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Women or *Hūri* and Islamic Art

Mamoona Khan

Abstract

*The current study is inspired by the fact that women, who occupy a considerable space in the Muslim miniature paintings, have not gained much attention from art critics and historians. Theirs is a rarely discussed domain. Major aim of the research is to bring them to light as an important subject worthy of independent study, and to view them critically, especially in the image of a *hūri*, defined in the Holy Qur'ān, with which they bear some affinity. In this context, Muslim miniature paintings of Persia will be analysed to find any of their links with the *hūris* of Jannah. Moreover, for a better understanding of the concept, Qur'ānic verses and exegeses will be taken into consideration. It will be further elaborated with ibn 'Arabi's conceits related to women, based on the saying of the Holy Prophet (pbuh). Thus, through intrinsic and extrinsic analysis, beauty of the inner and outer of women in Muslim miniature paintings will be explored.*

Women are an integral part of the Muslim society and likewise of the Muslim Art. Besides men, images of women keep essential space in illustrated manuscripts of the Muslim world. All spheres of life from marginalised to the dwellers of palaces that is from ordinary women to princesses, all are dealt in the illustrated manuscripts of the Islamic art. But not much is written on the subject, either completely ignored or partially covered by a few scholars. It is desirous then that the subject must be investigated by the esteem it deserves. The paper intends to delve deep into the probing of feminine beauty delineated in the Islamic art by viewing the concept of *hūri* defined in the Holy Qur'ān, since; pious women are mentioned with great respect in the Holy Scripture.

Woman is considered to be the most beautiful creature of the world and some of the Muslim theologians bestow her sanctity of Divine beauty. Ibn 'Arabi was of the belief that though God cannot be conceived in material form but “the sight of God in women is perfect of

all” (Aziz 41). The perfection is very similar to ḥūrī, emblems of physical and spiritual beauty, and a reward for the faithful.

In the Persian miniature painting, they are rendered as poetic vision of ideal beauty, mostly young and specimen of eternal spring. In Persian poetry a beautiful woman is envisaged as having moon like face, slender waist, straight back like a cypress tree, shoulders symmetrical, a perfect figure neither too plump nor too skinny, with black hair, curved eye brows like crescent, tiny mouth like rose bud, and so tiny that it seems she can hardly breathe through it. The same vision is transfigured by Persian poets to the artists, and females depicted have elegant personalities. Their attractive portrayal brings to mind the image of ḥūrīs, pen-pictured in the Holy Qur’ān. Ḥūrīs are the companions of the pious men in Jannah, a reward in the hereafter, for their piety in this world.

The metaphor of precious stones is used for ḥūrīs in the Holy Qur’ān. Ruby is known for the beauty of its delicate pink colour and pearl for the purity of its whitish tint. Combination of both brings to the imagination a perfect symbol of beauty, which refers to the complexions and delicacy of appearances of these women. This vision of ideal beauty is materialised in the Persian miniatures. Gems also symbolise worth of women. So, pious females are linked with precious stones or jewels and their appearances, symbolic of poetic beauty of Persia. They are further decked with light jewellery but having draped heads and fully clad shoulders. They are so attractive and seem so pious that it brings into being the concept of ḥūrī, defined in sūrah: lv (al-Raḥmān), 58:

*(tr.) As though they were rubies and pearls
Merit of these creatures is described in sūrah: lii (al-Ṭūr),
20, when they are identified as companions of reverent men:*

*(tr.) Reclining on thrones set in lines and we shall join
them to Pure and beautiful ones (ḥūrīs)*

So, physical beauty is linked with the spiritual, and besides numerous gifts for the pious men, excellent companions in the life hereafter are best rewards, described as “pure and beautiful”. Thus, the concept of beauty in Islam is comprised not only of the physical but of ethical as well, and females portrayed in Islamic art mirror these traits. They are

draped from head to toe whether in the role of princesses, queens or ordinary slave girls, or even a woman just got up after sleep, e.g. Thief discovered in a bedchamber from *Kalīla wa Dimna*, fig.1. She is



Fig.1: Thief discovered in a bedchamber. Tabriz, 1360-1374, *Kalīla wa Dimna*, University Library, Istanbul.

the hallmark of feminine beauty, though sitting on her bed, appears very tall and attenuated, with arched eyebrows, dark eyes, round moon-like face and tiny mouth. It symbolises perfect feminine poetic beauty of Persia, along with an emblem of a devout person, thus, delineation of an *hūri*.

Women represented in Muslim miniature paintings are incorporated with aura of loveliness and unending youth, envisioned about an *hūri*. Apart from the physical, beauty of their inner selves,

wrought by piety is also embodied in their imagery. Parameters of a pious woman, as described in the image of an ḥūrī in the Holy Qur'ān, sūrah: lv (al-Raḥmān), 70, 72:

(tr.) In them (Jannah) will be fair (companions), good, beautiful, (and) restrained (to their glances, living) in goodly pavilions

It is further added in sūrah: xxiv (al-Nūr), 31:

(tr.) And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what appears there of: and that they should draw their veils over their bosoms. . . .

