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ISLĀMIC AESTHETICS: ART AND BEAUTY

Latīf Hussaīn Shāh Kāzmi*

Abstract

Islāmic aesthetic is an outcome of Islāmic civilisation based on Islāmic metaphysics and theology and emphasizes that God is the origin or source of all art and thought, including various art forms. Thus, the essences or forms of all things have their reality in the Divine Wisdom or Intellect (*Al-'Aql-i-Awwal*). Islāmic conception of art and beauty has its origin in Islāmic *Weltanschauung*, so, each object of beauty in nature reflects the Creative and Aesthetic aspect of *Jamīl* Allāh with His *Jamāl*. Generally, in Muslim world, art and beauty are almost neglected ones, so, they are not given significant and sufficient importance because of some unauthentic and false notions and consequently, we have almost lost this pristine Islāmic heritage and now we must revisit it and realise its vital function and role in our socio-political and ethico-spiritual life. Islāmic aesthetics has a significant role in the cultural tradition of Islāmic Ummah, so it must be revitalised for a peaceful life's onward caravan.

* Professor & Chairman, Department of Philosophy, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh - 202 002, (UP), India
E-mail: latifkazmi@gmail.com

In the present paper, an effort has been made to discuss the etymological meaning of ‘aesthetics’ in general and the main features of Islāmic conception of aesthetics, including art and beauty, in particular, along with various Islāmic art-forms.

Key Words: Islāmic Aesthetic, *Hosn*, Baumgarten, ‘*ilm al-Jamāl*’, Nature, *Tawhīd*, Reality, *Rahmān*, Qur’ān, *Muṣawwir*.

To understand the spiritual message and true spirit of the Islāmic approach to creativity, let us briefly discuss some main characteristics of Islāmic aesthetics with especial reference to a few of its essential art forms in general, and architecture and calligraphy in particular. To understand the spiritual message and true spirit of this sacred art, we must know the basic features of Islāmic aesthetics as depicted in the Qur’ān and tradition of the Prophet and explained by the Muslim aestheticians, artists and artisans.

There are generally three most important human values, religious, moral and aesthetic. Here, we shall deal with aesthetic value. Before discussing Islāmic aesthetics and its components: Art and Beauty, it seems essential to know about ‘aesthetics’, its etymological meaning, application and covering domains, and art and beauty as envisaged by the western thinkers, artists and aestheticians.

(A). Introduction: Meaning and Nature of Aesthetics

Aesthetics is one of the significant branches of philosophy that examines the nature of art and its relation to beauty as reflected through the natural world. It was developed as an independent discipline of philosophical study during the 18th century, primarily in England and on the Continent. So, aesthetics, like other branches of philosophy say, epistemology, ethics, metaphysics etc. engaged in developing its various theories of art which start covering some significant art-forms like painting, sculpture, architecture, music, poetry, dance, landscape and miniature art and other various forms of fine arts.

Etymologically, the word ‘aesthetic’ is from the Greek, “*aisthetikos*” which means, ‘sense perception’. Alexander Gottlieb

Baumgarten (1714-62), a German philosopher, “coined the term ‘aesthetics’ in his *Reflections on Poetry* (1735) as the name for one of the two branches of the study of knowledge, i.e., for the study of sensory experience coupled with feeling, which he argued provided a different type of knowledge from the distinct, abstract ideas studied by “logic.” He derived it from the ancient Greek *‘aisthanomai’* (‘to perceive’), and “the aesthetic” has always been intimately connected with sensory experience (perception) and the kinds of feelings it arouses.”¹

Further, aesthetics has a unique role in human life. We feel pleased when we create something or appreciate an object of beauty when we observe it. Aesthetics is also the study of the feelings, concepts, and judgments arising from our appreciation of them or the wider class of objects considered moving, beautiful, or sublime. The aesthetic theory concerns itself with some essential questions such as: what is a work of art? What makes a work of art successful? Can art be a vehicle of truth? Does a work by expressing the artist’s feelings, communicate a feeling, arouse a feeling, purging or symbolizing sense? What is the difference between understanding a work of art, and failing to do so? How do we take aesthetic pleasure in surprising things: tragedies or terrifying natural scenes? Why can things of very different categories equally seem beautiful? Does the perception of beauty have connections with moral virtue and with seeing something universal or essential, and is the importance of aesthetic education and practice associated with this? What is the role of imagination in the production or appreciation of art? Are aesthetic judgements capable of improvement and training and thence of some kind of objectivity?² And finally, what is the prime role of aesthetics in our life as a whole?

Aesthetics is also considered as the science of the laws to define beauty in relation to man’s creativity under aesthetical assimilation of the objective world of nature. It is also called a science of the essence and forms of creative work according to the laws of beauty. It is said that aesthetics originated about 2,500 years ago during the period when slavery was widespread across the globe.

It was greatly developed in ancient Greece, Rome and England. Both the materialist and the idealist thinkers had defined it according to their own taste and understanding. Democritus, Aristotle, Epicurus, and others who believed in the objective basis of beauty, which they found in material qualities, links, relations and laws of reality, encouraged the materialist trend. Contrary to this trend, the idealist ones under Plato's teachings emphasized that beauty was an absolute, metaphysical, eternal, immutable and sensual concept, and *sensibilia* created by art were nothing but the reflection of this concept.

