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A Comparative Analysis of Woman Imagery in Imru' al-Qays' *Mu'allaqah* and the Qur'ānic Depiction of *al-Hūr al-'In*

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Abstract

This study explores the Qur'ānic portrayal of *al-hūr al-'in* in relation to pre-Islamic poetic traditions, with a particular focus on Imru' al-Qays's *Mu'allaqah*—a foundational text in Arabic love poetry. It aims to examine how the Qur'ān reconfigures familiar expressions of female beauty—such as *al-lu'lu' al-maknūn*, *qāṣirātu al-tarf*, *kaṭwā'ib atrāban*, *'uruban*, and *abkārān*—within a spiritual and eschatological framework. The research problem centers on understanding the rhetorical and semantic shift from the sensual, body-centered depictions of women found in Imru' al-Qays's couplet to the morally elevated and symbolically charged representations presented in the Qur'ān. Using a comparative textual analysis method, the study draws on classical *tafsīr* literature and selected passages from *Mu'allaqah* to trace the semantic transformation of key terms and metaphors. The findings demonstrate that while the Qur'ān retains the linguistic forms and imagery familiar to its audience—including poetic conventions of beauty from Imru' al-Qays—it redirects them toward a higher moral and theological purpose. Female beauty becomes not a site of fleeting desire, but a symbol of divine reward, integrating physical perfection with spiritual purity. Ultimately, the research argues that the Qur'ān does not reject the aesthetic legacy of pre-Islamic poetry, but absorbs and elevates it, establishing a new rhetorical paradigm grounded in revelation and ethical transcendence. This study encourages further comparative research between Qur'ānic discourse and early Arabic poetry to illuminate the cultural and expressive transformations shaped by Islam.

Keywords: Qur'ān; pre-Islamic poetry; Imru' al-Qays; woman; *Mu'allaqah*; *al-hūr al-'in*; Qur'ānic depiction



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1. Introduction

The central role occupied by women in the ancient Arab imagination cannot be overlooked, whether in poetic texts or in the symbolic structure of pre-Islamic (Jāhili) culture. Woman was the embodiment of longing (*shawq*), a source of beauty (*jamāl*), an object of seduction (*ghawāya*), and a catalyst for chivalry (*furūsiyya*) and heroism (*butūla*). In the pre-Islamic *Mu'allaqāt*¹ (suspended odes), woman occupies a prominent position, especially in the *ṭalal* (ruin-themed) and emotional preludes, where she is portrayed in a sensual image rich with movement and corporeal detail (Zahrāh 2012). Foremost among these poets is Imru' al-Qays, who depicted the features of his beloved with an explicit language that pulses with sensation and emotional intensity, presenting the woman as the subject of a deeply romantic experience (Imani 1984).

In contrast, the Qur'ān presents a different portrayal of the feminine, most notably through the depiction of the *al-hūr al-'īn* (heavenly maidens), where beauty is framed within spiritual dimensions that strip the body of its earthly nature and clothe it in purity and idealism. This image is not merely an eschatological promise, but also carries cultural and ethical significance that transcends the conventional boundaries of sensual description (Kudriavtseva and Rezvan 2017).

The relationship between the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic poetry is founded upon a solid linguistic and rhetorical basis. The Qur'ān was revealed to the Arabs at the height of their eloquence (*fasāḥa*) and full linguistic mastery (*malaka lughawīyya*), addressing them in the very language through which they composed their poetry and took pride in their rhetorical artistry. The Qur'ān employed their vocabulary and stylistic forms, engaging them within a domain in which they held deep-rooted expertise and command. This constituted one of the most profound aspects of its miraculous nature and challenge. Consequently, engaging with Jāhili poetry becomes essential for understanding many of the Qur'ān's expressions and constructions—particularly those related to the pre-Islamic environment and its specific cultural and contextual lexicon (Sperl 2020).

The leading Companions and early exegetes were well aware of this deep interconnection, foremost among them Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68 AH/687–88 CE)—renowned as *Ḥibr al-Ummah* (the Sage of the Ummah) and *Tarjumān al-Qur'ān* (Interpreter of the Qur'ān). He is reported to have said: “Poetry is the record (*dīwān*) of the Arabs; when something in the Qur'ān was obscure to them, they would refer back to their record (*dīwān*).” (Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī 1999). This statement underscores the pivotal role of Jāhili poetry in elucidating Qur'ānic language, serving as a linguistic and cultural repository that aids in the interpretation of its meanings.

Poetry was not an adversary to the Qur'ān, but rather a valuable aid in understanding it—a living linguistic archive to which one could return when a word was obscure or a meaning contested. This is precisely what the early exegetes relied upon in clarifying the meanings of many verses, often by citing Jāhili poetry, which represents the original and direct usage of the very language in which the Qur'ān was revealed (Suyūṭī 1974).

Despite the strong connection between the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic poetry—and the latter's recognized value as a linguistic and rhetorical resource for understanding the Qur'ānic text (Altıntaş Yılmaz 2020; Çokyürür 2022)—modern scholarship has seen the rise of views that question the authenticity of Jāhili poetry. According to these perspectives, the poetry that has reached us does not accurately reflect the pre-Islamic environment; rather, it is considered a later fabrication, composed after the codification of Islamic sciences. Proponents of this view argue that the true picture of Jāhili life can be reliably derived only from the Qur'ān itself, not from the poetic corpus attributed to that era. This view was initially associated with the writings of Orientalists, most notably David Samuel Margoliouth (d. 1940 CE), who in 1925 questioned the authenticity of most pre-Islamic poetry. He argued that much of it was fabricated in the early Islamic period for religious, tribal, or linguistic purposes (Margoliouth 1925). This argument—albeit with modifications—was later adopted by Tāhā Ḥusayn (d. 1973 CE) in his book *Fī al-Shi'r al-Jāhili*, in which he stated: “The vast majority of what we consider to be pre-Islamic poetry has nothing to do with the *Jāhiliyah*; rather, it is fabricated after the advent of Islam.” (Tāhā Ḥusayn 1926). This view sparked widespread controversy and was met with strong criticism from both Arab scholars and fair-minded Orientalists alike.

One of the most prominent figures to refute these claims was the British Orientalist Arthur J. Arberry (d. 1969 CE), who described such attacks on pre-Islamic poetry as grounded in sophistry or scholarly dishonesty. He argued that the linguistic and cultural portrait reflected in Jāhili poetry aligns with the known realities of Arab life before Islam

and, in fact, complements the cultural and linguistic references found in the Qur'ān (Arberry 1957). Accordingly, such hypotheses that question the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry remain closer to theoretical conjectures than to definitive scientific conclusions. Despite the possibility of partial fabrication, Jāhili poetry continues to be an indispensable source for understanding early Arabic and the Qur'ān itself.

From this perspective, the present study aims to compare feminine attributes as depicted in two of the most significant representations of the ancient Arab imagination: the model of pre-Islamic poetry, exemplified by the *Mu'allaqa* of Imru' al-Qays, and the Qur'ānic model, represented by the descriptions of the *al-ḥūr al-'īn*. Through linguistic, rhetorical, and semantic analysis, the study seeks to uncover the transformation in the conception of feminine beauty and its connection to the surrounding cultural and religious contexts. Within this framework, the article is structured around two main axes. First, the motifs concerning the depictions of women in the poetry of Imru' al-Qays will be identified. Second, these depictions will be compared with the representations of women in the Qur'ānic descriptions of Paradise. In cases where the relevant motifs in the Qur'ān have no parallel in the poetry of Imru' al-Qays, possible reflections in the works of other Jāhili poets will also be addressed. Furthermore, the female motifs in Imru' al-Qays's poetry have been, in places, associated with Qur'ānic depictions of paradise that are not directly related to women, as well as with other narratives concerning women. This approach, without exceeding the scope of the study, underscores the need to evaluate the representations of women in his poetry within a broader and more multilayered framework of meaning. Consequently, while the study is essentially confined to a comparison between the portrayals of women in Imru' al-Qays's poetry and the Qur'ānic depictions of women in Paradise, it occasionally draws upon wider contexts to highlight the literary, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of these representations.