The verses give a clear picture of the appearance desired for a Muslim woman, and her images in the illustrated miniatures are complete depiction of the model conceived. Whatever role is assigned to her in the story illustrated, the artists have tried to keep her within the limits devised by the Holy Scripture. They are always fully draped, never rendered as sensuous beings, whether represented as the beloved of a prince, an entertainer, a slave girl, a dancer or a musician, and even a nude who has been witnessed in the course of events by the protagonist while she was taking bath in a stream, figs.2-6.



Fig.2: Shīrīn viewing the portrait of Khusrau, from Khamsa-i Nīzāmi , 1539-43. British Library, London.



Fig.3: Khusrau listening the poetry of Shīrīn's maiden, Khamsa-i Nīzāmi, 1539-43.

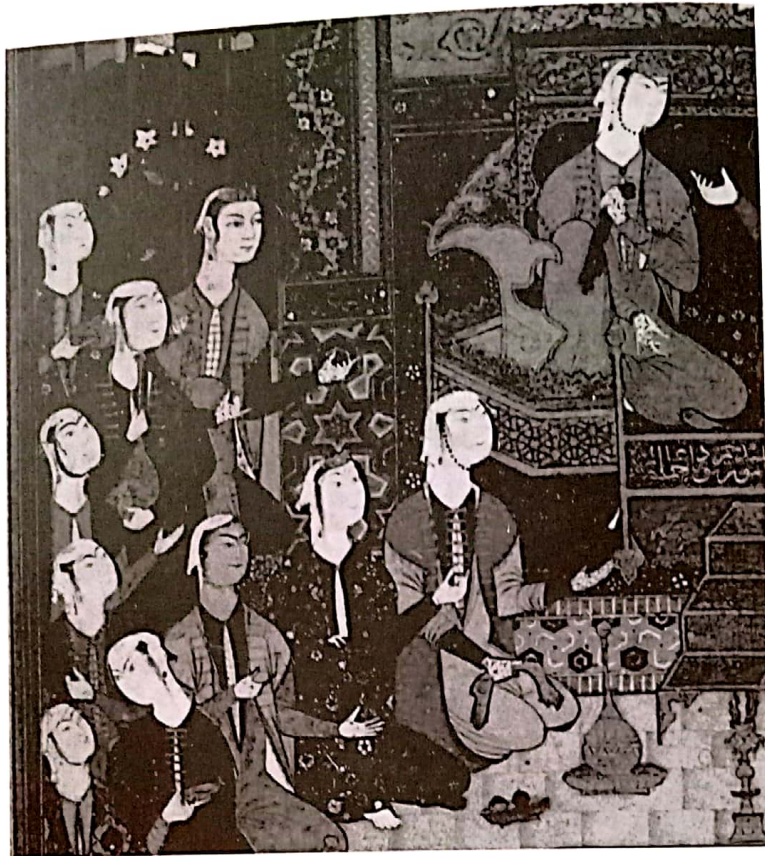


Fig.4: Shīrīn and her maiden, from fig.3



Fig.5: Portrait of Shīrīn, details from fig.2.



Fig.6: Shīrīn from Khūsru seeing Shirīn bathing details from fig.3.

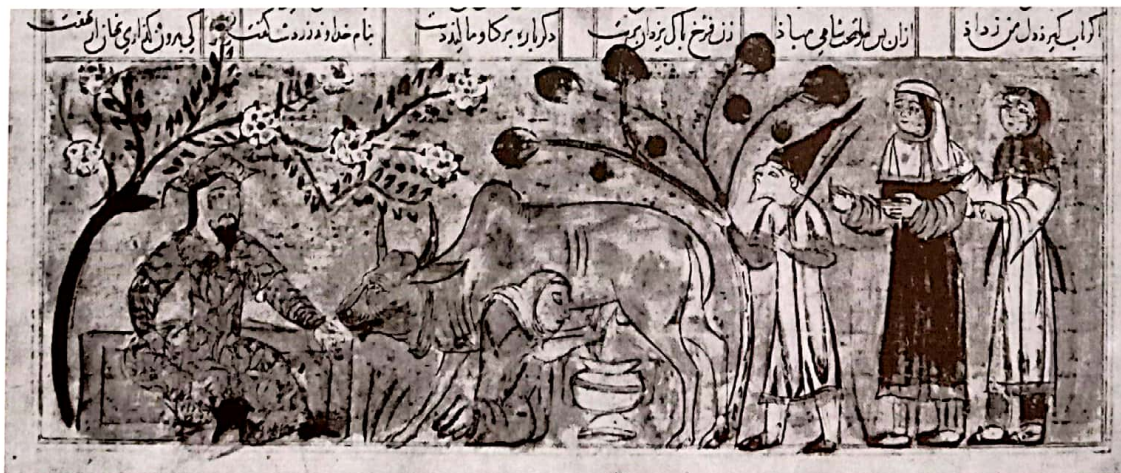


Fig.7: Bahrām Gur in the peasant's house. Shīrāz (1341), The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore



Fig.7: Combat between Humay and Humāyūn from *Dīwān* of *Khawājū Kirmān*. Baghdād 1396, British Library. London.