(B). Art and Beauty

(i). Meaning and Definition of Art:

Art is defined in many ways. It is considered as the mirror of a culture or civilization. It reflects every aspect of human endeavour. It covers both men's spiritual and material dimensions of life as well. There is no single definition of art; it has been defined in various ways even then. In a broad sense, 'art is a creative work of man in which his wisdom and freedom are actively involved'. It is a skill in making or doing a thing of beauty leading to perennial joy.

Generally, every art-lover, thinker or aesthete tries to interpret art as per his ability to understand. So, some primary concepts employed with art remain, "play, illusion, imitation, beauty, emotional expression, imagination, intuition, wish-fulfilment, pleasure, technique, sensuous surface, meaning, form, function and the like. Some of these terms refer primarily to the creation of art, others to the art object, and still others to the act of application."³

Rader explains that art is a creative activity in which man's wisdom and freedom both are involved. So, art reflects reality through artistic images in which man's aesthetic attitude is also embodied. Various important art forms like painting, fiction, sculpture, fiction, play, theatre, drama, cinematography, music, dance, poetry choreography and the likes have a significant role in life. Art is also considered an effective form of socio-political consciousness.⁴ 'Art seeks an imaginative transformation of life. It moves in a restricted

sphere of semblance.’ Generally, the aesthetic response is impersonal contemplation. Art moves human beings and satisfies their emotional dimension of consciousness. Artistic sensibility makes a man to think with clarity and appreciate the work of art. According to Ludwig Wittgenstein, art, like religion and science, cannot be reduced to a simple notion. However, all thinkers and aestheticians of all the times, have accepted one important general definition regarding art viz; “art, as a creative process is the expression of mood, feeling or spirit. That art is expressive rather than merely formal or descriptive is about as well established as any fact in the whole field of aesthetics.”⁵

For our better understanding, we will present some selected definitions as given by some thinkers or art lovers. Leo Tolstoy, for instance, defines art in his social terms. He says in his *What is Art?*:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colour, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling — this is the activity of art.⁶

Further, art is man’s creative activity in which he is consciously involved employing his selective natural or external signs, personal existential experiences with others’ feelings and aspirations he has lived through, as well as those others are infected by these feelings and also experienced them.⁷

There are some other definitions of art. John Ruskin said that ‘Art is valuable... only as it expresses the personality, activity and living perception of a good and great human soul.’⁸ He further underlined that all great Art is the expression of man’s delight in God’s work. It is an outcome of the artist’s inner connection with his spiritual world. According to Maritain and George Santayana, “Art is the creation of beauty, defined in terms of pleasures.” For Longinus, “Great art is the echo of a great soul.” According to Benedetto Croce and Henri Bergson, “art is vision or intuition.”⁹

Some artists think that the goals of art are not knowledge and understanding, as in philosophy, nor description, verification and control, as in science, but creativity, perfection, form, beauty, communication and expression and above all, aesthetic response. However, for others to create any kind of artistic activity, a Master artist must have sound knowledge and understanding for what they are going to create with their abilities.

(ii). Meaning and Definition of Beauty

In reality, beauty is indefinable. But when we are asked to explain the creative works like painting, sculpture, architecture, calligraphy etc. of artists or natural objects like ‘flowers’, ornamental trees, setting of the sun and so on, we say that all these objects possess a certain *quality* or *faculty* which we call *beauty*. These things give us a certain kind of pleasure that we call *aesthetic* pleasure. In simple words, through aesthetic experience, we get aesthetic pleasures, which are, in reality, disinterested, universal and permanently pleasurable, even in recollection in memory.¹⁰

However, we agree that aesthetic pleasure or the experience of beauty is both subjective and objective. Here, when we speak of aesthetic pleasures as universal, we mean nothing more than that they are objectified, thought of not as agreeable feelings of our own but as qualities of objects that would give pleasure to all. In a strict sense, we note that the self is lost and forgotten in aesthetic contemplation. There is a sort of annihilation of the self in the beautiful object, a feeling of total unity, freedom and completeness.¹¹

Some great thinkers, social reformers, theologians, and artists like Plato, Plotinus, Kant, Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Prophet Muhammad, Imām ‘Ali and Sufi poets like Rumi, Hafiz, Sa‘dī, ‘Attar, Jami and others have formulated their mystical doctrines of beauty. They commonly assert that “Divine Beauty” is the real beauty and the One Supreme Reality, which has

Perfect Knowledge and is Perfect Good and Perfect Beauty — is the source of every beauty. The Muslim, Christian, Jewish and Hindu artists and aestheticians mostly hold the same view and claim that God is the only source of their art and thought.

