They present two major answers to this question. In fact, these two tendencies are the same as presented above, which can be summarized as follows: first, the agent for making such negative aspects or false deeds seem fair and attractive is Allah since he ingrained this natural inclination in human beings toward worldly allurements, with the emphasis by commentators, as mentioned earlier, that this ascription should be understood in terms of the realities and nature of human beings, created by none other than Allah. It is not Allah that tempts human beings to gratify their prohibited worldly desires.⁸⁴ Qur’ānic commentators, such as Quṭb and Riḍā, mention that this ascription to Allah can be understood only to say that human beings are tested by these prohibited deeds and desires to see how they will conduct themselves and in what way

⁸² Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, XIV, 194.

⁸³ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, IV, 2141; id., *In the Shade*, X, 274.

⁸⁴ See, Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III, 239; VI, 668-667; Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, II, 294; VII, 433; al-Sha‘rāwī, *Tafsīr al-Sba‘rāwī*, II, 898.

they will enjoy them, in light of God's commands.⁸⁵ Second, the one who makes things "alluring" is Satan, by his evil whispers, which make evil desires seem good and attractive.⁸⁶ Moreover, in explaining the purpose of not specifying who makes evil alluring, Qurʾānic commentators such as Ibn ʿĀshūr claim that this Qurʾānic practice is intended to put great emphasis on the act rather than the one who commits it to give a general warning and to attach criticism more to the behavior than to the person. This being the case, the doer may take heed and return to his Lord and repent of the acts that he has been warned against.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Since no unified definition embraces the essence of aesthetics, investigating the qualities that characterize aesthetics may capture, to some extent, its nature. However, this study analyzed several qualities that characterize the notion of aesthetics in the Qurʾānic text. The first of these qualities is that aesthetics embodies *itqān*. This characteristic comprises various aesthetic qualities, such as order, harmony, proportion, balance, etc. The modern Qurʾānic commentators selected for this study assert that the quality of *itqān* is often mentioned, in Qurʾānic discourse, as a basis for aesthetics. The second characteristic mentioned is that aesthetics is defined by its impact on the beholder, i.e., pleasure. This aesthetic feature is more obvious in the connotations of the aesthetic terms derived from the root *b-h-j* mentioned in the Qurʾān: *bahjab* and *bahij*. Another essential quality mentioned is that in the Qurʾānic view, aesthetics is inseparable from goodness. This relationship is obvious in the aesthetic terms derived from the root *h-s-n*.

Furthermore, in the Qurʾānic view, aesthetics is intended in the origin of God's creation, and human beings, in turn, are invited to contemplate it. According to Qurʾānic discourse, this leads to the knowledge of the Creator. Aesthetics, indeed, is "a dimension of

⁸⁵ Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl*, III, 1201; id., *In the Shade*, V, 256f.; Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III, 246; VII, 670.

⁸⁶ See, Ibn ʿĀshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, II, 294; al-Shaʿrāwī, *Tafsīr al-Shaʿrāwī*, II, 898; Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, III, 239.

⁸⁷ Ibn ʿĀshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr*, III, 180; VIII, 46; XXVI, 93f.

reality,” not a subjective state in the eye of the observer.⁸⁸ In the Qur’ānic presentation of aesthetics, the universe is the vast realm of physical aesthetics. Aesthetics in the Qur’ānic view is not for emotional enjoyment or mere intellectual analysis but for religious functions. It has major roles in some religious aspects, as shown above. Finally, the Qur’ān addresses an important perspective related to aesthetics. It relates to the delusive aspects of aesthetics when it becomes alluring and causes human beings to deviate from the purpose of their creation according to the Qur’ān, i.e., worshipping Allah.

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⁸⁸ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 222.

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