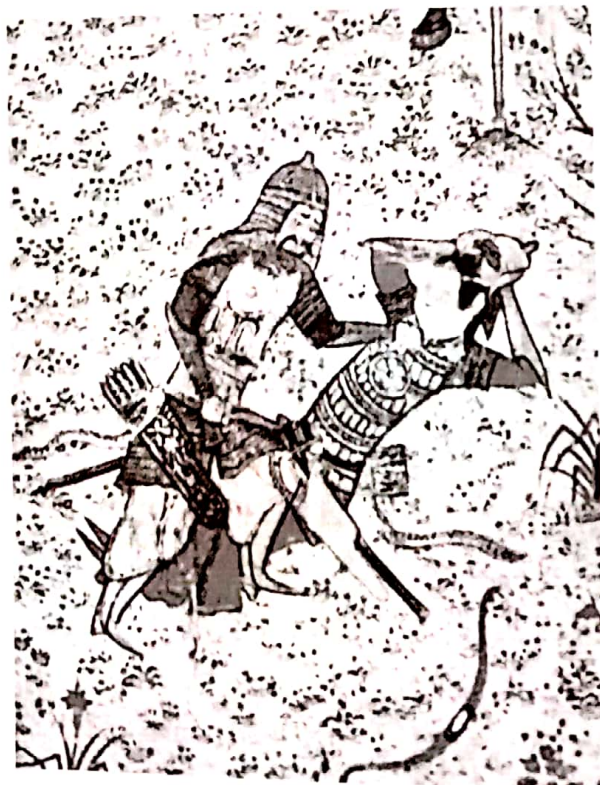


Fig.8: Humay and Humāyūn details from fig.7

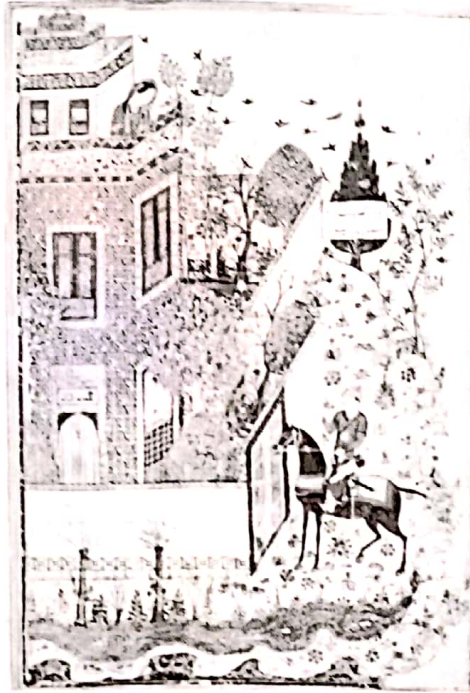


Fig.9: Humay at the gate of Humāyūn's castle. Dīwān of Khwājū Kirmāni, Jalayirids, Baghdād, British Library, London, 1396.



Fig.10: Humāyūn, details from Fig.9

one gets stirred by her nudity. Same is the case of draped women, whether ordinary women engaged in their daily toils, a princess catches the sight of her lover, enjoying the bounties of nature or engaged in any

stately discourse, she fulfils the tenets of the Holy Qur'ān about pious women and even her glances are benign not blunt. Height of these norms is apparent in the miniature where princess Humāyūn, in the guise of a man has just surrendered while fighting with the prince Humay, from the Dīwān of Khawājū Kirmān, even then she is fully covered and there is nothing erotic in her appearance, figs.7-8. In other subjects, where a deviation from the religious codes can occur, such as romantic scenes, there too, females retain the limits of hūris. These figures are embedded in beautiful surroundings like inlaid jewels, such as Humay at the gate of Humāyūn's castle, from Dīwān of Khawājū Kirmān, figs.9-10. The princess is looking down from the terrace of her palace, only her bust visible, having inclined head and benign looks, though embedded with jewels but completely clad, even with covered head. She is hence, a specimen of the Qur'ānic concept of Muslim women, and also the epitome of perfect and unblemished beauty that is an hūri.

Origin of the word hūri is traced in the exegesis of the Holy Qur'ān by Maulāna 'Abd Allāh Yūsuf 'Ali, from ḥawarīyūn; first disciples of the Christ, who were spiritually exalted. Therefore, she is lovely not only for her appearance but also an embodiment of the beauty of her inner-self. It means she is beautiful as well as pious. The word ḥawār" in Arabic bears another meaning: it also stands for intense whiteness of white of eye and intense darkness of black of eye. So, aḥwār: plural of hūr, also stands for purity of intellect and ā'īn means a large eyed person and 'āina stands for a beautiful and wide eyed woman. Maulāna 'Abd Allah Yūsuf 'Ali envisages hūri as a combination of beauty, purity, truth and good will ('Ali 873), that is, besides physical, spiritual refinement is an important feature of this creature. Intrinsically, beauty here is associated with eyes because eyes are considered to be the symbol of soul, and intense black of the eyeball against luminous white, creates lovely impact that gives feeling to the facial expressions. Hence, physical beauty is combined with purity of intellect. Thus, the concept of hūri was visualised by the Persian poets and transmitted to the artists, who delineated it on the pages of the miniatures. Consequently, women represented in Muslim miniature paintings are incorporated with aura of loveliness and unending youth that can only be envisioned about an hūri.