Though beauty for man is both subjective and objective, yet having an intense faith in God makes him/her to believe that there can be neither of the two; only all-embracing Unity is there which provides a spiritual satisfaction to our aesthetic urge:

This faith involves the corollary that the human subject is a part of the Infinite Reality; it is subsumed in it and does not stand over against it; and thus, within this higher sphere, the distinction between the subject and object, the finite ego and the non-ego, remains no longer valid. There is nothing outside the great all- enveloping Unity that may be supposed to be the subject apprehending it. Therefore, while the beauty for man, the phenomenal beauty, is both objective and subjective, the Absolute Beauty, which is not known to us finite beings, but in which the finite beings must have faith, can be neither objective nor subjective. It is an all-embracing Unity in which objects and subjects and all values are subsumed.¹²

There are still other humanistic, realistic trends developed during and after the Renaissance by thinkers, writers and artists who tried to combat the Western medieval mystic doctrines on “Divine Beauty” and affirmed that art is linked with ‘real life’. In this connection, we have some important personalities such as Divert, Rousseau, Linkman, Leasing, Herder and later Schiller, Goethe, Sartre, Feedback and Marx etc. For these thinkers and writers, the source of beauty is ‘physical’ qualities of objects or phenomena and to deduce aesthetic feelings and states from biological laws and the nature of man would be unjustifiable.

Generally, we can say that aesthetics is a science which investigates the meaning of aesthetic pleasure, the objective or

subjective character of beauty, the nature of beauty itself and the origin and nature of the art impulse. De Witt H. Parker has lucidly explained the science of aesthetics in the following words:

The science of aesthetics is an attempt to do in a systematic way what thoughtful art lovers have thus always been doing haphazardly. It is an effort to obtain a clear general idea of beautiful object is, our judgments upon them, and the motives underlying the acts which create them—to raise the aesthetic life, otherwise a matter of instinct and feeling, to the level of intelligence, of understanding. To understand art means to find an idea or definition which applies to it and to no other activity, and at the same time to determine its relation to other elements of human culture; and our understanding will be complete if our idea includes all distinguishing characteristics of art, not simply enumerated, but exhibited in their relationships.¹³

The western thinkers gave the above meanings and definitions of aesthetics, art and beauty and now we shall discuss aesthetics and its related components with reference to the Qur’ān, *Sīrah* of the Prophet of Islām and other Islāmic thinkers and aestheticians. Before discussing aesthetics in the Islāmic framework, we have to examine its early phase:

(C). Early Islāmic Aesthetics: Development of Art

It is essential to clarify that the term ‘aesthetics’ was never used in the Islāmic cultural tradition to highlight some particular aspects of art and beauty in Islāmic framework. The famous Arabic term *‘jamāliya’*, is used to denote various dimensions of man-made creative products and of God’s ‘Natural World.’ This word *‘jamāliya’* “which is synonymous to aesthetics, is borrowed from the West and is defined as the ‘science of beauty,’ *‘ilm al-Jamāl*. In Islām, neither the Qur’ān nor the Prophet’s traditions (*Sunnah*) refer to art.”¹⁴ However, the words, *ḥosn* or *zīnat* and *Jamīl* or *Jamāl* are also used in the Qur’ān and the tradition of the Prophet, respectively.

During the early phase, it can be said that the Arab Muslims developed art and beauty in their narrow perspective. They possessed good aesthetic sense but were not involved in its vast development. Arab Muslims began a series of conquests in the A.D. 600's and united all the countries they conquered into a single civilization (*Ummah*). Though the Arabs themselves showed less interest in art, but through their conquest, they were exposed to the highly developed art forms of the ancient Persia (Iran), Egypt, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq (olden, Mesopotamia).

Generally, it is believed that the peoples who embraced Islām cultivated their attractive cultural styles with a vibrant, distinct and uniform style of creative activity known as "Islāmic art." Consequently, Islāmic Art emerged as the constantly developing product of many countries, expanding from Spain to the Indian sub-continent. In a Spanish term, Islāmic art is called '*Moorish*', by the Muslims who at first inhabited Spain in the 700s. From the 900s on, multiple local variations started appearing in Islāmic art, but its overall interrelationship with the Islāmic worldview remained intact and vibrant.

However, the Islāmic civilisation welcomed the development of specific principles of art and beauty that were inspired by the Islāmic faith. Because of the same, the Islāmic artistic tradition, in the light of the Qur'ānic text, viewing the beauty of the universe as compelling evidence from the Divine World and the believer-artist involved devotedly to his creative activity with a spiritual orientation.

Thus, generally, we can say that Islāmic art is the creative effort of the civilization anchored on the Islāmic *Weltanschauung*. Islāmic faith has vast connotations regarding every flourishing aspect of human life. It explores the meaning and purpose of the universe and well-explained the relationship between God, human being and the universe. Islām guides and presents its required aspects to human beings with full vitality. Therefore, the intellectual, social, political, religious, ethical and aesthetic features of the Islāmic religion make it unique from other faiths:

The word “Islāmic”, as applied to art, refers to those people who have grown and lived under rulers who professed the faith of Islām or in cultures and societies which have been strongly influenced by the modes of life and thought characteristic of Islām. However, ‘Islāmic’, unlike ‘Christian’, refers not only to a faith but also to a whole culture, since – at least in theory - the separation of the realm of Caesar from that of God is not applicable to Islām. Also unlike Christianity, Islām did not develop first as the faith of a few, increasing the numbers of its adherents under the shadow of a huge state alien to it, slowly developing the intellectual and artistic features which were going to characterize it, and, after several centuries, blossoming into an empire and giving birth to an art as well as a philosophy and a social doctrine.¹⁵

During the early times, Muslim artists, aestheticians and artisans developed geometric forms, which constituted the bases of the Islāmic geometric art form for which they had no conception of such realities. With their deep introspection and spiritual realisation, they could understand that it was the graphic manner through which they could conceive that God was the supreme central entity in the cosmos. Every art, thought, and connection of the parts of creation to Him reflect significant connectivity of what can now be demonstrated and documented by scientific developments.

