

ISLAMIC METAPHYSICS OF BEAUTY

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Aesthetic behaviour is structured on metaphysical foundations. There are four principal dimensions of esoterism, namely intellectual, volitive, moral and aesthetic. From the traditional point of view, beauty has both the sensible aspect and the spiritual edifice. It is ‘integral aesthetics’ which takes into consideration the fundamental and relative aspects of beauty. Schuon says “By ‘integral aesthetics’ we mean in fact a science that takes account not only of sensible beauty but also of the spiritual foundations of this beauty.” It is in the perspective of integral aesthetics that we shall make an attempt to unravel the Islamic metaphysics of beauty.

Islamic metaphysics starts from the idea that all the Real is in the Invisible and that the Supreme Reality is Absolute and Infinite. It uses the word Haqq which literally means Truth or Reality in referring to the Absolute. The Absolute in its absoluteness is unknowable. It is. Nameless and It has no signs by which It can be approached. It is beyond human perception, conception or imagination. No qualification or relation can be attributed to It for It even transcends transcendence. It is at once, solely itself and totally itself and is ‘the most indeterminate of all indeterminates.’ No linguistic category can describe It. It is ‘the most unknown of all the unknownn, as well as the ‘Mystery of mysteries’ and no one, in principle, can have an access to It. The Absolute does not manifest itself in its absoluteness. ‘The self-manifestation of the Absolute does not yet occur.’ There is as yet no theopany or tajalli. The Absolute in its absoluteness is understood as dhat or essence and it is identified with Allah’s Essence and is known as al-ahadiyah. Here God is considered in respect of Himself for there are yet no relations. attributions and correlations. All relations, attributes, correlations arise by virtue of the Infinite which is one of the fundamental aspects of the Real and is known as al-wahdiyah. It is All-Possibility. From here arises communication, radiation, relativity, differentiation, contrast and privation.

Islamic metaphysics explains the emergence of the principle of differentiation within the undifferentiated Reality by referring to the

following Holy Tradition: 'I was a hidden treasure and I desired (ahbabtu, loved) to be known. Accordingly, I created the creatures and thereby made myself known to them. And they did come to know Me'. Here one sees the original emergence of the principle of differentiation within the Reality. The Reality loved to see His own Essence in 'another so that His own mystery could be revealed to Him. Nature acted as Divine Mirror but it was an unpolished mirror and thereby the mirror of the cosmos required Adam who 'was the very principle of reflection for that mirror and the spirit of that form.' The perfect man is 'the perfectly polished mirror that perfectly reflects the divine light 'and by virtue of which the Reality sees Himself perfectly. Muhammad was the most perfect mirror in this context. His this underlying cosmic purpose which made God address the Prophet in these words: 'If thou were not, I would not have created the heavens'. Thus, the Absolute by dint of the Infinite projects into relativity and this projection is termed as Perfection. Manifestation thereby proceeds from the Infinite. In the Infinite, beauty is essential, formless, undifferentiated and unarticulated whereas in and through manifestation it becomes tangible. Beauty is essentially a deployment. This undifferentiated beauty at the level of the Infinite becomes manifest by the principle of differentiation which is identified with Ahmad. Ahmad symbolizes the principles of Infinitude, perfection, beauty. It is to be remembered that the manifested beauty of God at the level of the logos is principial and not cosmic. It is when the primordial beauty manifests that Ahmad's formlessness assumes Ahmad's form. And this process leads to the creation of the universe and man for did not the Reality wanted to see. The essences of His most Beautiful Names?

The principle of complementarity between transcendence and immanence helps us to understand beauty. The perspective of transcendence is that 'nothing is really beautiful because God alone is Beauty' and the perspective of immanence reveals that 'every beauty is really beautiful-because it is that of God.' The complementarity does not separate us from God but brings us close to Him. This point is further explained in the Islamic metaphysics of Shahadah. The first Shahadah (La ilaha illa'Llah) is 'There is no divinity (or reality, or Absolute) outside the only Divinity (or Reality, or Absolute). The expression ilah (divinity) can be given every positive meaning for transposing in divines. For our purposes, we can say: there is no beauty outside the only Beauty. The second Shahadah

(Muhammadun Rasulu ‘Llah) is: ‘Muhammad (the Glorified, the Perfect is the Envoy (the mouthpiece, the intermediary, the manifestation, the symbol) of the Divinity’. In the second Shahadah the expression dab stands for the Divinity and it can also be given every positive meaning for manifestation in the Cosmos: We can say that beauty is the manifestation of Beauty.