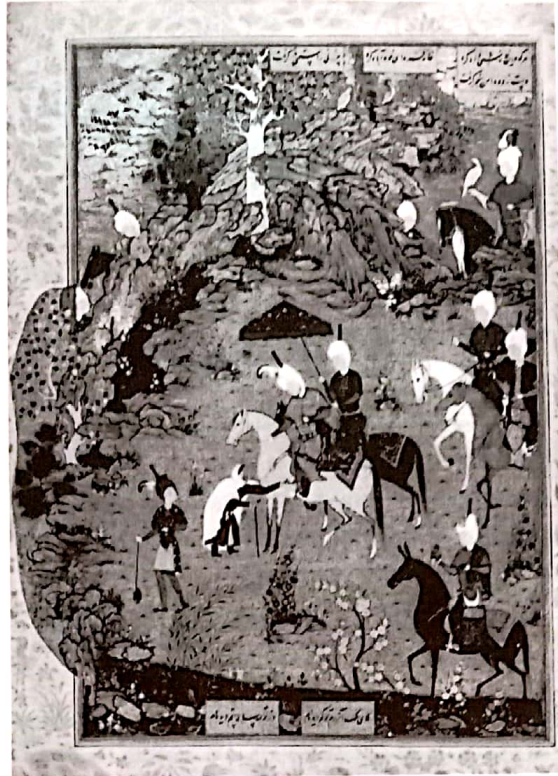


Fig.11: An old lady complaining Sulṭān Sanjar, *Khamsa-i Nizāmi* 1539-40. British Library, London.



Fig.12: Old Lady, details from fig.11



Fig.13: Majnūn brought before Laila, *Khamsa-i Nizāmi* 1539-40, Tabrīz. British Museum, London.



Fig.14: Old Lady, details from fig.13

Another amazing fact about representation of women in the Muslim miniature paintings is that the artists had never tried to capture a true likeness of any one, be that a princess or any ordinary slave girl. They are subjective and anonymous beings, who are identified with certain names, otherwise there is no individuality associated with the images of these figures. The main characters too retain anonymity (Papadopoulo 56, 1979), so much so that we cannot differentiate between Shīrīn of Farhād, Laila of Majnūn, or Zulaikha of Yūsuf from their appearances; even their maids are not very distinct from them, figs. 4-7.

Making images for vanity has been a human instinct, and to satisfy vanity conquerors and heroes have glorified themselves with their portraits. However, a Muslim conceives himself as an instrument of God and ascribes all the glories of his deeds to almighty Allāh. So the animate beings portrayed here, including women, are part of that vision. They do not have individual features but every where represented as young and beautiful. Thus, feminine beauty envisioned in paintings by Muslim artists is eternal that has nothing to do with time. They blossom like eternal spring, old age is rarely rendered, but here too, they are represented as specimens of piety and good will. For instance, An old women complaining Sultān Snajar, and in another miniature; Majnūn brought before Laila in chains, from Khamsa-i Nīzāmi 1539-43, figs. 11-14, both the elderly women are double bent with age but appear determined. Their figures mirror their lovely past and they strictly follow the dress code of a Muslim lady, defined in the Holy Scripture. There are very few examples of old age; even then artist's interest is not in the decreasing strength but in maturity of an experienced person. Otherwise, women imagery recalls the lasting beauty of ḥūris that will never wither. Moreover, individuality is not attached with these women, whether young or old. One cannot differentiate between Shīrīn and Laila, figs. 15-16.



Fig 15: Portrait of Laila from fig.13



Fig.16: Portrait of Shīrīn from fig.3



Fig.17: Odalisque, woman of Algiers by Renoir, National Gallery of Arts, Washington 1870.

Women represented in the Muslim miniatures are agile creatures, not powerful like warriors or monarchs but things of beauty or sometimes symbols of wisdom as well, never engaged in masculine pursuits. They are represented as princesses enjoying in gardens, listening music, feasting, catching the sight of a lover while standing on a terrace, appreciating portrait of a hero, committing suicide for a cause, or ordinary middle class ladies busy in their daily toils, above all, portrayed as emblems of wisdom. But never like the Greek Medusa or the Niké of Samothrace of Hellenism, rather comely and wise creatures. On the contrary, some misogynistic notions are associated with the Muslim society, wrongly perceiving the testimony of women as witness. Moreover, *haram*, or women's quarters; the concealed part of a Muslim house has great fascination for the west; they imagine it as a place of recreation only.

Considering women as an idle object, a few artists of the occident have also portrayed sluggish images of Muslim women, as Renoir (1841-1919) did in his *Women of Algiers* (1870), fig.17, reflecting occident's mind set. She is depicted in extremely erotic posture and looks. *Haram* and stories associated with it, frequently stirred imagination of the nineteenth century western writers and artists, who transmitted these stories in highly subjective manner. Similar are the accounts of Lady Montague, wife of the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in the first quarter of the eighteenth century. She gives

lucid accounts of nudity practised in the public baths, but it is completely denied by Julia Paradoe; a poetess, historian and novelist, who went there in 1835 and lived for fifteen months. She wrote "I should be unjust did I not declare that I witnessed none of that unnecessary and wonton exposures described by the lady M. W. Montague" (Sancar 13). Actually Ottoman women were very beautiful, as M.de.D'Ohsson says:

"Beautiful figures, dark and shiny eyes, and fresh ivory like skin separate the women of this country from European Muslim women are unacquainted with rouge and lipstick. Only they like to paint half their nails with henna or 'kina' as it is called among people. They use kohl on their eye brows and more often on their eye lashes Hair is maintained in its natural shape. Either it falls down in natural braids from the shoulders or it is wrapped around the muslin cloth that serves as headdress" (Sancar).

