

An Analysis of Beauty from Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Aesthetics as a branch of philosophy deals with beauty, ugliness, and value of objects. In the belief of Islamic thinkers, beautiful things in this world are useful reflections of the absolute beauty that is Great God. The origin of art also traces back to some divine attributes of God including being creator, omnipotent, and subtle. The present study aims to explore: what is the essence of beauty, and with regard to the importance of this argument, how much Islamic scholars have dealt with this issue? Is there any commonality between the ideas of thinkers in this regard? With respect to the ideas of philosophers about this subject and using descriptive-analytical method, the essence of beauty and its application in Islamic ideology was explored in the present research. The results showed that Islamic philosophers acknowledge the absolute beauty that is Great God, as the source of all beauty so all beautiful things in this universe are a reflection and manifestation of the beauty of God.

Keywords: Beauty, Great God, Ugliness, Absolute beauty, Illuminationism .

Introduction

In Islamic thought, beauty is a vast and boundless concept that is not limited to art and artistic works. The distinctive and unique place of this concept is evident in Islamic instructions as well as the ideas of former and recent Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers. In this regard, most of former Muslim philosophers including Avicenna, Razi, Sohrevardi, Khajeh Nasir Tusi, Ibn Arabi, Ghazali, and Mulla Sadra have regarded God as the ultimate beauty and the source of all beautiful things (Farabi, N.D.: 43; Avicenna, 1984: 362; Razi, 2008: Vol. 2, 14; Sohrevardi, N.D.: Vol. 3, 241 & 211; Tusi, 1939: 170; Ghazali, 1994: 917; & Mulla Sadra, 2003: Vol. 1, 344). Some thinkers, in their definitions of beauty, have emphasized on a fundamental relation between beauty, good, virtue, love, zeal, happiness, movement, and perfection (Farabi & Ghazali, 2010: 991; Avicenna, 1979: 79; Sohrevardi, N.D.: Vol. 3, 321 & 331; Tusi, 1996: 11 & 112; Ghazali, 1996: 929; & Mulla Sadra, N.D.: 931). In this respect, Muslim philosophers applied the term beauty, versus ugliness, for sensual issues (that can be felt by senses) as well as for rational issues (that can be realized by reason) (Razi, 2008: Vol. 9, 422; Tusi, 1996: 346; Ghazali, 1996: 923). Thus, they have considered good acts as beautiful and evil acts as ugly (Farabi, 1996: 21; Avicenna, N.D.: Vol. 29; Sohrevardi, N.D.: 322; Tusi, 1996: 417; Ghazali, 1994:

917; & Mulla Sadra, 1993: 449). Moreover, Muslim thinkers have always referred to “beauty” as a fundamental principle in ethics (Chittick, 2007) and it has been continued by the contemporary Muslim thinkers as well. Allameh Tabataba’i has recognized God as the origin of beauty, and beauty as the concomitance of existence and creation (Tabataba’i, 1981: Vol. 9, 39). He has attributed God’s popularity in the heart of human being to his attraction to beauty and perfection (Tabataba’i: Vol. 99: 291). Allameh Ja’fari has also considered ethics in Islam as a subcategory of beauty, and from the view of Seyed Hossein Nasr, this relationship is manifested through the application of the term “beauty” in Islamic texts. Nasr has also called Islam the religion of beauty and has regarded beauty in Islam as “the powerful attraction of divine truth” and “the highway to achieve God” (Nasr, 2009: 293).

1. The Essence of Beauty

Beauty is a philosophical, complicated, and abstract notion. Many philosophers hold that beauty cannot be defined (Hollingdale, 2016: 89). However, some have presented different definitions for that in the past and present (Kelly, 2004: 319-328). In the view of Motahhari, what can create love and fervor in a human and attract his attention and admiration is “beauty” (Motahhari, 2008: Vol. 22, 263). Although discussions about beauty in philosophy date back to the time of Socrates and Plato, aesthetics as an independent philosophical field was presented in the 18th century. In Islamic philosophy, there has not been an independent field as aesthetics so Islamic philosophers do not have any distinct writing in this regard, and like epistemological arguments, just a fragmentary account of this notion has been mentioned in the works of Islamic thinkers.

1.1. The Essence of Beauty from the Perspective of Farabi

Abu Nasr Mohammad Farabi who was a Muslim philosopher and thinker in the 10th century acknowledged beauty as the second philosophical reason, that is to say an existential and objective concept because beauty belongs to an object or existence. In his two books, he presents a clear and identical meaning of beauty. In *Ara' Ahl al-Madinah al-Fazelah va Mazadateba*, he says: "Beauty and worthiness for every creature is to achieve perfection, or in another words, its best existence." (Farabi, 1996: 43) He states almost the same definition in *al-Siasah al-Madaniyah*: "Beauty and worthiness for every creature is to reach its best existence and ultimate perfection." (Farabi, 2010: 42) Moreover, beauty in the view of Farabi is the manifestation of all talents in everything and reaching optimal perfection while ugliness denotes fault in the existence of a creature. Therefore, ugliness, versus beauty, is the existence coming out of shortcoming and imperfection. Farabi points to the fact that God is the highest being and there is no existence more perfect than Him so He must be the most beautiful existence and His beauty and value is above all being (Farabi, 2010: 43).