Various early Muslim aestheticians followed the particular pattern and motifs and used their techniques as framed by their predecessors keeping in view their close association with spirituality. Presently, Muslims of all the domains of life also need an aesthetic inclination that could satisfy their religion’s spiritual and contemplative nature. Further, they were also required to reinforce prime Islamic ideology and socio-political structure and keep their faith intact with its fundamental principles, whose roots went back

to the Abrahamic monotheism.¹⁶ Such art was to reinforce the awareness of God and His aesthetically created universe.

Primarily, great Muslim artists, aestheticians and other masters in their respective fields had been focusing their attention on their art and thoughts on the Oneness of God. Therefore, their creative power owed everything to their *Tawhīdic* vision.

However, regarding the evolution of Islāmic art, there are authentic views which endorse that the Islāmic art is as old as Islāmic itself:

Islāmic art did not slowly evolve from the meeting of a new faith and of a new strata with whatever older traditions prevailed in the areas in which the state ruled; it came forth as suddenly as the faith and the state, for whatever influences may have been at work in the building and decoration of early Islāmic monuments, their characteristic is that they were built for Muslims, to serve purposes which did not exist in quite the same way before Islām.¹⁷

Generally, Islāmic Art flourished between A.D. 800 and A.D.1700 and then declined, especially in the later 1700's. Again, in the last centuries, it regained its glory of fineness in the world of aesthetics. Even in the twenty-first century, its various forms are becoming an inspiring source and force for the art-lovers of the Western lands. It has its own distinctive features and cultural heritage. Multiple attempts have been made to present different aspects of this art, such as intellectual, symbolic, spiritual and so on. However, there is a great need of the time to look upon Islāmic art as the manifestation in the world of forms of the spiritual realities of the Islāmic revelations itself as coloured by its earthy embodiments.

Now, let us explain the Islāmic conception of aesthetics and its relation to man's esoteric and exoteric being.

(D). Aesthetics in Islāmic Framework:

In the Islāmic worldview and value system, the belief in *Tawhīd*

(Unity of God) is over-emphasized. All objects in the visible and invisible Creation emanate from Allāh—the *Jamīl*, and are solely the manifestations of His Divine Attributes (*Sifāt-i-Ilhāiyah*). He is the Supreme Creator of the cosmos, which is both known and unknown to man. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. Further, everything is dependent upon Him, come from Him and will hark back to Him.¹⁸ Such fact is also evident in the specific structure of atoms.

The Muslim artists and artisans of multiple creative fields brought out various forms of art and beauty in the light of *al-Tawhīd*. However, because of the strict manufactured injunctions against such depictions of humans or non-human or animal figures that might result in idol-worship, Islāmīc art developed another unique character by utilizing several primary artistic forms, such as geometric, floral, arabesque, and calligraphic, which are often interwoven. From early times, Muslim art has reflected this balanced, harmonious world-view. Music (*Maūsīqī* or *Sama*'), as a significant form of art, also did not get its due place because of the misinterpretation of so-called Islāmīc scholars and exegetes. However, till now, it remained a significant element in the Sufi-tradition of Islām, and the mystics recognise its significance and vitality in establishing man's spiritual connection with Allāh.

There are various dimensions of aesthetics in Islāmīc framework. Art and literature are generally considered the reflection or mirror of culture and its worldview. Such a version can more appropriately be applied to Islāmīc aesthetic world in which every sensitive, creative artist, writer and painter tries to contribute to the Islāmīc society, the vision and mission of the Islāmīc value system, in particular, and global society, in general. Thus, not only does Islāmīc art or various creative forms of this art reflect its cultural values, but also, more significantly, how its adherents, the true believers, view and realise the spiritual realm, the cosmos, life, and other multiple relationships of the parts to the whole—i.e. the Creation to the Creator—Allāh.

The Qur'ān mentions various instances that invite our attention to God's creation in multi-dimensional ways. Man's rational and aesthetic senses have been given great importance. Expressing the beauty of the created world and its objects, God says in the Book:

نِيَّطُ نَمِ نَسْنُ إِذَا قُلِّخَ أَذْبَوَ طُوقَلِّخَ عِيْشَ لَكَ نَسْخُ أَيْدِيًا

He who perfected everything He created (most good [beautiful (*al-ḥosn*)], and originated the creation of man from clay.¹⁹