Some academic studies have more broadly focused on Arab poets and their poetry, examining them from different perspectives. Examples of such works include Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi's *Description in Classical Arabic Poetry: Wasf, Ekphrasis, and Interarts Theory*; Nadia Jamil's *Ethics and Poetry in Sixth-Century Arabia*; Kamal Abu-Deeb's *Towards a Structural Analysis of Pre-Islamic Poetry*; and Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych's *The Mute Immortals Speak: Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Poetics of Ritual*.

Several studies have emphasized the significance of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry for understanding the linguistic, thematic, and rhetorical dimensions of the Qur'ān. Among these, the works of Ghassan El Masri are particularly noteworthy. In *The Qur'ān and the Character of Ancient Arabic Poetry*, El Masri examines the shared "character" and the points of divergence between the Qur'ān and pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, demonstrating how the Qur'ānic discourse draws upon, transforms, and transcends the poetic conventions of the Jāhili period (El Masri 2017). In another study, *Min al-Ba'ad ilá al-Āhira: Poetic Time and Qur'ānic Eschatology*, El Masri investigates how the Qur'ān constructs the concept of time within its eschatological discourse by comparing it with temporal representations in pre-Islamic poetry (El Masri 2015).

Another significant contribution is Thomas Bauer's article, *The Relevance of Early Arabic Poetry for Qur'ānic Studies Including Observations on kull and on Qur'ān 22:27, 26:225 and 52:31*. Bauer argues that early Arabic poetry—particularly that of the Jāhili period—offers a crucial interpretive framework for Qur'ānic studies, providing linguistic and stylistic contexts that enrich the exegetical understanding of the text. His analysis focuses on three specific verses (Q 22:27, 26:225 and 52:31) and explores the usage of the particle *kull* within both poetic and Qur'ānic contexts, highlighting their rhetorical and semantic interplay (Bauer 2010).

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that pre-Islamic Arabic poetry serves not merely as a historical background to the Qur'ān but as a hermeneutical key that deepens our understanding of the Qur'ān's poetic language, symbolism, and theological expression.

Some studies, by contrast, have more specifically focused on the representation of women in Jāhili poetry from different perspectives. One such study is Hafiz Mohammad Sarwar and Ghulam Ahmad's "A Critical Study of the Metaphorical Representation of the Female Body in Selected Jāhili Poetry." This research argues that the Jāhili (pre-Islamic) period included not only negative but also positive representations of women, and it explores the respect and affection shown toward women through the poetry of that era (Sarwar and Ahmad 2020).

Another study is Morteza Imani's article "Aesthetic and Functional Representation of Women in Imru' al-Qays's Mu'allaqa: From Individual Description to Collective Symbol." In this article, using an analytical-descriptive approach, the different dimensions of women's representation in Imru' al-Qays's Mu'allaqa are examined. The study concludes that Imru' al-Qays depicts women on two levels: first, at the individual level, focusing on the woman's physical beauty, movements, and emotional states; and second, at the socio-symbolic level, where the woman embodies tribal honor, the continuity of lineage, and collective memory (Imani 1984).

A further contribution to this field is the master's thesis by Kamaldeen Yakubu Zahrrah, titled "The Image of Woman in Pre-Islamic Qasida: The Mu'allaqat Poetry as a Case Study." This research aims to examine the depiction of women in the pre-Islamic poetic collection Mu'allaqat and demonstrates that the portrayal of both ideal and real women in the Mu'allaqat is largely confined to descriptive imagery and comparisons to objects found in the poets' surroundings (Zahrrah 2012).

Another relevant study is Jihad Hamdan and Yaser S. Natour's "The Image of Women in Pre-Islamic Poetry: Evidence from the Seven Odes (Mu'allaqāt)". The primary aim of this research is to determine how female images were represented among pre-Islamic Arabs through the seven odes. The study concludes that these odes present diverse images of women within pagan Arab society, with particular emphasis on fertility, motherhood, love, divinity, and respect (Hamdan and S. Natour 2012).

The study most closely aligned with our article is Anna Kudriavtseva and Efim Rezvan's article "Earthly Maiden and Heavenly Maiden (On the Interpretation of the Image of Woman in Pre-Islamic Poetry and the Qur'ān)." In broad terms, their work examines the comparative portrayal of women in Jāhiliyyah poetry and in the Qur'ānic depictions of Paradise (Kudriavtseva and Rezvan 2017). Although all these studies provide valuable and important contributions to the subject, our research addresses the topic within a narrower framework, focusing on the motifs of female depiction in Imru' al-Qays's poetry and their comparison with the female imagery in the Qur'ānic descriptions of Paradise.

Before delving into the core of the topic, it is useful to begin with a brief overview of the life of the pre-Islamic poet Imru' al-Qays, who is considered one of the luminaries of Arabic poetry and the foremost representative of the *madrasat al-talal*² (the ruin school), a poetic tradition that opens with nostalgic reflections on abandoned dwellings. In other words, the female figure in the world of the Mu'allaqāt poets is often remembered through the lens of memory, separation, or loss. The poet's act of beginning his poem by gazing upon the remnants of the beloved's dwelling (*atṭāl*) is the most well-known example of this tradition (Zahrrah 2012). His biography has been the subject of much discussion, with diverse and sometimes conflicting accounts—a phenomenon closely tied to the nature of the Jāhili period itself, in which historical documentation is marked by ambiguity and inconsistency due to the scarcity of direct sources from that era (Yamamoto 1997).

It is reported that his full name was Jundah ibn Hujr al-Kindī, and he descended from a royal family with considerable influence among the *Kindah* tribes. He was born in *Najd* around the year 500 CE. His father was one of the kings of *Kindah*, yet Imru' al-Qays fell out of his favor due to his indulgent and hedonistic lifestyle, leading to his expulsion and eventual refuge with his maternal relatives (Sumi 2004). However, the assassination of his father marked a turning point in his life; he shifted from a life of luxury and amusement to one of political vengeance. He engaged in battles and sought to reclaim his lost kingdom, moving among tribes and rulers. His journey ultimately led him to seek support from the Byzantine emperor, but he died on his return journey and was—most likely—buried in the city of Ankara (Fākhūrī 1986; Savran 2000). This profound transformation in his life was vividly reflected in his poetry. The *Dīwān* of Imru' al-Qays stands as a rich record of conflicting emotions and contrasting images. The literary figure Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt (d. 1968 CE) encapsulated this dimension by stating: “In his poetry, you find a complete portrait of his life and character: the pride of kings and the recklessness of vagabonds, the debauchery of a libertine and the fervor of a rebel, the lament of the wronged and the humiliation of the outcast.” (A. al-Zayyāt 1993).

2. Woman in the Poetry of Imru' al-Qays—An Image of Sensuality and Emotion

Woman occupied a central position in the structure of Jāhilī poetry—not merely as a figure present in Bedouin life, but as a complex symbol that fused beauty, vulnerability, seduction, and tribal sanctity. In other words, the Arabs of the Jāhilī period were not as “harsh” toward women as often assumed; in many respects, they held an understanding that exalted her (Sarwar and Ahmad 2020). The opening of the major *Mu‘allaqāt* with references to woman was not a matter of artistic luxury; rather, it reflected an emotional and cultural framework that imbued the feminine figure with a near-mythical quality, often surpassing her physical reality. The pre-Islamic woman was not simply a female presence; she was a constellation of meanings in which desire, longing, rupture, and rebellion were intricately interwoven (H. al-Zayyāt 2012).