1.2. The Essence of Beauty from the Perspective of Avicenna

Avicenna (11th century) believes that beauty, especially God's beauty, means that He should be in a way that is essential for Him. For instance, it is essential for His Majesty to be Qadir (almighty), Latif (subtle), Karim (noble), and Javad (generous) to be considered beautiful. Islamic philosophers attribute the source of all beauty to the absolute beauty that is Great God. Avicenna says: "Aseity (self-dependent) has the absolute beauty and is the source of every beauty. He regards 3 attributes as the fortifiers of beauty: Having order, writing, and balance resulting in equilibrium and harmony." (Avicenna, 1984: 362) Giving the definition for beauty in terms of balance and harmony have always been controversial. For instance, it is said this definition just involves sensual and material, not rational and spiritual beauty as Basit (simple) existence such as the being of God does not include any components to be harmonious.

1.3. The Essence of Beauty from the Perspective of Sohrevardi

With the analysis of the ideas of Sheikh Shahab al-Din Sohrevardi (12th century), it is perceived that he has derived the concept of illumination and darkness relying on Persian stories and myths. Perhaps, his aesthetical approach to beauty gives pleasure to the audience. In a philosophy established by Sohrevardi, we can trace aesthetical discussions and illuminationism. The expression of aesthetics from the beginning until now has mostly relied on sensual experience. The literal meaning of this term also implies this fact and is derived from a Greek word (*aisthētikos*) exactly meaning sentient and pertaining to sense perception (Little, 1973: 32) so it is evident that this knowledge explores aesthetical experience in the context of sensual perception. In fact, aesthetics is the science of knowing sensual beauty although beauty is not limited only to sensory perception as some philosophers know it as a totally subjective issue with respect to its non-cognitive nature. They believe that the pleasure of aesthetical experience is a requisite for our intuition and the recognition of beauty is completely subjective. Sheikh-e Eshraq has special attention to the role of 5 senses in knowledge; however, senses in Islamic philosophy have just an elementary place in perception as it takes place in human soul and an inner faculty named "common sense". Therefore, if we want to perceive beauty in Sohrevardi's philosophy, we should refer to a common sense or another faculty that might have been used by Sohrevardi to explain sensory perception. In this regard, he says that in order to see a thing that should be placed in front of one's eyes. However, encounter between eyes and a visible object is just a necessary and not sufficient condition for seeing because the perceiver is Espahbodi light (soul). Aseity (self-dependent) in illuminationist philosophy is the light of lights. Light has various stages so some creatures in the world have more illumination than others. Sheikh-e Eshraq calls the linear dynasty of angels Anvar-e Qahereh (dominant lights) that transmit blessing from one to another up until it reaches the material world; however, there are some other lights that coexist in the same line with no priority compared to each other. These types of angels are the lords of various types of creatures on the earth and every type in the material world has a special lord. Every lord has intermediary lights called Anvar-e Modabber (managing lights) or Anvar-e Espahbodi (soul) to manage his types so it is not limited to physical eyes. Eyes have a preliminary and elementary role for seeing and this process is conducted by Espahbodi light or soul (Sohrevardi, 1970: 213). It is hence evident that in the view of Sohrevardi, common sense does not have an ultimate role in sensory perception either. The perception of Sheikh-e Eshraq from the world is based on illumination and darkness. He perceives and describes everything in this world in terms of this perception of the universe. In the illuminationist system, every answer related to the notion of beauty will inevitably guide us to illumination. Since the subject of beauty almost has not been dealt with in the works of Sohrevardi, we should seek for his implicit connotations. It can be said that illuminationist philosophy has tremendous elements regarding aesthetical discussions. The illuminationist view of Sohrevardi has many shared aspects with the theory of Plato so it can pave the way to recognize the origin of Sohrevardi's thoughts and also assist mind for a better comprehension of illuminationist view. Plato in the dissertation of *Menon* acclaims that sensory perception is nothing but remembering the forgotten memories (Plato, 2001: 366-372). According to Sohrevardi, Plato holds that sense has a preliminary role in sensory perception. Upon seeing and touching objects, we perceive their forms and finally our soul gets to understand those forms. Therefore, the source of things that seem beautiful in the material world or so called dark world by Sheikh-e Eshraq traces back to the lights recognized by Espahbodi light (soul). In another words, when we hear a beautiful melody, or see a beautiful face, or smell a pleasant scent, the exposure of senses to the material issues perceived as beautiful makes Espahbodi light or our soul understand beauty and hence, we take pleasure in beauty. The result of this perspective is transferring beauty to the world of lights or reason. This perception paves the way for a metaphysical interpretation of beauty and aesthetical experience. Although Sheikh-e Eshraq has not definitely mentioned the intuition of the world of lights for sensory perception, he paved the way for later philosophers in Islamic tradition to present this perspective.