The word '*al-ḥosn*' in Arabic means the 'most beautiful' so from this verse it is inferred that whatever Allāh has created in the universe, all comes under the category of '*al-ḥosn*'. Islāmic thinkers, like *Allāmah* Tabatabai states, "everything is good because it is created by Allāh and also attributed to Him."²⁰ Further, another great Iranian thinker, Ragheb al-Iṣfahānī, emphasizes the concept of spiritual and moral beauty, which is grounded in the approach of the Holy Qur'ān. It is stated that out of 189 applications of the word *al-ḥosn* (goodness) in Qur'ān, only a few of them refer to sensible beauty that denotes or reflects a special artistic explanation. However, in the Qur'ān, Allāh has given an attractive description of some worldly objects of beauty while narrating about the Heavenly-Garden (*Jannat al-Firdaūs*), or Garden of Perpetual Bliss (*Jannat al-'Adan*).²¹

However, there are several synonymous words in the Qur'ān, such as *al-Jamāl* or *Zīnat* etc., but they are used in the same approach. In the sacred texts, life in the next world is considered more important than life in this mortal world. Although in Islām, it is also essential to pay attention to worldly life and enjoy the gifted Blessings of God. In other words, we may say that the beautiful life in this world is so important because it is an introduction to another beautiful life in the next world.²²

'Nature', as indicated above, is the symbolic representation of the Deity. It is the first artist's love and the source of realization of the Creator and the Most Beautiful (*Jamīl*). Inspired by the

‘Natural objects’, an Islāmic artist confesses himself as a follower of the Way laid down by the Qur’ān and the *Sīrah* of the Prophet. He feels delighted in the intimate companionship of ‘Nature’ because it the creation of the Supreme Being. God makes Himself known to us through the beauty manifesting in Nature and, the rest of His creation. However, it is merely a pathway, or a means to achieve the Highest Destination.

Therefore, a Muslim artist is not contented with a mere description of what he observed, however beautiful or enchanting, his inner creative yearning compels him to go beyond physical phenomena to identify the Hidden Spirit beyond the cosmological world. He strongly feels that the flow of life, the Divine Light and spirituality never cease. The Supreme motive-force of his arts and thought is One – the Ultimate Spirit. In this way, the Islāmic world view or Islāmic spirituality has influenced Islāmic art and architecture directly through the inculcation of certain attitudes and elimination of other possibilities within the mind and soul of those men and women who have created these art forms.

The Qur’ān also cites examples of fruits, gardens, herbs, plants, seeds, vegetables, vines, dates, grapes, pomegranate, palm-trees, harvests like onion, garlic, lentils, cucumbers, grain, and otherworldly beautiful objects and emphasises that all such cited ones would also be bestowed upon the pious person there in the heaven. A beautiful description about ‘garden’ is explained in seventy-eight verses in the Qur’ān, and similarly, in the sixty-seven verses the word ‘fruit’ is mentioned. Thus, according to the Qur’ān, the fruits like grape, date, fig, olive and pomegranate are gifts and heavenly fruits of God. Other fresh and dry fruits are the natural staple food of man. They contain substantial quantities of essential nutrients in a reasonable proportion. All these are cute gifts with beauty in colours and shapes, and we must thank Allāh for all.

Further, one may find an extensive description of different types of gifts with complete beauty and vigour in various verses of the Qur’ān. Just for reference, have a look at Chapter 55 (*Surah*)

Rahmān, in which Allāh narrates His blessings in the form of beautiful created things for human beings and asks man time and again:

نَابِدْكَتْ اَمَكْبَرَّ ءِآلَاءِ يَّأْبِفْ

So which of your Lord's marvels will you deny?²³

Moreover, the entire beautiful world with all her natural beauty has been created for the pleasure and utility of His vicegerent—human being. For instance, for true believers and followers of the right path, the Qur'ān guarantees them rewarding with beautiful gardens for their good deeds:

اهِيَفِ نَيِدِلْخُ رُهْنُالْ اَهْتِخْتِ نَمِ يَرْجِتْ تِنُّجْ تِنِجْمُؤْمَلْ اَوْ نَيِنِجْمُؤْمَلْ اَهْلَلْ اَدَعُو
رُؤْفَلْ اَوْ هُكَلِدْ رُبَكَا اَهْلَلْ اَنَمِ نُوْضِرُوْ نِنْدَعِ تِنُّجْ يَفِ هُبَيْطِ نَكْسِلْمَوْ
مُيْطِعْ اَهْلَلْ

Allāh hath promised to Believers, men and women, gardens under which rivers flow, to dwell therein, and beautiful mansions in gardens of everlasting bliss. But the most incredible joy is the good pleasure of Allāh that is the supreme felicity.²⁴

Also it is interesting that in a verse of the Qur'ān, the word *al-ḥosn* has been used to denote both good and beautiful life.

اَنْقَبُوْ هَنْسَحْ هِرْخَاءَلْ اَيْفُوْ هَنْسَحْ اَيِنْدُلْ اَيْفِ اَنْتَاءِ اَنْبَرَّ لُوْقِيْ نَمَّ مَهْنَمَوْ
رَانَلْ اَبَادَعْ

And among them is he who says, “Our Lord, give us goodness in this world, and goodness in the Hereafter, and protect us from the torment of the Fire.”²⁵

The Qur'ān further says:²⁶

الْمَعْمَ نَسَحْ اَنْمَ رَجْ اَعْيِضُنْ اَلْ اِنَّا تَحْلِلْ لَصَلْ اَوْلَمَعَوْ اُونَمَاءِ نَيِدِلْ اَنْ!