The women in Muslim miniatures are analogous to the above defined pen-portrait, and their embellishment too, is similar. One can see beautiful patterns of henna on their hands, whether one views domestic ladies busy in their daily toils or princesses in palaces enjoying music or poetry, fig.16. Thus, women are much focused creatures in miniature paintings by the Muslim artists, where not only their physical but spiritual aspects are also explored.

Ibn 'Arabi gives a different view of women. In the last chapter of his book, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikmah*, he discerns waḥdat or singularity in triplicity by using the metaphor of women. Laying its substrate on an ḥadīth, the Prophet (pbuh) says, "three things have been beloved to me in this world of yours: women, perfume and serenity of my eyes is placed in namāz¹". Representing her as multi-faceted mirror, that reflects a panorama of infinite beauty of the Supreme-Being. She is embodied with the qualities of charm, beauty, productivity, object of attraction, breathed with spirit of mercy by the Supreme Lord. On the other hand, for male, the vicegerent of God, woman is a perpetual attraction, even a distraction from the recollection of God. For, ibn 'Arabi holds:

. . . a man may most perfectly contemplate God in women being,

¹It is quoted in *Sunnan al-Nīsā'i*, ḥadīth No: 3903, and also in *Masnad-i Aḥmad*, ḥadīth No: 12066.

as she is, that quintessential sign or clue [āyah] from which he might best learn to know his own true self, which is in turn, to know his Lord (‘Arabi Bezels 271).

Man emerged from God and woman from man, holds ibn ‘Arabi, for God made man for His own recognition, and through women man knows his own self and thus recognises God. The very reason that woman in the Muslim miniatures remind the concept of ḥūrī of the heavens that is an emblem of feminine beauty. Ibn ‘Arabi defines her as a microcosmic mirror who reflects multifarious qualities of God, like beauty, creativity and wisdom. He, while elucidating perfume, the second element of the ḥadīth mentioned above, relates women with its fragrance. The aroma of perfume, holds ibn ‘Arabi, “at once soothes and incites, drugs and stimulates, may remind one of the delight of women or the serenity of the sanctuary, and may either sharpen or diminish spiritual awareness” (‘Arabi Bezels 271).

In Arabic the word ṭīb is used for perfume which also stands for goodness or virtue of spirit. He views perfume for its physical and spiritual entities; something that soothes or gives comfort, similar, he holds, is drugs or women that make their impact on spirit.

An interesting analogy traced by ibn ‘Arabi is related to the delight of women with serenity of a sanctuary, may be of a mosque, where a devotee contemplates the Supreme Lord. But the best of cerebration occurs, not in the sanctuary but in its serenity. It means ibn‘Arabi has perceived woman not in her shallow appearance but in her contemplative self that opens doors of wisdom, or he loves her for her wisdom.

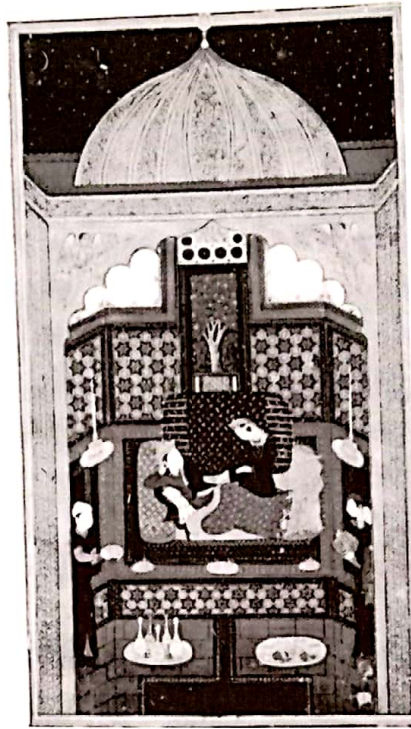


Fig.18: Indian Princess under black dome. Herat 1427. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig.19: Princess of Khawārzam under green dome. Tabrīz, 1481. Topkapi Museum, Istanbul



Fig.20: Persia Princess under the white dome, from *Khamsa-i Nizami*, 1505, Topkapi, Istanbul

Under the aegis of romantic subjects, Persian artists have promoted the wisdom of women, a negation of the generally accepted notion that Muslim women are excluded from the sagacious pursuits, wrongly perceiving their testimony as witness. Moreover their role in the society is misconceived, as defined by Delacroix in the sluggish image of the Odalisque, woman of Algiers, fig. 17, where she appears as an idle being, along with sensuous and erotic symbol (Robbinson 19). While, Muslim scholars: *ṣūfīs* mystics or poets, along with artists have erased the misinterpretation, such as Nizāmi eulogises erudition of women in his poem *Haft Paikar*. His *Khamsa* is apparently a percept of fairy tales but actually he has decoded the hidden talent of wisdom of women. His masterpiece *Haft Paikar*², 1197, cloaks spiritual meaning with fables. In the romantic atmosphere of music and beauty the women provide

² Meaning, *The Brides of the Seven Climes*.

lessons of wisdom and spiritual elevation to Bihrām Gur³; the protagonist, who is a symbol of virile perfection. His seven expected brides came from seven climes, resided under seven distinct coloured domes. Each colour associated with the planet ascended to her homeland, and the seven women imparted cosmic wisdom of seven different lands to a man of high esteem. Each night one of them narrated a story pervaded with a rationale of “converging virtue of the civilised world” to Bihrām (Barry 278). Having physical and mental capabilities, he was charged with the universal wisdom by women. Each woman, clad in the colour attributed to the star associated with her homeland, such as Fūrāk, the daughter of Rājā Puras in black, the colour of Saturn, the planet of India, while Byzantine princess in yellow, the colour of sun, the planet of Byzantine, etc.