The complementarity between transcendence and immanence is further visible in the doctrine of Oneness of Being (wahdat al-wujud). It accepts the idea of ‘the Indivisible One_and_Only’ but goes on to assert that ‘the One—and Only is the One and All’. It is not merely a doctrinal truth but has effective means of realization. Khawaja Ghulam Farid, for instance, depicts this stage in the following verses:

Lover, know the omnipresence of Punnal with certainty.

Thy Friend’s demonstration is in each form: be Heavens or earth.

Laudation to the conduct of the Beautiful: who descendeth in each form.

Recognize the Essence in all forms: do not place the other beside Reality.

The immanence of beautiful Friend, Punnal is manifest everywhere.

Know that the First, the Last, the Outward, the Inward is His Manifestation.

At a place exhibits ornamental beauty: at a place recurs as lover. He dwells in each manifestation: He contemplates Himself.

Discard the style of apprehension and risk. There is no other except one God. In the interior and the exterior there is the everlasting existence of Truth, the existence of Reality. There is no other except Thee. There is absolutely no odour of the non-divine. There is permanent one and not two. Be with One and discard otherness.

The move of the Primordial Beauty is queer; the style is subtle, the manner is novel. Himself is the lover; is Himself rival. Has won the world by becoming heart ravisher.

The unity is manifest in all things. The Beautiful manifest is Himself Manifestation.

Radiant Beauty is witnessed everywhere. The hidden secrets have been disclosed.

What tradition love has taught me. Divine Beauty is visible everywhere.

Wherever I see openly there appears to be mystery. All Beauty and its elegance is evident. All painfulness seems painlessness. Oneness of Being made me discover noble tradition.

Beautiful or ugly is mere pretension. Keep your understanding posited on Oneness.

Beauty and ugliness are manifestation of the Self. The lovey colourless is in each colour.

These last two verses bring us to the problem of ugliness. Metaphysics lends to beauty its own content and considers ugliness as state which obstructs the manifestation of Divine Beauty. A perfect of beauty in its totality leaves no room for ugliness which is merely disequilibrium in the world and has no self-subsistent reality. In words of Schuon: the Creation, or the world which in its disequilibrium contains ugliness but is beauty in its totality. This totality the human soul does not realize, save in holiness.'

Beauty and love are intimately linked. Both point towards the same reality by reflecting the Inward in the outward. The Divine Essen assumes the form of the personal Divinity which makes love possible. The Prophet loved women, perfume and prayer with a divine love which means effective realization of beauty. It is pertinent to note that in the context of Islamic metaphysics there is neither profane beauty nor profane love. Beauty is Divine and like Divinity it is all-embracing All that is beautiful cannot exist outside the realm of this Divine Quality. The Prophet says: 'God is beautiful and He loves beauty' This means that God loves His own manifestation in

the world. Thus there is no profane beauty for beauty has its ontological roots Divinity which lends its objectivity characterized by regularity mystery. Likewise, not loving with a divine love simply amounts to reducing the sentiment to a form devoid of essential reality.

Beauty and truth are inseparable. And this takes us to the heart of the Islamic metaphysics of Beauty. In the words of Schuon: 'there is no real beauty which does not have truth concealed in it, and there is no real truth from which beauty does not emanate'. Divine Beauty shines forth at every level of existence and beauty is characterized by both outward and inward reality. And it is this beauty which is the essence of art and which is possible by virtue of contemplation of things. It is precisely this vision of things which the profane 'art' misses. Titus Burckhardt says: "The essence of art is beauty, and beauty by its very nature is an outward as well as inward reality...Modern European art, whatever beauty it may offer incidentally, is generally enclosed within the particular psychic world of its author; it contains no wisdom, spiritual grace. As for modern science, it neither possesses nor demands any beauty. Being purely analytic it scarcely opens its eyes to a contemplative vision of things. When it studies man, for instance, it never contemplates his entire nature, which is at once and the same time body, soul and spirit. If we make modern science responsible for modern technology, it is at the very basis of a whole world of ugliness... Perhaps the greatest lesson traditional art can teach us is that beauty is a criterion of truth'.