1.4. The Essence of Beauty from the Perspective of Mulla Sadra

Sadr ol-Moteahhelin (17th century) has dealt with some issues related to beauty in the 7th volume of *Asfar*. According to his arguments, it is perceived that he has admitted the definition presented by former Islamic philosophers. He holds that every sort of beauty and perfection reflects the beauty and perfection of God. Similarly, he says that God is the source of every good, perfection, and beauty. He knows every sort of beauty in this world a reflection of beauties in higher and other worlds. Although beauty in those worlds is absolute, it is combined with matter, fault, and change in this world. Every sort of faculty, view, and beauty in the mundane world is in fact a reflection of what exists in the higher world. The issues of the higher world that were free of any fault and imperfection or darkness have degraded and replicated in the form of matter in this world. There is a statement by Mulla Sadra that can be considered as a definition for beauty: "Beauty is something that is admired." (Sadra, 1990: Vol. 1, 128) With a little reflection on this statement, it is perceived that it traces back to two generic definitions of beauty by Farabi and Avicenna. In the view of Farabi, beauty is the ultimate perfection and the best existence of a creature: "Beauty and worthiness for every creature is to reach its ultimate perfection, or in another words, to realize its best existence." (Farabi, 1996: 43) According to this definition, a creature that has all expected perfections is beautiful. Avicenna has also a similar definition: "Everyone's beauty is what he is required to be." (Avicenna, 2000: 590) Now, according to the definition of Sadr ol-Motahhelin, what deserves to be appreciated and admired? The answer to this question is: Whatever has its suitable and required perfections. A carpet is admired that has great design, pleasant color, and good quality. Similarly, a human is admired who has divine attributes such as knowledge, patience, modesty, piety, and so on.

1.5. The Essence of Beauty from the Perspective of Allameh Tabatabaii

Seyed Mohammad Hossein Tabatabaii (1909-1981) known as Allameh Tabatabaii was an Iranian mystic, philosopher, and author. *Tafsir al-Mizān*, *Nahayah al-Hekmah*, *Shi'e dar Islam*, and *Osul-e Falsafe va Ravesh-e Realism* are among his works. The ideas of Allameh Tabatabaii regarding aesthetical notions are conspicuously profound and noticeable. He has also explained the attribution of beauty to God through reasonable and rational arguments and demonstrated how Satan can make some acts seem to be beautiful. Allameh has an accurate and unique discourse on the subtle notion of beauty and presents valuable exegetical points from the Qur'an to explain beauty. He regards the divine creation all beautiful and says that all components of the creatures in the universe are in harmony. He holds that all those components are equipped with capabilities that can make the creature reach prosperity and perfection. It seems that Allameh, like Plato, has a tendency to this theory that beauty means harmony between components. However, he also pays attention to the harmony between the whole components of an object and its existential purpose as an element in beauty. He says in this regard: "The truth of beauty means that all components of an object be compatible with each other, and also, all components be in harmony and compatibility with a purpose and intention that is beyond their realm. Therefore, the beauty of a face means harmony between its components such as eyes, eyebrows, nose, and mouth. Moreover, they should be compatible be a purpose that is followed in a civilized society, so that everyone who has a right achieves his own's. The same applies for every other beauty." (Tabatabaii, 1997: Vol. 7, 254)

He also writes:

"Beauty means that an object be compatible with what is naturally acquired of that. Therefore, the beauty of a face depends on that all component in that face including eyes, eyebrows, lips, cheeks and so on have the complexion and qualities that are required and also have harmony. In this case, the soul and heart of the beholder is attracted to the face; otherwise, it is considered as ugly." (Tabatabaii, 1997: Vol. 5, 10)

The *Noble Qur'an* in Surah Hujr says: "And the earth - We have spread it and cast therein firmly set mountains and caused to grow therein [something] of every well-balanced thing." (Surah Hujr: 19) In his commentary on this verse, Allameh says: "Well-balanced denotes the heaviness of objects and also beauty and harmony among components of objects." (Tabataba'ii, 1997: Vol. 12, 137) As it is seen here, balance and beauty have an association in the perception of Allameh and they come together.

Conclusion

Some Islamic thinkers recognize beauty as an existential and objective notion as it belongs to the object or existence. Besides, beauty, versus ugliness, is the manifestation of all talents in an object and its realization of optimal perfection. Most of Islamic scholars believe that there is no existence more perfect than that of God so He must be the most beautiful being. Islamic philosophers acknowledge the absolute beauty, that is to say God, as the source of all beauties. They hold that beauties in this world reflect the beauty of God as the root of all good, perfection, beauty, and virtue. This perception paves the way for a metaphysical interpretation of beauty. Furthermore, it is conveyed that divine creation is all beautiful because the components of every creature is in harmony with its other parts and the whole components are equipped with some capabilities that make the creature achieve its own prosperity and perfection. The definition of beauty in terms of balance and harmony has always been controversial as it just includes sensory and material, not logical and spiritual beauties. Besides, the absolute existence such as God does not involve components to be harmonious or balanced.

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