The fable Haft Paikar is basically related to Gnosticism (Barry 282), in Greek it means knowledge and in Arabic it is ‘Irfān. The Gnostic philosophy, though very old, secured a strong hold in Muslim ṣūfī thought. It defines human soul as a segment of Divine light, imprisoned in the darkness of matter, struggles constantly to escape from the entanglement, and to ascend to its luminous whole. In ṣūfī perception, soul has to pass through seven stages before ego prostrates before the Divine will, called in Arabic as fanā’ or annihilation of self. In sequence, it begins from carnal to self critical, then inspired, specified, God satisfied, God satisfying and finally perfect. These are seven spiritual levels, ascended by human soul to acquire spiritual union, visualised by Nizāmi in the seven brides of Bihrām Gur, who tinted his soul with seven colours of wisdom. Ibn Sīna calls it tenth intelligence⁴. The tenth or active intelligence, holds ibn Sīna,

³ He is actually Bihrām 5th, who ruled Persia from 420-439, and was entitled the sobriquet *Gur*: the chaser of onagers, which is the fastest running animal of desert. He is said to be so brave that crown from between two lions could be easily snatched by him.

⁴ Ibn Sīna, like al-Fārābī believe that power of contemplation and knowledge are the cause of all creation, best explained in their theory of emanation. In the emanation of ten intelligences, source of all knowledge is God, who is pivotal by Himself, but first cause for everything. He is perfect, necessary, self-sufficient, immaterial, unable to be defined (Fakhry 117, al-Madīna al-Fadila 23). He gives a systematic account of all the things emanating from the One, resulting from His contemplation about himself which gave birth to the first intelligence. The first intelligence when contemplates the

contemplates the forms of existence by detaching them from matter. It illuminates souls with light to grant capability of abstract reasoning, provided to Bihrām by women. Seven princesses from seven climes of the world narrated him a story each night, enlightening his spirit to attain spiritual union. Fūrāk the daughter of Puras and princess of India revealed Nafs⁵-i ammāra⁶ (Aziz 757) linked with corporeal desires that lead to unhappiness, fig.18. Then under the yellow dome the Byzantine princess, the daughter of Qaisar made him familiar with Nafs-i lawwāma⁷ (Aziz 757) that guides to self-criticism to understand truth of life. The third princess Nāzpari from *Khawārzam*, fig.19, narrated about Nafs-i mulhimah⁸, the true initiation of mental integration (Aziz 757), linked with virtuous piety of a believer. The fourth named Nasrīn Nush is Kremlin, that is Russian princess, directed to Nafs-i mutma'inna⁹ (Aziz 757), aimed to attain intellectual and emotional balance. This state was further elevated by the fifth woman Azur Gun, the Moorish princess, facilitated about Nafs-i rādīya wa kāmila¹⁰, a spiritual state when complete satisfaction of soul is attained, and one begins to have such experiences difficult to be explained in tangible form. It is related to the mystical quest that transfigures an ordinary mortal to *Khizr*¹¹ (Barry 291). The sixth princess Yaghma Nāz from China defined Nafs-i mārīya¹² that teaches complete faith in God. The last princess is Dursati of Persia, fig.20, who narrated about Nafs-i šaffīya wa kāmila¹³ (Aziz 757) that leads to perfect satisfaction. It is symbolic of soul freed from the entrapment of matter. In mysticism, it

One as well as itself, it causes the flow of the second intelligence along with matter and form of the outer most heaven. Similarly, third intelligence springs the 2nd sphere; the sphere of fixed stars and the 2nd soul, and so on till the ten intelligences with corresponding nine spheres and nine souls, other than God. Thus, the philosophers relate every creation to knowledge and contemplation. The 10th intelligence is the ruling body of the terrestrial world (Nasr, *Cosmology* 203).

⁵ Nafs is self, person, lust, sensuality, etc.

⁶ *Nafs-i ammāra* is inordinate appetite or ardent desire.

⁷ *Nafs-i lawwāma* means accusing soul or conscience.

⁸ *Nafs-i mulhimah* is the inspiring spirit in man.

⁹ *Nafs-i mutma'inna* is the benevolence soul that is satisfied soul.

¹⁰ It is complete prostration before Allāh.

¹¹ *Khidr* means the wise one.

¹² *Nafs-i mārīya* means to mortify the sensual appetite or to restrain passion.

¹³ It is complete piety.

is the summit or highest rung of the ladder when a soul gets united with its Original, also called unio mystica or spiritual union with the Divine. Thus, Bihrām Gur's intellect is raised from corporeal to the spiritual by women.

