

INNER AND OUTER BEAUTY IN ISLAM: AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT: A person's physical appearance plays a big role in both individual and social situations. Regardless of a culture's fashionable apparel, particular types of grooming and dressing are universal and can have a drastic effect on a person's life, such as affecting our self-esteem and giving the people we meet a long-lasting impression on us. The Prophet Muhammad himself was well-known for his striking good looks and hygiene. Moreover, qualities such as intelligence, sincerity, and compassion give the soul inner beauty. This article expounds on the importance of inner and outer beauty in Islam by using verses from the Qur'an and narrations from the Ahlul Bayt.

Introduction

People naturally seek beauty and dislike untidy appearances. Based on human nature, Islam has taken humankind's tendency towards beauty into consideration and issued helpful guidelines to fulfil this natural need. According to the Qur'an, appreciation for beauty as a God-given blessing is a sign of His wisdom and it goes hand in hand with the existence of beautiful beings in the world. Islam guides its followers to appear neat and tidy in public.

Besides the natural pursuit of beauty, humans have to appear neat and tidy to strengthen and extend their family relationships and social ties. As social beings, people cannot reach most of their goals without having societies, thus it is important to make a good impression by looking presentable.

More importantly, inner or spiritual beauty, such as having knowledge, patience, and faith are some adornments of the human soul. In this article the idea of Islam on appearance and beauty will be discussed, with a further explanation on spiritual beauty.

Beauty in the Qur'an and hadiths

In the Qur'an, God mentions the beautification of the heavens with stars: "Indeed, We have adorned the lowest heaven with the finery of the stars."¹ Plants² and natural scenes³ are also seen as a way of beautifying the Earth. In one verse, people are asked to look pleasant when going to the mosque. The following verse provides us with a general rule that Islam is not against beauty and adornments. God says:

O Children of Adam! Put on your adornment on every occasion of prayer, and eat and drink, but do not waste; ... Say, Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of provision? Say, these are for the faithful in the life of this world, and exclusively for them on the Day of Resurrection.⁴

¹ The Qur'an 37:6

² The Qur'an 10:24

³ The Qur'an: 18:7

⁴ The Qur'an 7:32

As said earlier, there is a deep sense of beauty in human beings. And by displaying beautiful appearances and avoiding disheveled ones, humans harmonize with nature.

Along with the Qur'an, the traditions received from Imams also indicate great importance for the inner and physical beauty. There is a hadith from Imam Ali that shows how important outer beauty is in Islam. Imam Ali stated, "God is beautiful and likes beauty, and also likes to see His blessings being used by His servants."⁵

Beautiful appearance was important in our Prophet's lifestyle. Once, as the Prophet was leaving the house, he began combing his hair and beard, using a bowl of water as a mirror. Aisha asked, "You are the best son of Adam and the Prophet of God! Are you combing your hair and beard?" The Prophet answered, "God likes a believer to get ready and adorn when he wants to meet another believers."⁶

The Prophet also said, "When you want to appear in a gathering of believers, choose nice and neat clothes so that you become distinct among people like a beauty spot on one's face, because Allah dislikes uncomeliness and looking repugnant."⁷

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

إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ وَ يُحِبُّ أَنْ يَرَى أَثَرَ نِعْمَتِهِ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ

⁶ Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, *Makarim ul-Akhlaq*, Sharif Radi publication, pp. 96-97:

وَقَفَّ رَجُلٌ عَلَى بَابِ النَّبِيِّ ص يَسْتَأْذِنُ عَلَيْهِ قَالَ فَخَرَجَ النَّبِيُّ ص فَوَجَدَ فِي حُجْرَتِهِ زَكَاةً فِيهَا مَاءٌ فَوَقَّفَ يُسَوِّي لِحْيَتَهُ وَ يَنْظُرُ إِلَيْهَا فَلَمَّا رَجَعَ دَاخِلًا قَالَتْ لَهُ عَائِشَةُ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ أَنْتَ سَيِّدُ أَدَمَ وَ رَسُولُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ وَقَفْتَ عَلَى الزَّكَاةِ تُسَوِّي لِحْيَتَكَ وَ رَأْسَكَ قَالَ يَا عَائِشَةُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ إِذَا خَرَجَ عَبْدُهُ الْمُؤْمِنُ إِلَى أَخِيهِ أَنْ يَهَيِّئَ لَهُ وَ أَنْ يَتَجَمَّلَ.