In this context, the *Mu‘allaqa* of Imru' al-Qays stands as a striking example of the depiction of woman through a vividly sensual and direct lens. Bodily expressions intertwine with emotional gestures and erotic imagination, forming a poetic structure marked by linguistic boldness and sharp visual imagery. Imru' al-Qays is regarded as one of the most prominent pre-Islamic poets who established the daring lyrical portrayal of woman and expanded the expressive scope of feminine beauty. He spoke of woman in ways unmatched by others, and was the first to stand, pause, weep, make others weep, and lament the ruins—setting the tone for an entire tradition of passionate poetic nostalgia and intimate portrayal (Qayrawānī 1981). Imru' al-Qays's view of women is not based solely on physical beauty. While describing the beloved's facial features, gait, gaze, and emotional states, the poet enriches these depictions with natural imagery—such as the gazelle, the horse, the tree, and the sun—imparting deeper layers of meaning. These images carry both individual and social connotations (Imani 1984).

- (a) Imru' al-Qays opens his timeless *Mu‘allaqa* with a scene steeped in sorrow and longing, as he pauses to recall memories at the ruins of his beloved's dwelling—ruins worn down by the passage of years and altered by the shifting rhythms of time and place. These locations, once a playground for his love and revelry, are no longer as they once were. Yet they still possess the power to summon his fervent emotional past. Despite the erasure and decay that have overtaken the site, the memories rooted in those spaces remain resistant to oblivion, refusing to let their traces be erased from his heart. He finds no solace from the pain of loss and the anguish of separation except

in the tears he sheds before these weathered ruins, which stir his sorrows and revive the image of his beloved. It is as if tears are the only language capable of expressing the depth of his grief and the intensity of his longing.

This sentiment is captured in the opening the couplet of the *Mu‘allaqa*:

قفا نَبْك من ذِكْرى حَبِيبٍ وَمَنْزِلٍ يَسْقِطُ اللّوى بَيْنَ الدَّخُولِ فَخَوْمَلِ

Qifā nabki min dhikrā ḥabībīn wa-manzili/bisiqtī al-liwā bayna al-dakhūli fa-Ḥawmalī

“Stop, let us weep over the memory of a beloved and her dwelling/at the edge of *al-Liwā*, between *al-Dakhūl* and *Ḥawmal*.”

The word *Qifā* (Stop, you two) is an appeal to the companion to pause and join in the weeping—a common opening scene in pre-Islamic poetry, where the ruins become a mirror of the soul, overflowing with memories and tears. This is followed by a precise description of temporal changes:

فَتُوضِحَ فَالْمَقْرَأةُ لَمْ يَعْفُ رَسْمُهَا/لِما نَسَجَتْها مِنْ جَنُوبٍ وَشَمَالِ

Fa-Tūḍiḥa fā-al-Miqrāt lam ya‘fu rasmuḥa/limā nasajat-hā min janūbin wa-sham‘ali

“At *Tawḍiḥ* and *Miqrāt*, its traces have not been erased/by the weavings of the south and north winds.”

These scenes express the deep emotional state with which Imru‘ al-Qays begins his poem—a state of feeling that sets the tone for the emotional trajectory that follows in his portrayal of the beloved. Thus, the description of woman in his poetry does not emerge in isolation; rather, it extends organically from this initial emotional charge, rooted in place, time, and memory, and culminating in a detailed physical and spiritual depiction unparalleled in Jāhili poetry (Qayrawānī 1981; Dayf n.d.).

- (b) Imru‘ al-Qays begins his description of the beloved with her scent, as it is the first to captivate the senses—ensnaring the man even before his eyes behold the contours of her body. He says:

إِذا قَامَتَا تَضَرَّعَ الْمِسْكُ مِنْهُمَا/نَسِيمَ الصَّبَا جَاءَتْ بِرِيَا الْقَرْنُفُلِ

Idhā qāmatā tadawwa‘a al-misku minhumā/nasīme al-sibā jā‘at biriyyā al-qarunfuli

“When they rise (or when the two of them stand), musk spreads from them, as if the morning breeze had brought the scent of cloves.”

This line contains immense descriptive power, combining the sensory verb *tadawwa‘a* (diffuses fragrance), the natural simile *nasīm al-sabā* (morning breeze), and the complex olfactory image *riyya al-qurunful* (scent of clove). Through this fusion of sensuality, nature, and refined imagery, the poet elevates the beloved’s fragrance into an aura that precedes her physical presence—an ethereal signature of her allure (Shantamrī 1983).

When we compare this image of pleasant fragrance with what is found in the Qur‘ān, we observe that the Qur‘ān treats the concept of *tīb* (fragrance) within a framework of purity and divine bliss, rather than within a sensual or amorous context. This is exemplified in the verse: *Fa-rawḥun wa-rayḥānun wa-jannatu na‘īm* “Then [for them is] rest, fragrance, and a garden of delight” [Q. 56:89]. Although the fragrance (*rayḥān*) in this verse is not directly associated with women, unlike the meaning attributed in Imru‘ al-Qays’s poetry, it is linked not to bodily attraction or emotional longing but to spiritual serenity and the reward of Paradise. This highlights the difference in the symbolic function of scent between Imru‘ al-Qays’s poetic depictions and the Qur‘ānic understanding of fragrance.

- (c) When Imru‘ al-Qays draws near to his beloved and begins to savor the pleasures of intimacy, he pleads with her not to push him away. According to al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 216 AH/831 CE), he likens her to a fruit-bearing tree (*shajarat dhāt janā*), portraying the fragrance of her body, her speech, and her kisses as fruits to be picked and scents to be

savored (al-Anbārī n.d.). This image carries a sensual metaphor, gently naturalizing the emotional and physical connection as something instinctive and delicate. The use of the word *janā'* (fruit) reflects this imagery. Notably, this same term appears in the Qur'ān in a different context—within the language of paradise and eternal bliss. In the verse: *Wa-janā al-jannatayni dānin* “And the fruits of both gardens will be hanging low” (Q. 55:54), it describes the nearness and ease of access to the fruits, symbolizing effortless pleasure and everlasting reward. Thus, while Imru' al-Qays employs *janā'* to evoke the sensual delight of a human encounter, the Qur'ān reorients the same term toward a spiritual and paradisiacal context, marking a shift from the earthly and passionate to the divine and serene.

- (d) The poet offers another powerfully expressive image to convey the depth of his beloved's effect on him: he likens her to a nursing mother so overtaken by passion that she becomes distracted from her infant. She turns only half her body toward the child she is nursing, while keeping the other half with her lover—an image evoking a divided emotional and physical presence between motherhood and romantic desire (Zawzanī 2019). This emotionally charged portrayal echoes, at a deeper level, a profound Qur'ānic scene that captures the terror of the Day of Judgment: *Tadhhalu kullu murdī'atin 'ammā arḍa'at* “Every nursing mother will forget what she was nursing” (Q. 22:2). Here, instinctive maternal affection is overturned by the sheer magnitude of fear, illustrating a reversal of natural order under extreme dread. In contrast, Imru' al-Qays presents a reversal of instinct not through fear, but through overwhelming love and longing. Both images explore the disruption of natural bonds—one through divine awe, the other through human passion—underscoring how intense emotion, whether spiritual or sensual, can disturb the most primal connections.
- (e) Before Imru' al-Qays begins detailing the physical and emotional attributes of his beloved, he opens his address to her by describing the coyness and difficulty she showed him. She withheld herself and swore solemn oaths without releasing herself from them or attaching any exceptions—an act that only deepened his attachment to her and intensified the pain of their separation. In this context, the words *ālath* (she swore), *istathnat* (she made an exception or conditioned her oath), and *tahallalat* (she revoked or broke the oath) (al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019) appear—terms that clearly echo expressions found in the Qur'ānic text. This is exemplified in the Qur'ānic verse: “For those who swear abstinence from their wives, a waiting period of four months is ordained; but if they return, then indeed Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (Q. 2:226). The verse refers to the oath of abstaining from women, known in Islamic jurisprudence as *al-īlā'*—that is, swearing to abstain from marital relations (Samarqandī 1994). This closely parallels the poet's depiction of his beloved swearing to withhold herself from him, without expressing any intent to return. Similarly, the verse “And never say of anything, ‘Indeed, I will do that tomorrow,’ without adding, ‘If Allah wills’” (Q. 18:23–24) emphasizes the importance of making exceptions when swearing oaths or making promises. This aligns with the poet's complaint that his beloved *ālath dūna an tastathnī*—she swore without making an exception—meaning she bound herself by oath without leaving room for reversal or reconsideration, reinforcing the emotional gravity of her rejection.
- (f) Imru' al-Qays then moves to an expression of profound emotional impact, as he addresses his beloved: *In kunti qad 'azamti 'alā mufāraqatihi, fa'alayki an takhla'i thiyābaki min thiyābī, aw takhla'i qalbaki min qalbī*. “If you have resolved to part from me, then you must remove your clothes from mine, or remove your heart from my heart.” Here, the poet employs a powerful metaphor (*isti'āra*), where clothing becomes a symbol of affection and emotional union—to the extent that the garment assumes