As for those who believe and lead a righteous life-We will not waste the reward of those who work righteousness.

نَم رَوَاسًا نَم اِهَيْفِ نَوَلَّحِي رُهْنُ الْاَمْوَاتِ نَم يَرْجَتِ نَدْعُ تَنْجَحُ مَهْلَ لَكَيْلًا
 يَلْعَ اِهَيْفِ نِي عَيْتَمُ قَرَبَتَسْ اَوْ سِدُنْسُ نَم اَرْضُخُ اِبَايَتِ نَوَسُ بَلْيَوِ بَهْدًا
 اَقْفَتَرُمُ تَنْسُ حَوِ بَاوْتَلُ مَعْنِ لَكَيْلًا اَلْا

These will have the Gardens of Eden, beneath which rivers flow.

Reclining on comfortable furnishings, they will be adorned with bracelets of gold, and will wear green garments of silk and brocade. What a wonderful reward, and what an excellent resting-place.

Allāh is the main source and force behind every creative, innovative and potentially regulative aspect of man. Although all creation reflects the cosmic intelligence, but only man, who is the central being in the terrestrial world that he inhabits, reflects it in an active, creative sense and he participates in the works of God as He is the Best (and most beautiful) amongst the creators:²⁷

نِي قَوْلِ خُلَا نَسْ خُ اَلْا لَكْرَابَتَف

Most Blessed is God, the Best of Creators.

Our rational faculty deals with the sensory world and its higher form, 'intuition', with the metaphysical world. When a complementary relationship between reason and intuition is achieved, it can become the guide which ultimately leads man to the highest form of 'knowledge' possible.²⁸ For a Muslim artist, Islāmic art or creative activity is one of how he can attain spiritual 'knowledge', either through creating it or by contemplating its beauty.

In the Qur'ānic aesthetics, we find various forms of beauty such as rational, sensual, sensible, linguistic, poetic, psychological, spiritual, ethical, formal or physical, metaphysical or ideal etc. Sometimes, we find an amalgamation of ethics and aesthetics or both in exchangeable terms—what is 'good' is also 'beautiful' and vice versa. The most striking aesthetic message of the Qur'ān is that all the physical, ethical and spiritual aspects are taken into

account by the Holy Book as per the psychological nature of man. In this way, the philosophical element has given much importance to Islāmic aesthetics. Allāh has created the earth and sky and beautified them with attractive features. The Qur'ān says:

أَنَا زَيْنًا السَّمَاءِ الدُّنْيَا بِزِينَةِ الْكَوَاكِبِ ط (37:6)

We have indeed decked the lower heaven with beauty (in) the stars.²⁹

Besides the creation of heavens and the earth, He has also created the beautiful human being with all bestowed attributes:

طَمَّ كُنُوزًا وَسَخَّ أَفْ مَكْرُورًا وَسَوَّوْا قَحْلَ أَبِ ضَرَّالْ أَوْ تَوْمَسَّالْ أَوْ قَلَّخْ

He created the heavens and the earth with truth, and He designed you, and designed you well.³⁰

In another verse, Allāh says that He has created man in the best beautiful form and fulfilled all the required divine elements in him amongst all the creatures. A human being possesses both spiritual and material aspects in him. The Qur'ān says:

مَيِّوَقَّتْ نَسَخًا عَفَّ نَسْنُ إِلَا أَنْ قَلَّخْ دَقْل

We have indeed created man in the best design.³¹

There are amazing descriptions of linguistic, logical and full of deep meanings of words used in an organised way in the Qur'ān. For instance, by visiting chapter 4, *Al-Nisā'*; Chapter 92, *Al-Lail*; Chapter 105, *Al-Fil*; Chapter 108, *Al-Kaūsar*; Chapter 109, *Al-Kafarūn*; Chapter 112, *Al-Akhlās*; chapter 113, *Al-Falaq*; Chapter 114, *Al-Annās* and others, one will find a unique poetic rhythmic words with eloquence and meaningful message that appeal a sensitive and creative mind. This is, in fact, another significant aspect of beauty inherent in the Holy Book.

In the Qur'ān, we find that Allāh possesses the Most Beautiful Names (*Al-Asma al-Husna*) and highest excellence, and He creates everything of great beauty. His most beautiful Names indicate that He is the creator of 'Beauty' in all His Natural objects in both living and non-living streams. His Names include:

‘الخالق’ ‘الجليل’ ‘ذوالجلال والاکرام’

Every object in nature shows that the Designer is perfect in ratio and proportion. The Master Artist, *Allāh*, also called *al-Muṣawwir* (the painter/artist), through His colour schemes and techniques, wonderfully created everything with the gift of beauty and with this supreme element put attraction in Natural World. Allāh, the possessor of beautiful Names is the Supreme Creator and Designer of everything. The Qur'ān says:

عَلَّمَ سَخْلًا ءَأَمَسْنَا أَلَّا هَلْ تَرَوْصُنْمُلَا يُرَابِلَا قُلْخَلَا هَلَّلَا وَه

He is God; the Creator, the Maker, the Designer.