These miniatures are a solid proof of the misogynistic concept of the west about Muslim society. The seven brides of Bihrām are actually representatives of Muslim women, figs. 21-22, envisaged by Nizāmi,



Fig.21: Details of Indian, Byzantine and Princess of Khawārzam of Bihrām Gur.



Fig. 22: Russian, Moorish, Chinese and Persian princesses of Bihrām Gur.

who was a pious and contented gentleman¹⁴. The poet Jāmi while collecting biographies of mystics and poets gives a precise picture of Nīzāmi, as he says:

The Sheik Nizami possessed full knowledge of the outward sciences and manners of this world. But he chose retreat from the affairs of this lower world to return his countenance towards God most high, praise He! From beginning to end, he spent his long life in contentment, devotion and solitude (Barry 277).

Only a man of this calibre can reveal the hidden powers of a creature who is fragile apparently but whose soul delves deep in knowledge and wisdom, and with agile pace activates Bihrām's soul with universal wisdom, elevating it to ecstatic heights. Bihrām Gur the symbol of virile strength, whose fame persuaded seven monarchs of the world to make an alliance with him and wished their daughters to join him in matrimony. But wisdom is not linked with physical strength, it is one's mental capacity. Women by instinct have more endurance and patience than men, though phenomenally a delicate piece wrought by the supreme creator. Thus, the path selected to initiate virtue in the legendary hero is a benign way to impart education. To digest a dry hard advice is something difficult but the allusive manner adopted by the brides is agreeable, a solid proof of their wisdom. The Holy Qur'ān too, teaches the rudiments of wisdom through narratives. In the series of miniatures illustrating Nīzāmi's Haft Paikar, the wise stance of women is defined in a very simple way.

Ibn 'Arabi too elevates women when he explicates the ḥadīth that women, perfume and prayer are most beloved to the last apostle of God. So, the third corporeal element liked by the Holy Prophet (pbuh) is prayer; a source that leads to the Divine realms. Elucidating this ḥadīth Ibn 'Arabi boldly discerns aroma of femininity in it, asserting that the word for three in Arabic is also feminine¹⁵. It is linked with the supremacy of Allah's attribute of creative mercy that is Raḥīm over

¹⁴ It is said that Nīzāmi was so respected that the ruling monarchs showered gifts on him but he had such a contented soul that he paid no heed to the corporeal benefits.

¹⁵ *Thalātha* is the word for three in Arabic. Words that end with third alphabet of Arabic that is *Tā*, usually attached with its previous, is called *tā'-i marbūṭa*, is feminine and wherever a word ends with *tā'-i marbūṭa*, it is labelled as feminine.

obligating mercy. It is similar to the notion of *tashbīh*¹⁶ and *tanzīh*¹⁷, the positive and negative attributes of the Divine Being, while the former dominates the latter. Thus, he promotes the feminine aspect of Reality, where the object of knowledge whether corporeal or incorporeal, may be considered feminine, and the subject whether “created or self-reaffirming” of God, who were made by Him in his own image, may be considered masculine (‘Arabi Bezels 270-271).

The word *Nīsā’*¹⁸ is plural having no singular form; the Prophet (pbuh) also used it in plural, using the word women not woman. Moreover, the word *Nus‘āb* means coming after. The ternary where women precede perfume and prayer, another ternary, holds ibn ‘Arabi is related to God, man and woman. From man, who is in the image of God, emerges woman. Everything yearns for the one it belongs to, along with longing of the source for its created being. Thus women are liked by the prophet (pbuh) because God loves the one whom he creates in His own image. So, all love the things that emerge from them or which belong to them. In reverse the subservient things long for their sources, thus converting and ending contemplation on God again; which in other words is a mystic’s path.

Concentration on women, holds ibn ‘Arabi is the perfect cerebration of the Supreme Reality, in the sense that in concentration of man on women, the man views Him in passive mode, while in contemplating Him in his own-self, man sees Him in active mode¹⁹. But when man contemplates Him without realising the one emerged from him²⁰, he appears passive, while in contemplating women he contemplates reality in active and passive both ways, that is complete realisation of reality; active in the sense of His image and passive in the emergence of women. So, woman is the cause of complete cerebration of God, thus perfect contemplation of God is in the contemplation of women, the very reason that Prophet (pbuh) likes her. It is not corporeal liking in the sense that it leads to the Divine realms (Ibn ‘Arabi Bezels

¹⁶ *Tashbīh* is similarity or nearness

¹⁷ *Tanzīh* is dissimilarity that causes distance

¹⁸ *Nīsā’* (Arabic) = woman.

¹⁹ Because He created man in His image, which is His active participation but in the creation of women His is passive participation.

²⁰ That is women.

274-75), the cause of viewing women as emblems of wisdom by the Muslim artists.

Women to man, in this sense are like Universal Nature²¹ to God, on which through Divine commandment cosmic forms emerge. In physical sense their union is matrimonial but on spiritual it denotes the primeval union that is singularity of all into the one Reality. The philosophy of placing women before perfume and prayer is that she is like Universal Nature from which corporeal and incorporeal beings derive their form and it is actually the breadth of the Merciful, though it varies in both the bodies. The Prophet (pbuh) thus gives priority to women over men by using feminine noun *thalāth* and not *thalātha* which is masculine noun. While Arabs preferred masculine noun even if it describes feminine plural with masculine singular. The Prophet preferred feminine, relating it with God (Ibn 'Arabi Bezels 277); the way Nīzāmi has elevated her in the realms of wisdom, it gives sanctity to the existence of women.