the role of the heart. This meaning parallels the Qur'ānic expression: "They are a garment for you, and you are a garment for them" (Q. 2:187), a highly eloquent phrase that portrays the marital relationship (*'alāqa zawjiyya*) as one of covering, unity, and intimate closeness. Each spouse becomes like a garment to the other—in proximity, constancy, protection, and tranquility. Thus, Imru' al-Qays's metaphor of garments serves as a precise expression of deep emotional entanglement, with both linguistic and conceptual roots in Qur'ānic usage (al-Tūfī 2014).

- (g) Imru' al-Qays then begins to depict the eyes of his beloved, describing them as two tearful eyes (*'aynān dāmi'atān*). Yet their tears are not of gentle sorrow; rather, they are like two piercing arrows (*sahmān nāfidhān*) that struck his heart and shattered it. His heart becomes torn, fractured, and fragmented—like a clay pot (*fakhkhār*) that is patched by a mender using iron scraps (*a'shār al-ḥadīd*), only to crack further instead of being repaired. In this poignant image of emotional paradox, the poet likens the emotional wounds caused by the beloved's gaze to physical wounds (*jurūh*) that ruin the vessel rather than restore it—emphasizing that the heart (*qalb*) cannot be mended as a pot (*burma*) can (al-Askarī n.d.; al-Ḥamawī 2004).
- (h) Imru' al-Qays then delves deeper into his description of the woman, beginning with a striking simile: *bayḍat khidrin* "an egg in the tent", as in his couplet:

وَبَيْضَتِ خِدْرٍ لَا يُرَامُ خِبَاؤُهَا/تَمْتَعْتُ مِنْ لَهْوٍ بِهَا غَيْرَ مُعْجَلٍ

Wa-bayḍati khidrin lā yurāmu khibā'uhā/tamatta'tu min lahwīn bihā ghayra mu'jali

"And a maiden like an egg in her secluded tent—whose canopy none dares approach—I enjoyed the delight of her company, without haste or rush."

This metaphor carries significant connotations—on one hand, delicacy and softness (*riqqa wa nu'ūma*); on the other, chastity and seclusion (*iffa wa sawn*). The egg (*al-bayḍa*) symbolizes purity and whiteness, while the tent (*al-khidr*) refers to a concealed, protected space that is beyond reach (Zawzanī 2019; Rāfī 2000). Although he does not explicitly describe a part of the body, the overall image evokes a veiled feminine form, a beauty safeguarded and untouched. This imagery is completed by the subsequent verb *tamatta'tu* "I enjoyed", which suggests that the woman became an object of sensual pleasure and delight. This reflects the pre-Islamic poet's perception of the woman as part of the adornments of life (*zīnat al-ḥayāt*)—desired, admired, and yet distant in both body and metaphor (al-Nahḥās 1973).

This imagery aligns with the Qur'ānic description of the women of Paradise, as in the verse: *Ka-annahunna bayḍun maknūn* "As if they were well-protected eggs" (Q. 37:49). The simile alludes to preserved beauty (*jamāl maṣūn*), shielded from the gaze of others and from harm—just as the egg is safeguarded within its shell. Moreover, the verb *tamatta'tu* in the poetic couplet recalls the Qur'ānic statement: "Beautified for people is the love of desires—of women..." (Q. 3:14), followed later by the clarification: "That is the enjoyment (*matā'*) of worldly life." This reflects the Qur'ānic view of such desires as part of the fleeting adornments of this world (*zakhārif al-ḥayāt al-dunyā*)—permissible within legitimate bounds, yet ultimately transient and not of lasting spiritual value.

- (i) After Imru' al-Qays depicted his beloved as having disrobed for sleep and accompanied him to the valley's depths—a place of privacy and concealment (*khalwa wa sitr*)—he transitions into a sensual and finely detailed description of her body, reflecting the poet's deep contemplation of her charms. He describes her as *hadīmu al-kashh*, where *al-ḥadīm* in classical Arabic denotes softness and subtle concavity; for example, the Arabs would say *ard ḥadīm* to refer to flat, smooth land. It also carries the connotation of reduction, as in *aḥdama lahu min ḥaqqihi*—meaning to diminish someone's due (Ibn Manẓūr 1993). The *kashh*, anatomically, is the area between the ribs and the waist (Azharī 2001). Thus, the phrase conveys that she is slender in the flank and graceful

in the waist—neither overweight and sagging nor excessively thin and deformed, but perfectly proportioned and refined in form. The description highlights a balance of delicacy and symmetry, consistent with the idealized feminine beauty in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

- (j) The poet then shifts to describing her leg, stating that it is *mukhallakhala*, a term indicating that she wears an anklet (*khilkhāl*)—a piece of jewelry traditionally worn around the ankle as a symbol of adornment and coquetry. He reinforces this image with the word *riyya*, meaning pleasantly full—evoking a form that inspires admiration. This fullness is not indicative of thinness or frailty; rather, *riyya* (from *riyy*, the opposite of thirst and dryness) suggests vitality, freshness, and robust health. Thus, the portrayed image is of a well-proportioned, moderately plump leg, radiating feminine allure—neither emaciated nor excessively corpulent. The poet then describes her as bending over him, a scene charged with sensuality. Yet beyond its erotic tone, the moment also conveys her graceful sway (*tamāyul*), gentle coquetry (*dalāl*), and responsive softness during that intimate encounter. All these qualities emphasize a form of delicate femininity (*‘unūtha raqīqa*) that manifests in her movement and demeanor (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019).
- (k) Imru’ al-Qays then continues his depiction of his beloved’s body, emphasizing its balance and proportion (*i’tidāl fī al-takwīn*)—neither overly thin nor corpulent. He describes her as *muḥafhafa*, a term in classical Arabic used to refer to a woman with light flesh and a slender, graceful build—neither heavy nor sagging. This denotes bodily harmony, agility, and elegance (Azharī 2001). He reinforces this image with the phrase *ghayr mufada*, meaning that her abdomen is neither relaxed nor protruding, but rather flat and firm. The result is a portrayal of feminine form that exemplifies ideal moderation, refinement, and delicacy—conveying a poetic aesthetic rooted in the values of classical Arabic sensual imagery (Zawzanī 2019).

We may, in this context, draw attention to the Qur’ān’s framework of modesty and veiling. Rather than encouraging the display of bodily beauty, the Qur’ān situates women within an ethic of measured concealment and moral dignity through *ḥijāb*, *khumur*, and *jalābīb* (Q. 33:53, 33:59; Q. 24:31). This orientation stands in marked contrast to Imru’ al-Qays’s corporeal and sensuous portrayals, indicating that the body in the Qur’ānic discourse is treated within a sacral and spiritual register. The comparison thus underscores a substantive divergence in aesthetic and symbolic function between the two corpora.