⁷ Javadi Amuli, Abudllah, *Mafatih ul-Hayat*, Isra Publication, p. 161:

إِنَّكُمْ قَادِمُونَ عَلَى إِخْوَانِكُمْ فَأَصْلِحُوا رِحَالَكُمْ وَ أَصْلِحُوا لِبَاسَكُمْ حَتَّى تَكُونُوا كَأَنَّكُمْ شَامَةٌ فِي النَّاسِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْفُحْشَ وَ لَا التَّقَشُّشَ

The amount of money the Prophet spent on his perfume was more than that which he spent for food.⁸ Using perfume was very important to the Imams as well. Regarding Imam Sadiq there are narrations which say people could easily locate him in the mosque by the fragrance of his perfume.⁹

Imam Ali taught us that beautiful appearance is part of a believer's etiquette¹⁰ and advised us saying, "You should adorn yourselves for your brothers the same way you do for strangers who you like to see you in your best appearance."¹¹ He also described true believers as those who appear neat and adorned even when they are poor.¹²

Some see an opposition between religion (or piety) and beauty and so they object if they see religious leaders in beautiful clothes. This has a long history rooting back to the time of Imams. For example, it is narrated by one of Imam Sadiq's companions, Ibn Qaddah, that one day Imam Sadiq had high-quality clothes on when he came across Abbad Ibn Kasir the Suffi. Abbad said "You are from the household of the Prophet and your great father, Imam Ali, always wore burlap! What are these good clothes you have?" Imam replied, "Oh Abbad, be aware! Why do

⁸ Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, *Makarim ul-Akhlaq*, Sharif Radi publication, p. 43:

كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ص يُتْفِقُ عَلَى الطَّيِّبِ أَكْثَرَ مَا [مِمَّا] يُتْفِقُ عَلَى الصَّلَامِ

⁹ Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, *Makarim ul-Akhlaq*, Sharif Radi publication, p. 42:

كَانَ يُعْرَفُ مَوْضِعَ جَفْعَرِ ع فِي الْمَسْجِدِ بِطَيِّبِ رِيحِهِ وَ مَوْضِعَ سُجُودِهِ

¹⁰ Javadi Amuli, Abdullah, *Mafatih ul-Hayat*, Israa Publication, p. 160: التَّجَمُّلُ مِنْ أَخْلَاقِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

¹¹ Majlesi, Muhammad Baqir, *Bihar ul-Anwar*, Islamiyyah Publications, vol. 10, p. 91:

لِيَتَرْتَبَنَ أَحَدَكُمْ لِأَخِيهِ الْمُسْلِمِ إِذَا أَنَا كَمَا يَتَرْتَبَنُ لِلْغَرِيبِ الَّذِي يُحِبُّ أَنْ يَزَادَ فِي أَحْسَنِ الْهَيْئَةِ

¹² Sayyed Radi, *Nahj ul-Balaghah*, Hijrat Publications, p. 305:

مِنْ عَلَامَةِ أَحَدِهِمْ أَنَّكَ تَرَى لَهُ قُوَّةً فِي دِينِهِ ... وَ تَجَمُّلاً فِي فَاقَةِ

you protest like this? Who has made blessings of Allah impermissible? Allah, the exalted, likes to see His blessings being used.”¹³

A believer can avoid all factors that take his attention away from Allah and the afterlife and yet still care about his appearance and adorn it in a way that even his tidiness and neat appearance attracts others to the religion.

There is nothing wrong with pious people having good houses, eating delicious food, enjoying the best drinks, and wearing the finest clothes. It is possible for them to gain pleasure from this world and yet have the best afterlife. These are blessings provided by God for everyone.¹⁴

Imam Ali said “Clothes reveal beauty.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, some people are not concerned with a tidy appearance, and to make it worse, assume it against their spiritual wayfaring to care about their appearances. This belief is against the teaching of Islam.

Imam Hasan always wore his best clothes for prayers and when he was asked about it, he said, “God is beautiful and likes beauties so I adorn

¹³ Majlesy, Muhammad Baqir, *Bihar ul-Anwar*, Islamiyyah Publications, vol. 47, p. 361:

كَانَ أَبُو عَبْدِ اللَّهِ (ع) مُتَكِنًا عَلَى أَوْ قَالَ عَلَى أَبِي - فَلَقِيَهُ عَبْدُ بَنِ كَثِيرٍ وَ عَلَيْهِ ثِيَابٌ مَرْوِيَّةٌ حَسَنًا - فَقَالَ يَا أَبَا عَبْدِ اللَّهِ إِنَّكَ مِنْ أَهْلِ بَيْتِ نُبُوَّةٍ - وَ كَانَ أَبُوكَ وَ كَانَ هَذِهِ الْمَرْيَمَةُ عَلَيْكَ - فَلَوْ لَبَسْتَ ذُوْنَ هَذِهِ الثِّيَابِ - فَقَالَ لَهُ أَبُو عَبْدِ اللَّهِ وَ ذَلِكَ يَا عَبْدًا - مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ - إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَ جَلَّ إِذَا أَنْعَمَ عَلَى عَبْدٍ نِعْمَةً - أَحَبَّ أَنْ يَرَاهَا عَلَيْهِ لَيْسَ بِهِ نَاسٌ

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

أَنَّ الْمُتَّقِينَ... سَكَنُوا الدُّنْيَا بِأَفْضَلِ مَا سَكِنَتْ وَ أَكَلُوا بِأَفْضَلِ مَا أَكَلَتْ شَارَكُوا أَهْلَ الدُّنْيَا فِي دُنْيَاهُمْ فَكَالُوا مَعَهُمْ مِنْ طَيِّبَاتِ مَا يَأْكُلُونَ وَ شَرِبُوا مِنْ طَيِّبَاتِ مَا يَشْرَبُونَ وَ لَبَسُوا مِنْ أَفْضَلِ مَا يَلْبَسُونَ وَ سَكَنُوا مِنْ أَفْضَلِ مَا يَسْكُنُونَ - وَ تَرَوُحُوا مِنْ أَفْضَلِ مَا يَتَرَوُحُونَ وَ رَكِبُوا مِنْ أَفْضَلِ مَا يَرَكِبُونَ أَصَابُوا لَذَّةَ الدُّنْيَا مَعَ أَهْلِ الدُّنْيَا وَ هُمْ عِدَا جِبْرَائِلَ اللَّهِ يَتَمَتَّعُونَ عَلَيْهِ فَيُعْطِيهِمْ مَا تَمَتَّعُوا وَ لَا يَزِدُّ لَهُمْ دَعْوَةً وَ لَا يَنْقُصُ لَهُمْ نَصِيبًا مِنَ اللَّذَّةِ..

¹⁵ Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, *Makarim ul-Akhlaq*, Sharif Radi publication, p. 96: الثِّيَابُ تُظْهِرُ الْجَمَالَ:

myself for my Lord. He orders us to use our adornments for prayers. And because of this, I like to wear my best clothes.”¹⁶

When the Prophet saw an unkempt man wearing dirty untidy clothes, he said to him, “It’s a religious act to use and reveal God’s blessing”¹⁷

As said, when the Imams used fine clothes and faced some complaints as a result, they supported their stance by explaining how other prophets, such as Salomon and David, did the same. One of Imam Rida’s servants, Obayd, said, “Some people from Khorasan came to him and told him that they did not like him to wear fine elegant clothes. The Imam replied that Joseph had been a prophet and son of the prophets and yet he had worn elegant clothes and participated in Pharaoh’s meetings, yet this did not degrade his spiritual level. [Buying] elegant clothes is wrong if there are unmet needs.”¹⁸

In another story, once a person saw Imam Sadiq in a bright-coloured shirt. He is surprised as he thought that bright colours are only worn by young people. The Imam noticed his reaction and said, “Who prohibited

¹⁶ Ayyashi, Muhammad ibn Mas’ud ibn Muhammad, *Kitab ut-Tafsir*, Elmiyye Publications, Tehran, vol. 2, p. 14:

رَوَى الْعِيَّاشِيُّ بِإِسْنَادِهِ عَنِ الْحَسَنِ بْنِ عَلِيٍّ (ع) أَنَّهُ كَانَ إِذَا قَامَ إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ لَبَسَ أَجْوَدَ ثِيَابِهِ - فَيَقِيلُ لَهُ يَا ابْنَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ لِمَ تَلْبَسُ أَجْوَدَ ثِيَابِكَ - فَقَالَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ جَمِيلٌ يُحِبُّ الْجَمَالَ - فَأَتَجَمَّلُ لِرَبِّي وَ هُوَ يَقُولُ: «خُذُوا زِينَتَكُمْ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ»، فَأُحِبُّ أَنْ أَلْبَسَ أَجْمَلَ ثِيَابِي

¹⁷ *Al-Hayat*, vol. 6, p. 217:

أَبْصَرَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ص رَجُلًا شَعْنًا شَعْرَ رَأْسِهِ وَسِخْفَةً ثِيَابَهُ سَيِّئَةً حَالَهُ فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ص مِنَ الَّذِينَ الْمُسْتَعْنَةُ وَإِظْهَارُ التَّعَمُّةِ