His are the Most Beautiful Names...³²

Allāh has bestowed upon a human being the three most essential elements---hearing, sight and heart---to acquire knowledge, create something purposeful, hear what is vital, observe the signs (*Ayāt Allāh*) and make a judgment based on sound understanding. So, in the field of aesthetics, these three components in human beings work appropriately for art, beauty and appreciation. Allāh inscribed beauty upon all things and has given the sensitivity to the human being to possess and appreciate beauty. As the Qur'ān says:

وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ ط إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالبَصَرَ وَالفَقْوَادَ كَلَّ أَوْ
لَأَنَّكَ كَأَنَّهُ عَنْهُ مَسْتَهْلَأٌ ه

And follow not that which thou hast no knowledge of; the hearing, the sight, the heart-all of those shall be questioned of.³³

It is essential to refer to some more verses from the Qur'ān and a few Traditions of the Prophet of Islām, which endorse the view that Islāmic aesthetics, which explores that beauty is inherent in Islām itself the believers of Islām must encourage its flourishing, It is the Grace of Allāh that He has created the beautiful universe including starry heavens, lands and gardens, hills and rivers, birds and animals and all other creatures and also fashioned human being with best proportion and perfection. The Qur'ān says:

ولقد جعلنا في السماء بروجاً وزيننا للنظرين ط (15:16)

It is We Who have set out the Zodiacal Signs in the heavens, and made them fair-seeming to (all) beholders,³⁴

لَكَ بَكَرَءَاتُ أَمْ قَرَوْصُ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِي دَعَعْتَ لَكَ الْوَسْفَ لَقَوْلِ خِ يَذَلَّأ

He Who created you, and formed you, and proportioned you...

In whatever shape He willed, He assembled you.³⁵

هو الَّذِي يَصَوِّرُكُمْ فِي الْأَرْحَامِ كَيْفَ يَشَاءُ ط (آل عمران: ٦)

He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases...³⁶

In addition to the above Qur'ānic Verses regarding the significance of aesthetics, a couple of Traditions of the Prophet of Islām would be in order:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ إِذَا عَمِلَ أَحَدُكُمْ عَمَلًا أَنْ يُحْسِنَهُ (كنز العمال)

“God likes that whenever anyone of you performs any work he should do it in a beautiful manner”³⁷

الله جميل ويحب الجمال (مُسلم شريف، كتاب الايمان)

“God is Beautiful and Likes Beauty.”³⁸

There are other several traditions of the Prophets, his descendants (*Itrah*) and true companions (*ashābah*), which endorse the legacy of Islāmic art and thought throughout the ages.

(E). Concluding Remarks:

Thus, the origin of Islāmic aesthetics and all Art, Beauty and thought has to be sought in the inner realities of the Qur’ān which are also the principal realities of the cosmos and the spiritual reality of the Prophetic Substance from which emanates his grace (*al-Raḥmah*). In fact, the Qur’ān and Prophet Muhammad’s *Sīrah* have become the chief sources of Islāmic art and thought, “The Qur’ān provides the doctrine of Unity while the Prophet provides the doctrines of this Unity in multiplicity and the witness to this Unity in His creation.”³⁹

In fact, these sayings of the Prophet of Islām some more than 1400 years ago became a source of inspiration for the Muslims who unfold their creative potential in various fields of art and thought. Such prophetic sayings (*Ahādīth*) have provided the impetus for Muslims’ embellishment and beautification of their places of worship, homes, schools or *Madāris* and even of articles in common use in everyday life. The emphasis of Islāmic art is on ornamentation rather than on art for art’s sake.

Thus, Islāmic aesthetics prominently reflect Islāmic value system. All art, thought, beauty, goodness and other life ideals emerge from the Qur’ān and Prophetic Sunnah. Consequently, from the spiritual and ethical point of view, Islāmic art originates essentially from the Qur’ān and Sunnah, whose core values it aims to imbibe and translate into the plane of physical shapes or other multiple forms or styles. Therefore, every external image possesses inner reality that is also its hidden esoteric essence. The exoteric

or an outward form, or say *dhāir*, underlines its quantitative and physical aspect which is obvious, and thus, it is easily and readily intelligible. The Inner Intelligible Reality is represented in various dimensions—in the shape of some natural objects, like flowers, trees, stars, birds or some other forms of art like buildings, the ceramic, the piece of calligraphy, or the body of a human being, or the outward form of religious rituals and the likes. In this way, Islāmic “art makes manifest, in the physical order directly perceivable by the senses, the archetypal realities and acts, therefore, as a ladder for the journey of the soul from the visible and the audible to the Invisible which is also Silence transcending all sound.”⁴⁰

Hence, the essential and qualitative aspect of Islāmic art rests in the esoteric or inward (*bātin*) present in the entire creation or, say, in all objects of beauty. So, to know the secrets of this art in its completeness, one must seek appropriate knowledge and understanding of its exoteric and temporal reality, as well as its quintessential aspect and inward corporeality, where the Supreme Beauty of every object exists. It is up to the beholder- the scholar who comprehends the innermost technique and logic of the composition, while the superficial or unlearned fellow merely appreciates its aesthetic value and vigour. Such an interpretive concept forms the most significant philosophical aspect of Islāmic aesthetics.⁴¹ Behind every creative activity of a Muslim artist or artisan, and a spiritual link remains a vital factor.