- (l) He then turns to another part of her body: the *tara’ib*, which refers to the upper part of the chest—specifically, the area where a necklace rests (Zajjāj 1988).³ He describes her *tara’ib* (the upper chest) as being like *al-sijjanjal*, meaning a polished, radiant mirror. The term *sijjanjal* refers to a finely crafted, highly reflective glass—clear, bright, and lustrous. This metaphor emphasizes the smoothness, clarity, and radiant whiteness of her skin, suggesting a surface that glows with purity and sensual brilliance (Zawzanī 2019).

Imru’ al-Qays employs the term *tara’ib* in his description of feminine beauty, referring to the delicate and polished area at the upper part of the chest. This is the same anatomical region referenced in the Qur’ānic verse: “Emerging from between the backbone and the *tara’ib*” (Q. 86:7). Though the contexts differ—one poetic, the other theological—the shared precision in spatial reference reflects a common anatomical perception between pre-Islamic poetic expression and Qur’ānic usage. Despite the divergence in rhetorical purpose, both texts demonstrate a meticulous attention to physical detail that underscores the linguistic and cultural continuity across registers (Kudriavtseva and Rezvan 2017).

- (m) Imru' al-Qays then moves on to describe the features of his beloved's face, focusing on her cheeks and gaze. He says:

نَصُدُّ وَتُبْدِي عَنْ أَسِيلٍ وَتَنْقِي/بِنَاطِرَةٍ مِنْ وَحْشٍ وَجَرَّةٍ مُطْفِلٍ

Taṣuddu wa tubdī 'an asīlin wa tannaqī/bi-nāẓiratin min waḥshi Wajrata mutfili

"She turns away, then reveals a smooth, soft cheek, and shields herself with a gaz like that of a nursing gazelle from the wilds of Wajrah."

He portrays his beloved as turning her face away — out of modesty or playful coyness — then revealing a cheek that is *asīl*, meaning smooth, elongated, and flowing in its softness and symmetry (Azharī 2001). The poet emphasizes that she shows and hides her face alternately, and in doing so, her refined cheek is exposed — marked by its polished texture and balanced proportions. The term *asīl* here captures not only the physical grace of the cheek but also evokes a sense of noble elegance and delicate femininity rooted in pre-Islamic ideals of beauty. Additionally, the term combines both softness and length, without implying obesity or sagging — thereby reinforcing the idealized feminine image as perceived by the poet (Zawzanī 2019).

- (n) He then portrays her gaze as one of tenderness and compassion, likening it to the look of a female gazelle nursing her young. For this, he employs a precise simile: *bi-nāẓiratin min waḥshi Wajrat mutfil* — that is, with the gaze of a gazelle in the region of Wajrah as she nurses her offspring. This comparison blends gentleness, serenity, and maternal affection with the enchanting beauty that characterizes the eyes of gazelles, creating an image that is at once emotionally rich and visually captivating (Zawzanī 2019). This description indirectly recalls another couplet by the poet, in which he compares his beloved to a nursing mother who turns away from her child in the presence of the one she loves. It is a remarkably powerful image that conveys the overwhelming dominance of love over the soul — so much so that it surpasses even the strongest of human instincts: maternal affection.

In this context, one is reminded of the Qur'ānic depiction of the sheer terror of the Day of Judgment, when even a nursing mother will forget her infant, as in the verse: "On the Day you see it, every nursing mother will forget what she was nursing" (Q. 22:2). If only the horror of the Final Hour can cause a mother to forget her child, then the poetic simile suggests that passionate love for the beloved can have a similarly overpowering effect. This represents a deliberate artistic exaggeration (*mubālagha*) characteristic of pre-Islamic poetic tradition, where emotional intensity is often elevated to rival the most profound human instincts.

- (o) As for her neck, the poet compares it to the neck of the white gazelle (*jīd al-rīm*) — evoking an image of purity, smoothness, and graceful length. This simile combines elegance, radiant whiteness, and balanced proportion, presenting an elevated neck that is refined without being exaggerated in length. The poet notes that this neck is not devoid of adornment; rather, its natural beauty is complemented by ornaments that add brilliance and allure. In this way, the poet merges the calm, wild beauty of nature, symbolized by the gazelle, with intentional human enhancement, represented by jewelry — highlighting the harmony between inherent charm and chosen embellishment (al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019).
- (p) Imru' al-Qays reaches the pinnacle of aesthetic imagery in his description of his beloved's hair, portraying her femininity through the depiction of hair as a symbol of both sensual perfection and symbolic completeness. In the first couplet, he likens her flowing hair to the cluster of a date palm (*qinw al-nakhla*), saying:

وَقَرَعُ يَزِينُ الْمَثْنِ أَسْوَدَ فَاحِمٍ/أَثِيثٍ كَقَوْرِ النَّخْلَةِ الْمُتَعَثِّلِ

Wa-far 'in yazīnu al-matn aswad fāḥimīn/athīthin ka-qinwi al-nakhlati al-muta 'athkili

“And tresses adorning the back, jet-black and thick/like the laden cluster of a date palm.”

This simile draws a parallel between the abundance and downward flow of her hair and the hanging bunch of a palm tree, rich with symbolism related to fertility, natural beauty, and vitality. The use of *athīth* (thick) and *aswad fāḥim* (intensely black) reinforces the image of luxuriant, vibrant hair, elevating it as a core element of sensual and symbolic allure (Zawzanī 2019). This simile was not foreign to the Arab aesthetic sensibility, as the image of the date palm also appears in the Qur'ān as a vehicle for aesthetic comparison. In the verse: “And the moon—We have determined its phases until it returns like the old curved date stalk” (Q. 36:39), the *'urjūn qadīm*—the old, bent stalk of the palm—is used to signify graceful flow and living curvature in form (al-Taybī [1434] 2013). From this perspective, the pre-Islamic poetic expression aligns with Qur'ānic suggestion in employing the image of the palm to denote soft, arched beauty, illustrating a continuity in symbolic representation of elegance and natural grace across poetic and sacred registers.

Imru' al-Qays continues to intensify this image in another couplet, where he says:

غَذَائِرُهُ مُسْتَشْزِرَاتٌ إِلَى الْعَلَا تَضِلُّ الْعِقَاصُ فِي مَتْنَى وَمُرْسَلِ

Ghadā'iru-hā mustashzirātun ilā al-'ulā/tadillu al-'iqāsu fī mathnā wa mursali

“Her braids rise toward the heights, and the hair-ties wander (are lost) in the doubled twists and the loose parts.”

In this couplet, the poet portrays his beloved's hair as carefully styled and elevated, using *mustashzirāt* to describe it as lifted and neatly drawn up to the top of her head, formed into *ghadā'ir*—braids or tightly bound locks. He adds that the *'iqās*—the decorative cords used to tie the hair—have disappeared within the mass of her hair due to its abundance. Part of the hair is *mathnā* (braided), and part is *mursali* (loose and flowing), indicating both its density and softness, as well as its balance between discipline and freedom. This stands as one of the most exquisite corporeal images in classical Arabic poetry, reflecting the poet's acute awareness of the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of feminine beauty. Hair here becomes a textural and expressive space, combining symmetry with fluidity, strength with gentleness—an embodiment of structured elegance infused with natural charm (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019).

(q) Imru' al-Qays then returns to complete the physical description, moving on to depict the waist and leg, emphasizing the precision and harmony of the figure. He says:

وَكَشْحٍ لَطِيفٍ كَالْجَدِيلِ مُخَصَّرٍ / وَسَاقٍ كَأَنْبُوبِ السَّقْيِ الْمُدَّلِّ

Wa-kashḥin laṭīfin ka al-jadīli mukhaṣṣar/wa-sāqin ka-'anbūbi al-saqiyyi al-mudhallal

“A delicate waist, like a tightly braided cord; and a leg like a smooth irrigation tube.”