¹⁸ Tabarsi, Abu Nasr Razi ud-Din Hasan ibn Fadl, *Makarim ul-Akhlaq*, Sharif Radi Publication, p. 98:

دَخَلَ قَوْمٌ مِنْ أَهْلِ خُرَاسَانَ عَلَى أَبِي الْحَسَنِ ع فَقَالُوا لَهُ إِنَّ النَّاسَ قَدْ أَنْكَرُوا عَلَيْكَ هَذَا اللَّبَاسَ الَّذِي تَلْبَسُهُ قَالَ فَقَالَ لَهُمْ إِنَّ يُوسُفَ بْنَ يَعْقُوبَ ع كَانَ نَبِيًّا ابْنَ ابْنِ نَبِيٍّ وَ كَانَ يَلْبَسُ اللَّبَاسَ وَ يَتَرَزَّرُ بِالذَّهَبِ وَ يَجْلِسُ مَجَالِسَ آلِ فِرْعَوْنَ فَلَمْ يَضَعْهُ ذَلِكَ وَ إِنَّمَا يَدْمُ لَوْ اخْتِيجَ مِنْهُ إِلَى فِسْطِهِ

the beautifications that God allows for people? I have got married recently [I am expected to wear nice clothes.]¹⁹”

Looking presentable is so important in Islam that a person is not considered a spendthrift when he or she buys different types of clothing. Imam Sadiq was asked “Can a believer have two sets of clothes?” to which he replied “Yes.” The person went on asking until twenty sets and at last he replied “[No], it is not considered extravagance unless you wear your party clothes for work.”²⁰

There is a similar hadith from Imam al-Kadhimi in which he was asked about having ten sets of clothes; he answered, “It is not extravagance; indeed, it may even help your clothes last longer. Extravagance is wearing your formal clothing in an unclean environment.”²¹ According to this hadith, having different sets of clothes is good both for looking presentable, which is an answer to one’s tendency towards beauties, and for keeping clothes for a longer time which is more economic.

Neatness is so important in Islam that there are instructions about the slightest actions such as caring for and combing hair,²² polishing nails,²³

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 105:

دَخَلْتُ عَلَى أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ عَ وَ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ وَ لَمَحَنَّهُ مَضْبُوعَةً بَعْضُهَا قَدْ نَمَّصَ صَبْغَهَا عَلَى عَائِقِهِ قَالَ فَتَطَّرْتُ إِلَيْهَا فَقَالَ يَا حَكَمُ مَا تَقُولُ فِي هَذَا قُلْتُ إِنَّا لَتَعِيبُ السَّابَّ الْمَرَاهِقَ عِنْدَنَا مِثْلَ هَذَا فَأَبَى شَيْءٌ أَقُولُ وَ هِيَ عَلَيْكَ فَقَالَ يَا حَكَمُ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ يَا حَكَمُ إِنِّي حَدِيثٌ عَمْدٌ بِعَرَسٍ

²⁰ Ibid. p. 98:

يَكُونُ لِلْمُؤْمِنِ عَشْرَةٌ أَفْضَلُ قَالَ نَعَمْ قُلْتُ عِشْرِينَ قَالَ نَعَمْ وَ لَيْسَ ذَلِكَ مِنَ السَّرْفِ إِنَّمَا السَّرْفُ أَنْ يُجْعَلَ ثَوْبٌ صَوْنُكَ ثَوْبٌ بِذَلِكَ .

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

²¹ Ibid.:

الرَّجُلُ يَكُونُ لَهُ عَشْرَةٌ أَفْضَلُ أَيْ يَكُونُ ذَلِكَ مِنَ السَّرْفِ فَقَالَ لَا وَ لَكِنَّ ذَلِكَ أَبْقَى لِثِيَابِهِ وَ لَكِنَّ السَّرْفَ أَنْ تَلْبَسَ ثَوْبَ صَوْنِكَ فِي الْمَكَانِ الْقَدِيرِ

²² Majlesi, Muhammad Baqir, *Bihar ul-Anwar*, Islamiyah Publications, vol. 73, p. 116

²³ Ibid. p. 123:

and trimming nose hairs.²⁴ There are even teachings about how to decorate a tablecloth.²⁵

Though it is important to look presentable in public, there is more flexibility in what a person wears in private. For example, one may wear old or coarse clothes in private and fine and soft clothes in public to both practice an ascetic life and simultaneously look presentable in the public.