Besides all, women of these miniatures are individual yet not individual in their representation. Though, princesses of one or the other clime, each has a particular name, but not individual in delineation of her physical-self, fig.21-22, because humanism in Islamic art is not restricted to the outer-selves only. Similarly, women in Haft Paikar are not individual in the rendering of their physical, though attributed with certain names but not much distinct in their characters. 'Allāma Iqbāl too elucidates a similar concept in *Asrār-wa Ramūz*:

Zindagi anjuman āra wa nighahdār khud ast
Īy kah dar qāfla īy, bi hamashū, ba hamarū
(tr.) *Life embellishes associations as well as guards*
itself,
O you, travelling in the caravan! be apart from
everybody and yet move along with everybody.

It is a pithy saying, which seems to have followed by Muslim artists in the delineation of humans in Muslim miniature painting. Iqbāl stresses

²¹ It can be elucidated through Plato's theory of existence: ideas and substance without form were present in the mind of God, prior to the emergence of cosmos. When ideas were imprinted on substance, forms emerged. The Universal Nature here can be taken as substance defined by Plato.

on collective-self without denying the individual, which is the essence of harmonious life (Ahsan 39). Although, he asserts on the selfhood²² of man but a kind that does not come at clash with communal unity, where man is isolated having original thought, as well as an essential part of the whole. This is how men and women appear in almost every Muslim miniature painting of Persia. They are individuals in the sense that each one is performing the task assigned to him in the narrative illustrated, as well as submerged in the group because their individuality is not subservient to corporeality. Women of Haft Paikar are not much individual in their physical but individual in their intellectual cerebration.

Although they do not follow natural proportions but they are proportionate to the formula evolved for the beings of these paintings. Heads of standing figures are comparatively larger, and the most prominent feature is their eyes, while hands and feet are always very small, and the most favourite position is three quarter. Head, the control room of all bodily functions is hence, provided with prominent position, while hands and feet the manipulators of corporal realities are rendered very small. Isometric view or three quarter is their favourite posture, keeping the capacity to decipher things most precisely, the whereabouts of a figure, through which they are provided solidity. Profile position conceals half while revealing the other half, on the other hand, frontal posture hides thickness of a body, and thus three quarter became ideal of the Muslim artists. Profile, full front or back are extremely rare in the Muslim miniature paintings because of their incapacity to have perfect view. Hence, third dimension, isolated from the subservience of illusionism can only be acquired through three quarter view. Moreover, their postures are not static even if a person is standing still, in attendance with a ruling monarch; motion is created through bodily twist or turn, which also creates the impression of air and space around the figures. Furthermore, human figure is stably solid without its dependence on any extraneous source of light.

Thus representation of women in Muslim miniature paintings, whether viewed from theosophical point of view or from corporeal rendering, is not based on mimesis defined by Plato. It deals with the complete self of man; here inner is corresponded with the outer to

²² The term *Khūdi* is used by Iqbāl, for selfhood.

delineate a reality that is perfect to its core. But have never come under the sway of abstractions related to distortions. Because man is defined in the Holy Qur'ān as best of all creations, the word used is aḥsan-i taqwīm²³, sūrāh xcvi (al-Tīn), 4:

(tr.) We have indeed created man in the best of moulds.

So, when God created man to get Himself recognised, He shaped him as best of all His creations. Hence, Muslim artists viewing the godly in woman configured her as the most essential and attractive of all beings. So, women represented in these miniatures are mostly young, old age is very rare, but if rendered, focus of the artist is maturity not decay of strength, figs.13-14, An old women complaining Sultān Sanjar. Not decay of old age but embodiment of strength though bent with age. Decay is linked with the corporeal while the inner of man is his real-self which is permanent. It neither withers nor destroys but gets mature with the passing time. Since Muslim artists, not restricting their vision to the outer, have rendered the heavenly creatures like perpetual spring. They are delineated beautiful to the core, for being in the image a ḥūrī, fig.23.

²³ A creation that is best and complete in itself.



Fig.23: Women from Muslim Miniatures, a symbol of piety.

To sum up the above discussion, it is viewed that women and beauty have closer affinity and beauty in Islamic art is linked with truth, perhaps derived from the Platonic conviction that truth is eternal and

man can recognize it in himself, and beauty which is a manifestation of truth is beyond all things beautiful. It is everlasting which neither withers nor changes, and not even subservient to the outward adoration. The platonic idea of the beautiful was derived from his theory of love which was absorbed into the Muslim Ṣūfī thought that transfigures his love of worldly beauty into the Divine one. Thus, the Muslim artists treated physical beauty as a mere symbol to reach Perfect Truth. Because Ṣūfīs believe that everything emanates from the One, who is Supreme, and beauty or truth are partial facts of absolute reality which can only be conceived through intellect and intuition, neither from the corporeal eye nor from objective truths. This philosophy has shaped the very essence of Islamic art, which can be conceived fully in the representation of women, as specimens of the concept of ḥūrī configuring Divine love.