The *kashḥ*, which refers to the area between the side and the waist, is described as *laṭīf*—meaning fine and graceful (al-Azhārī). He likens it to the *jadīl* (a braided rope), a metaphor that conveys slenderness and flexibility. This is further reinforced by the word *mukhaṣṣar*, meaning narrow or drawn in at the middle—slim, with no sagging or excess fullness. Altogether, the imagery suggests an extraordinary symmetry and elegance in the physical form (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019).

As for the leg, Imru' al-Qays likens it to an irrigation tube (*'anbūb al-saqy*)—that is, a reed stem or water channel known for its length, straightness, and smoothness. He presents it as if growing in a place shaded by tamed palm trees (*nakhīl mudhalla*)—their branches softened and lowered—so that the plants beneath them gain in purity of color and balanced growth. This image conveys a sense of freshness, softness, and graceful fluidity in form (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019). The poet's description of the plant as *mudhalla* (tamed, softened) finds a striking rhetorical parallel in the Qur'ānic

expression: *Wa dhullilat qutūfuhā tadhlilā* “And its fruit clusters have been made low and accessible” (Q. 76:14). In the Qur’ānic verse, the fruits of Paradise are described as *mudhalla*, meaning made accessible and easy to reach—implying gentleness, closeness, and ease of access. These are the very qualities evoked in the poet’s simile, where the beloved’s leg is compared to a softly grown, aesthetically pleasing plant, extended lightly and with elegance. The beauty of this poetic image is further enhanced when viewed in light of the Qur’ānic expression, where the *qutūf* (fruit clusters) are made low and approachable, reflecting an effortless flow and nearness. Just as the Qur’ān compares Paradise’s fruits to a softened, yielding form, Imru’ al-Qays compares his beloved’s leg to an irrigation stalk growing beneath shaded palms—suggesting graceful motion and supple structure. This image may well stem from the Arab’s lived experience with palm trees and the difficulty of harvesting their fruit; hence, the poet borrows the concept of tamed vegetation to describe feminine beauty—a remarkable convergence of poetic sensibility and Qur’ānic eloquence.

- (r) Imru’ al-Qays returns to express his beloved’s grace and luxurious lifestyle through a sensual image that blends fragrance, sleep, and comfort. He says:

وَيُضْجِي قَيْثُ الْمِسْكِ فَوْقَ فَرَّاشِهَا/نَوْمُ الضُّحَى لَمْ تَنْتَبِطِ عَنْ تَفَضُّلِ

Wa-yudhī fatītu al-miski fawqa firāshihā/na’ūmu al-duḥā lam tantatīq ‘an tafadduli

“And the powdered musk lies scattered over her bed—she who sleeps through the forenoon, never rising except by choice and leisure.”

The poet describes his beloved’s bed as being sprinkled with powdered musk (*fatītu al-misk*), either literally—through applied perfume—or metaphorically, due to the natural sweetness of her body’s scent, as if her very skin exudes fragrance without the need for external perfume.

Some classical commentators argue that the musk was not actually placed on the bed, but rather that her natural scent clung to the bedding, making it seem as though musk had been crumbled upon it. This interpretation is supported by another couplet of his, where he says:

أَلَمْ تَرَ أَنِّي كُلَّمَا جِئْتُ طَارِقًا/وَجَدْتُ بِهَا طِيْبًا وَإِنْ لَمْ تَطَيَّبْ

A-lam tara annī kullamā ji’tu tāriqan/wajadtu bihā ṭībān wa-in lam taṭayyab

“Do you not see that every time I come to her by night, I find her fragrant—even if she has not perfumed herself?”

This reinforces the idea that her fragrance is innate, not applied, and becomes part of the very space she inhabits—intensifying the sense of effortless allure and sensual presence (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019).

- (s) He continues to describe her graceful ease and indulgence, noting that she is *na’ūm al-duḥā*—that is, she sleeps into the forenoon, a relatively late hour in the morning. This suggests a life of luxury and comfort, as she does not rise early for work or to manage household affairs. This image is reinforced by his statement: *lam tantatīq ‘an tafadduli* meaning she has not girded her waist with a work belt, as women typically did when engaging in household duties. The couplet implies that she is attended to and free from labor, enjoying a state of effortless ease. Such a portrayal reflects a broader poetic motif in pre-Islamic poetry, where a woman’s refinement and desirability are closely tied to her being untouched by toil, embodying both elegance and noble leisure (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019).
- (t) Imru’ al-Qays then moves on to describe his beloved’s palm and fingers, through which he reveals his refined aesthetic sensitivity and the elegance of his simile. He says:

وَتَعْطُو بِرُخْصٍ غَيْرِ شَنْنٍ كَأَنَّهُ/أَسَارِيْعُ طَبِي أَوْ مَسَاوِيْكُ إِسْجَلِ

Wa-ta 'tū bi-rakhsin ghayri shathnin ka-annah/asāri 'u zabiyyin aw masāwiku ishili

“She extends a hand soft and unrough, as delicate as the slender limbs of a gazelle, or the thin twigs of the *ashāl* tree.”

In this couplet, the poet describes his beloved's fingers when she reaches or gestures as *rikhs*, meaning soft and delicate, and not *shathn*, that is, not thick or rough. He likens the softness and extension of these fingers to *asāri 'u zabiyy*—the small worms or larvae that move with gentleness and smooth motion (al-Farāhīdī n.d.). In their fineness and softness, he also likens them to the *masāwīk al-ashāl*, a type of tree known for its slender branches, from which tooth-sticks (*siwāk*) are traditionally made (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019). This combination of softness and gentle elongation creates a complete visual image: delicate, fine fingers moving with lightness and grace—enhancing the element of refined femininity in the beloved.

- (u) Imru' al-Qays continues to deepen the aesthetic image of his beloved, shifting to the features of her face and its radiance, as he says:

نُضِيءُ الظَّلَامَ بِالْعِشَاءِ كَأَنَّهَا مَنَارَةٌ مُمَسَّى رَاهِبٍ مُتَبَتِّلٍ

Tudī 'u al-ḡalāma bi-l- 'ishā 'i ka-annahā/manāratu mumsā rāhibin mutabattili

“She lights up the darkness in the evening, as if she were the lantern of a devout monk at his place of retreat.”

In this couplet, the poet compares the brightness, freshness, and luminousness of his beloved's face to the lamp kindled in the monk's tower—that solitary monk who spends his night in worship, humility, and seclusion, lighting his lamp at dusk to assist his prayer and contemplation. Her face, then, emits a light that seems to illuminate the night itself, casting a glow that fills the space—just as the monk's beacon can be seen from afar, breaking the stillness of a dark night. What stands out here is the poet's blending of sensual beauty and spiritual imagery: he borrows from a setting of purity and devotion—the *mutabattil rāhib* (a monk devoted in ascetic withdrawal)—to describe his beloved, thereby adding a symbolic layer of refinement and transcendence. Even though the beloved is, in his poem, a figure of pleasure and desire, not of religious sanctity, this metaphor infuses her with an aura of elevated grace and luminous charm (al-Nahḥās 1973; al-Anbārī n.d.; Zawzanī 2019).

Following this analytical journey through the verses of Imru' al-Qays's *Mu 'allaqa*, the image of the woman emerges as a complex figure, composed of sensual beauty, emotional allure, and social elegance (Imani 1984). The woman in his poetry is not merely an object of romantic admiration, but rather a mirror reflecting the poet's worldview, and a window through which he projects his rebellious self and impassioned emotions. The physical descriptions are marked by precision and rich suggestiveness, where sensation blends with symbolism: scent becomes a shade of emotion, the gaze a piercing arrow to the heart, clothing a metaphor for emotional fusion, and the leg a branch of a tamed, graceful plant. This interweaving of imagery reveals not only the poet's artistic sensitivity but also the central role the feminine figure plays in articulating his poetic and existential vision (Hamdan and S. Natour 2012).