Further, in various art forms such as calligraphy, painting, poetry, ceramics, textiles, and decorative arts and so on, one can find that all these and a thousand other art forms are the results of Islāmic spirituality. A Muslim artist or artisan thinks that all those moments that he spends in his creative activity are in reality, the moments of prayer, the domain of spiritual ecstasy or remembrance of God (*dhikr Allāh*), Who is, according to the Qur’ān, the Supreme Artisan, the Greatest Painter and the Supreme Maker of everything and the inspiration or *ḥikmah* certainly bestowed upon man from Him. In the present Chapter, a sincere effort has been made to deal with Islāmic

art and architecture (along with other forms of art) as the practical sources of Islāmic spiritual message.

For a true believer, Allāh is the central Reality of every thought and creative system. *Allāh*---the Supreme One ‘entitled to be worshipped,’ is the Unique, Sovereign, Holy, Almighty, and the Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Loving, and the Most Merciful and Compassionate and the Most Beautiful (*Jamīl*). All creation or all existence is subject to His Will and follow His Commandments. He is the sole source and center of conscious Muslims’ lives, prayers and aspirations. He is, in fact, the *summum bonnum* of their lives.

With such a robust belief system in al-Tawḥīd, a Muslim is fully aware and convinced of the balance and harmony of all existing beings, even when some confusing contradictions or imbalances sometime appear. Man’s limited understanding and low-knowledge seem responsible for all such incomplete reflections. In the Islāmic framework, nothing is looked upon as occurring randomly or by chance, for all is governed by the Plan of the All-Wise, Most Merciful Planner—God. There is one common beliefs among Muslims that the totality of things including all good and evil, right and wrong proceeds from the Creator and Sustainer of all beings. However, it is not true in the sense of believing that evil is from God. The Qur’ān categorically mentions that whatever is in the form of good, coming to men is from God and any kind of evil is from their own selves.⁴² Again, there is a series of the prophets to be believed in and finally a true believer must have faith in the last of the Prophet—Muhammad (S).

As mentioned, Islāmic art could not develop more vigorously because of the strict injunctions against such depictions as of the human or animal figures that might result in idol-worship. Thus, this art flourished in other creative ways. It developed a unique character by utilizing several other primary forms, like geometric, floral, arabesque, miniaturist, calligraphic and the others often interwoven and interlinked. From early times, Islāmic art has reflected its vitality in such a balanced, harmonious and attractive way.

Islām encourages all valuable creative activity and appreciates change and constant striving for a better individual and social life. So, Islāmic artists and aestheticians, under Islāmic world view and value system, tried at their level best to create and develop various art-forms such as poetry, music, calligraphy, painting, architecture, book-illustration and book-illumination, ceramics and other minor plastic and decorative arts. They have been deeply inspired by their religions world-view and cultural out-look:

Islāmic artists were most inventive in architecture, especially in mosques, their houses of worship, and in palaces and such socially useful institutions as shopping areas and hospitals. They also produced beautiful textiles, metal-ware, pottery, carved and molded plaster, glassware, wood and ivory carvings and *book illuminations* (decorations) and buildings. The best of these works show extraordinary mastery of technique, design, and colour. They illustrate a consistent concern to beautify all aspects of daily life.⁴³

The significance Islāmic aesthetics in creation of art and beauty remain remarkable throughout the centuries and left great impact on other civilizations and cultures. In both the creation of Allāh, the ‘Nature’ and in the creative activity of man ‘Art’, we find beauty. So, Islāmic conception of aesthetic became sacred element for the believers of Islāmic religion because through ‘natural beauty’ they approach or apprehend the Creator, Who is Jamīl and loves Jamāl. The mentioned Hadīth of the Prophet “God is Beautiful and He loves beauty” can be considered to be the foundation of Islāmic aesthetics. So, in Islām, art and faith are inseparably bound together and Muslim artists and artisans created remarkable art-forms with this standpoint. Thus, Islāmic artistic tradition performs a spiritual function and because of its close relationship to the form and content of the Islāmic Revelation or Islāmic spirituality, “whatever relation exists between Islāmic art and the Islāmic revelation, it cannot be simply on the plane of socio-political changes brought about by Islām. The answer must be found in the religion itself.”⁴⁴

In reality, Islāmic art, as remarked by Hossein Nasr, is the result of Islāmic metaphysics and theology and vehemently emphasizes that God is the origin or source of all forms. He is Omniscient—the Knower of all things, and therefore, the essences or forms of all things have their reality in the Divine Intellect.⁴⁵ In order to understand the spiritual message and true spirit of the Islāmic approach to art or creativity, we have briefly discussed some main characteristics of Islāmic aesthetics with special reference to the few of its essential art forms in general, and architecture and calligraphy, in particular. To understand the spiritual message and true spirit of this sacred art, we must know the basic features of Islāmic aesthetics as depicted in the Qur’ān and tradition of the Prophet and explained and empirically brought out by the Muslim aestheticians, artists and artisans in various stages of development of this discipline around the Muslim World. Let us sincerely revisit and rediscover the pristine Islāmic Art heritage through its multiple forms and applications and enlighten our young generation with its vigour and all-time vitality.

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