In one narrative, when Sofyan the Sufi saw Imam Sadiq in fine clothing, he told the Imam that none of Imam Sadiq's fathers had ever worn that. Imam replied, "The holy Prophet lived in the time of poverty and so he lived like other people, but afterwards came times of richness. The best people to use God's blessings are believers." And he recited this verse "Who has forbidden the adornment of Allah which He has brought forth for His servants, and the good things of [His] provision?"²⁶ and then said, "We are the best to use God's blessings. Besides, what you see of my clothes is what I have worn for [meeting] people." Then he showed him the coarse clothes he was wearing underneath, and said, "You wear coarse clothes on top to make people think you have an ascetic life, yet under it, hidden from people, you wear soft clothes that make you comfortable."²⁷

قَالَ لِلرِّجَالِ قُصُوا أَظْفَارَكُمْ - وَ لِلنِّسَاءِ انْتَرِكْنَ فِائَتَهُ أَرِيئُ لَكُنَّ

²⁴ Ibid. p. 109:

أَخَذُ الشَّعْرَ مِنَ الْأَنْفِ يُحْتَسِنُ الْوُجْهَ

²⁵ Ibid. vol. 59, p. 300:

زَيَّنُوا مَوَائِدَكُمْ بِالْبُقَالِ فَإِنَّهَا مَطْرَدَةٌ لِلشَّيَاطِينِ مَعَ السَّسْمِيَّةِ

²⁶ The Qur'an 7:32

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

Spiritual beauty

Verses of the Qur'an and hadiths were shared regarding physical appearance. Regarding inner and spiritual beauty, God introduces faith as beautification of people's hearts: "God has endeared faith to you and has adorned it in your hearts" (Qur'an, 49:7). Thus, adornment applies even to the realm of spirituality and faith is one instance of it. Intellect,²⁸ knowledge,²⁹ wisdom,³⁰ good manners,³¹ silence,³² patience,³³ modesty,³⁴ and gratitude³⁵ are some examples of spiritual beauties.

In a beautiful hadith where the Prophet lists qualities that result in inner beauty,³⁶ he mentions that in every situation a virtue that can beautify our lives, such as patience in times of hardship, humbleness when in a

²⁸ Tamimi, Abdul Wahid, *Tasnif Ghurar ul-Hikam*, Daftar Tablighat Publications, p. 51:

العقل زينٌ لعن رُزقه

²⁹ Ibid. p. 281:

العلم أشرف حليّة و عطيّة

³⁰ Ibid. p. 58:

عليك بالحكمة فإنها الحليّة الفاخرة

³¹ Ibid. p. 247:

لا زينة كالآداب

³² Ibid. p. 216:

الصمت زين العلم و عنوان العلم

³³ Daylami, Hasan ibn Abul-Hasan, *Irshad ul-Qulub*, Sharif Radi Publications, vol. 1, p. 199:

العلم زينة

³⁴ Payande, Abulqasim, *Nahj ul-Fasahat*, Danesh Publications, p. 453:

الحياء زينة

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

الشكر زينة العنى و الصبر زينة البلوى

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

العفاف زينة البلاء و التواضع زينة الحسب و الفصاحة زينة الكلام و العدل زينة الإيمان - و السكينة زينة العبادة و الجفط زينة الرواية و حفظ الحاج [الججاج] زينة العلم و حسن الأدب زينة العقل و بسط الوجه زينة العلم و الإيثار زينة الزهد و بدل الموجود زينة اليقين و التقلل زينة الفتاة و ترك المن زينة المعروف و الخشوع زينة الصلاة و ترك ما لا يعني زينة الورع

high social position, eloquence when speaking, justice of those who are faithful and tranquility in the time of worship.

Keeping a balance

There are many hadiths regarding the importance of having a neat and beautiful appearance that there remains no doubt about its significance in Islam. This is to bear in mind that Islam is a religion of balance. The Qur'an instructs that people should not be excessive in beautifying themselves or their belongings.³⁷ This becomes even more important in societies where the majority cannot afford basic necessities. As explained by Imam Rida when asked why his clothing differed to that of Imam Ali, and he replied that at the time of Imam Ali people were challenged with poverty and thus had to wear simple clothes; but because people were well-off during Imam Rida's period the Imam blended in.³⁸

Unfortunately, we fall into the trap of tending towards extremes. For example, some are either too sluggish to even have a simple yet tidy and neat appearance or they go towards the other extreme and spend endless hours on their appearance. A balance is to be made in looking presentable without troubling themselves with complications.

³⁷ Qur'an: 7:31

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