At the same time, these poetic images subtly engaged in a distant dialogue with Qur'ānic rhetoric, through scattered features tied together by shared symbols such as *al-bayḍa* (the egg), *al-janā* (the fruit), *al-rayḥān* (basil), *al-tarā'ib* (upper chest), and *al-libās* (garment). Yet this intertextual echo does not obscure the clear disparity between the purpose of pre-Islamic poetry and the intentions of the Qur'ān. Whereas pre-Islamic poetry represents the woman within an earthly realm open to pleasure and the body, the Qur'ān portrays the female figure within a heavenly horizon—defined by purity and the promise of eschatological reward.

Understanding the image of woman in the poetry of Imru' al-Qays is incomplete without considering the cultural context of the pre-Islamic era—an era that celebrated the body and conceived of love as an existential experience, inseparable from longing, enchantment, deprivation, and yearning (Hamdan and S. Natour 2012). Within this framework, the physical portrayal of the woman in his *Mu'allaqa* functions as a celebration of beauty, preceding the rise of religious conceptions that would later cast the body in terms of purity and abstraction. At this point, it is worth noting that pre-Islamic Arabian society presents a rather rich picture of the social positions of women: Servant women—those who pitched tents, herded animals, kindled fires, and managed domestic tasks. Entertainment women—singers, cupbearers, and those who created pleasant and leisurely atmospheres for men. Noble women—they did not work; their delicate physiques, fair skin, and refined demeanor symbolized wealth and aristocratic status (Kudriavtseva and Rezvan 2017). Therefore, despite certain negative aspects, woman in the pre-Islamic period held an active and significant social role (Sarwar and Ahmad 2020). Accordingly, the depictions of women in Imru' al-Qays's poetry do not serve merely an erotic purpose; rather, they also function as indicators of social status. For instance, women belonging to noble tribes are described through their fair skin, slender figures, and elegance, whereas women of nomadic or slave origin are characterized by their diligence, endurance, and naturalness. Thus, while portraying the physical beauty of women, the poet simultaneously reproduces the class hierarchy of his society (Zahrrah 2012).

3. al-Hūr al-ʿĪn in the Qurʾān—Beauty Adorned with Purity

This section shifts to a fundamentally different paradigm in the representation of women: the portrayal of the *al-hūr al-ʿĪn* in the Qurʾān. Whereas the previous section examined the image of woman in pre-Islamic poetry—characterized by desire, sensuality, and physical defiance—we now turn to a Qurʾānic depiction that situates feminine beauty within an ethical and spiritual context.

The *al-hūr al-ʿĪn* in the Qurʾān are not depicted as extensions of earthly women, but rather as luminous beings created specifically for Paradise. In them, grace is emphasized over seduction, tranquility over frivolity, and purity over provocation. The Qurʾānic description is imbued with reverence, avoiding explicit sensual imagery and instead employing symbols that suggest spiritual clarity and purity—such as *al-luʿluʿ al-maknūn* “well-protected pearls”, *ʿĪn* “wide-eyed”, *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf* “those who restrain their gaze”, and *utrāb* “of equal age”. These expressions establish a notion of transcendent beauty—one that does not stir bodily desire so much as it brings comfort to the soul.

3.1. al-Hūr al-ʿĪn

The term *al-hūr* in its original linguistic sense denotes the intense whiteness of the sclera contrasted with the deep blackness of the iris—an aesthetic feature long admired by the ancient Arabs, who considered it a hallmark of striking beauty. *al-hūr* is the plural of *ḥawrāʾ* (feminine) and *aḥwar* (masculine), much like *ʿawrāʾ* and *aʿwar* (one-eyed), or *sawdāʾ* and *aswad* (black), with plurals *ʿūr* and *sūd*, respectively. The expression describes eyes with a vivid contrast between white and black, akin to the eyes of gazelles or cows. Among human beings, such an intense contrast is rare; thus, the women of Paradise are called *al-hūr al-ʿĪn* because their eyes are likened to those of gazelles and cattle—symbols of beauty in classical Arab imagery (al-Hijmyari 1948).

As for *al-ʿĪn*, it is the plural of *ʿaynā*, referring to a woman characterized by large, wide-set eyes and a clear, expressive gaze (al-Zabīdī n.d.). This feature has long captivated the imagination of Arab poets, who often likened such eyes to those of gazelles (*ẓibāʾ*) and *mahā* (a type of wild cow), praising their delicate appearance and graceful expression.

In classical Arabic aesthetics, wide eyes became a symbol of both allure and gentleness, embodying a blend of beauty and emotional subtlety (Hashimī 1960; Kudriavtseva and Rezvan 2017).

When the two terms *al-hūr* and *al-ʿīn* are combined, they form a linguistic construction charged with a high degree of aesthetic resonance. *al-hūr* evokes purity of color and sharp contrast, while *ʿīn* suggests openness of vision and breadth of gaze. Together, they produce a harmonious and integrated image of femininity—soft in its phonetic rhythm, yet rich in connotation—signifying purity of form and the allure of appearance.

The expression *al-hūr al-ʿīn* is a unique linguistic construction found exclusively in the Qurʾān. This specific pairing does not appear in the extant corpus of pre-Islamic poetry, where the words *al-hūr* and *al-ʿīn* may occur separately but never in this precise combination. At most, similar but not identical formulations can be found—for instance, in a couplet by Qays ibn al-Khaṭīm (d. 620 CE), a pre-Islamic poet who lived into the early Islamic period without converting (al-Marzubānī [1402] 1982), where he says:

عَيْنَاءُ حَوْرَاءُ يُسْتَضَاءُ بِهَا/كَأَنَّهَا حُوطٌ بَانَةٌ قَصِيفٌ

ʿAynāʾ u ḥawrāʾ u yustadāʾ u bihā/ka-annah khūṭa bānatin qasīfu

“A wide-eyed, fair woman by whose light one is guided, as if she were a slender branch of a fragile tree.” (Anbārī 1992).

Despite the presence of both *al-hūr* and *al-ʿīn* as individual terms in Arabic poetry—*al-hūr* often referring to the intense contrast between the white and black of the eye, and *al-ʿīn* indicating wide, expressive eyes—their combined usage in the form *al-hūr al-ʿīn* remains absent from the pre-Islamic lexicon. In the Qurʾān, however, this compound takes on a distinctive linguistic and semantic form, becoming a term with technical precision and symbolic depth. It signifies a particular category of feminine beauty, imbued with spiritual and eschatological meaning, thereby elevating the expression to a unique and codified status within the sacred text (al-Hūfī n.d.).

With its repeated appearance in descriptions of the women of Paradise, the expression *al-hūr al-ʿīn* has become a firmly established linguistic designation for a specific category: the women of the Garden, who embody aesthetic traits closely aligned with the meanings of both terms. *Al-hūr* refers to the striking contrast between the whiteness of the sclera and the blackness of the iris, while *al-ʿīn* indicates the breadth of the pupil and the expansiveness of the gaze. Together, they form a unified linguistic symbol for the Qurʾānic conception of ideal beauty.

This understanding is further affirmed by a hadith reported from Umm Salama, the wife of the Prophet. She asked: “O Messenger of God, tell me about God’s words: (*al-hūr al-ʿīn*).” He replied: “*Al-ʿīn* are those with large eyes; the lashes of the *ḥawrāʾ* are like the wings of an eagle.” (al-Ṭabarī 2000). That is, their eyelashes are long and prominent, evoking strength and majesty, much like the outspread wings of an eagle (*janāḥ al-nisr*), adding another layer of visual grace to the Qurʾānic depiction (al-Suyūṭī 1988).

Although each of the two terms—*al-hūr* and *al-ʿīn*—has been known in the Arabic lexicon since ancient times, their combination in this specific compound form appears exclusively in the Qurʾān. Through repetition and contextual use, the expression acquired a distinctive semantic character, becoming independent in its function and intentional in its formulation. Over time, *al-hūr al-ʿīn* evolved into a linguistic proper noun designating a specific group of women, marked by a concentrated and idealized aesthetic description unique to the Qurʾānic vision of Paradise. Thus, while the Qurʾān preserves certain elements of the female image found in pre-Islamic poetry, it removes the corporeal descriptions and elevates them to a spiritual layer of meaning (Kudriavtseva and Rezvan 2017).

3.2. *al-Lu'lu' al-Maknūn*

This description conveys layered aesthetic and symbolic meanings. *Al-lu'lu'* (pearls) are traditionally associated with purity, radiant whiteness, and high value. The term *al-maknūn*—meaning hidden or well-protected—suggests that this beauty is preserved and safeguarded, implying that it remains untouched by vulgarity and retains its pristine brilliance and refinement. This expression was interpreted by *Umm al-Mu'minīn*, Umm Salama, in a hadith where she asked the Prophet about the meaning of the verse. He replied: “Their clarity is like that of pearls still in their shells, untouched by human hands.” (al-Ṭabarānī 1994). This explanation emphasizes the untouched, pristine nature of the *al-hūr al-'īn*, likening their beauty to the pure brilliance of pearls protected within their oysters—untainted, intact, and preserved in their most perfect state. This Prophetic interpretation clarifies that *al-maknūniyya*—the state of being concealed—does not merely imply being hidden from sight, but rather indicates protection from all influences that could diminish clarity or compromise purity. These influences may be physical, such as exposure to sunlight or air, or symbolic, such as excessive contact or vulgar display. The emphasis is on preserving an untouched, immaculate essence—both materially and morally—reinforcing the Qur'ānic portrayal of beauty as refined, dignified, and elevated.

The Arabic language has carefully distinguished between mere external concealment and the concept of *kann* (concealment with preservation), which conveys a deeper sense of protection and safeguarding. Not everything that is hidden qualifies as *maknūn*; in classical Arabic, *maknūn* refers to that which is shielded from harm and external influence while still potentially visible to the eye—like a pearl preserved within its shell or a noble maiden safeguarded in her private quarters. Thus, *maknūn* does not imply total invisibility, but rather a dignified protection from vulgarity or damage.

This nuanced distinction makes the Qur'ānic expression *al-lu'lu' al-maknūn* “well-protected pearls” far more eloquent than a mere reference to concealment. It implies a beauty that is both seen and revered, preserved in its highest form. The poet al-A'shā captured this layered meaning in his couplet:

أَوْ بَيْضَةٍ فِي الدَّعْصِ مَكْنُونَةٍ/أَوْ دُرَّةٍ شَيْفَتْ لَدَى تَاجِرٍ

Aw bayḍatin fī al-dī 'ṣi maknūnatīn/Aw durratin shīfat ladā tājirī

“Like an egg hidden in the soft sand, or like a pearl displayed before a merchant.”

Here, the egg is not hidden from view, but protected from breakage and harm—just as a precious pearl is guarded against loss or damage (Ibn Durustawayh 1998). This poetic image parallels the Qur'ānic description of the *al-hūr al-'īn*, in whom both outward purity and inner clarity are combined, preserved from anything that might compromise their beauty or expose it to vulgarization. As stated in the poetry of Abū Dhuhbal al-Jumahī—an Umayyad poet from the first century AH—he says:

وَهِيَ زَهْرَاءُ مِثْلُ لَوْلُؤَةِ الْغَوَاصِ/مُيَزَّتْ مِنْ جَوْهَرٍ مَكْنُونٍ

Wa hiya zahrā'u mithlu lu'lu'ati al-ghawwāṣi/Muyyizat min jawharin maknūnin

“She is radiant, like a pearl drawn up by a diver, Set apart from among the well-concealed jewels.” (Abū 'Ubayda 1962).

Although this couplet does not belong to pre-Islamic poetry, it clearly reflects the extension of the Qur'ānic imagery into Islamic-era couplet. This indicates the deep-rootedness of such imagery within the Arab aesthetic sensibility, where it came to represent an ideal of preserved beauty and safeguarded purity.

Thus, the expression *al-lu'lu' al-maknūn* in the Qur'ānic context transcends mere sensory comparison; it carries a symbolic and ethical dimension that highlights the harmony

between outward beauty and inner modesty. This meaning—marked by the fusion of natural purity and moral protection—does not appear in such a compound and elevated form in pre-Islamic poetry. Rather, it is the Qur’ānic usage that uniquely integrates both aesthetic clarity and ethical safeguarding, presenting the *al-hūr al-‘īn* as a model of complete beauty—preserved from vulgarity and shielded from any influence that might diminish its radiance.

3.3. Bayḍ Maknūn

One of the most prominent similes used in the Qur’ān to describe the *al-hūr al-‘īn* is His saying, the Exalted: *Ka-annahunna bayḍun maknūn* “As though they were well-protected eggs” (Q. 37:49). This is a complex image that conveys aesthetic meanings which go beyond mere color or form, suggesting preservation and perfection.

Interpretations of this image in the exegetical and linguistic tradition are numerous, and they may be categorized into three main directions:

The First Approach: A Color-Based Simile Derived from Ostrich Eggs

A large group of Qur’ānic commentators interprets the verse as comparing the *al-hūr* to the color of ostrich eggs hidden in their nests—eggs that are protected by the ostrich’s feathers from dust and wind. This results in a hue that is white tinged with a soft yellow, which was considered one of the most beautiful skin tones for women in pre-Islamic Arab aesthetics.

This very tone is described by Imru’ al-Qays in his couplet:

كَبُرَ الْمُقَانَاةُ الْبَيَاضُ بِصُنْفَرَةٍ غَدَاَهَا نَمِيرُ الْمَاءِ غَيْرُ مُخَالٍ

Kabikri al-muqānāti al-bayād bi-ṣufratin/gadhāhā namīru al-mā’i ghayru muḥallali

“Like a young maiden, her whiteness tinged with yellow, Nourished by pure, unpolluted water.” (Ibn ‘Aṭīyya 2002).

This indicates that the Qur’ān employed a simile familiar to the pre-Islamic aesthetic sensibility but elevated it by adding the term *maknūn*—meaning protected and preserved. In doing so, it infused the visual beauty with an added moral and dignified dimension, transforming a culturally known image into one that embodies both aesthetic refinement and ethical depth.⁴

The Second Approach: A Simile Based on Preservation and Protection, Not Color

Another group of scholars holds that the primary point of resemblance lies not in color, but in the attribute of being *maknūn*—protected and preserved. According to this view, the *al-hūr* are likened to eggs that remain untouched by hands and unaffected by external elements.

This understanding is supported by a hadith reported from Umm Salama, in which the Prophet said:

“Their delicacy is like the thin membrane inside the egg, just beneath the shell—known as *al-ghirqa*’.” (al-Ṭabarī 2000).

That is to say, the intended meaning is to emphasize protected delicacy—not merely the surface color. This interpretation aligns with the Qur’ānic meaning of the term *maknūn*, which signifies safeguarding and preservation, rather than simple visual concealment. It reflects a deeper semantic layer where beauty is defined not only by appearance, but by its being shielded from harm, exposure, or vulgarity.

The Third Approach: A Simile of Harmony and Proportion

This is the view favored by Ibn ‘Aṭīyya al-Andalusī (d. 541 AH/1147 CE), who held that the Qur’ānic simile indicates the perfect harmony between the parts of the body, just as the egg is characterized by the complete proportion among its elements—without irreg-

ularities, protrusions, or distortions. It is a simile based on the whole form, not a part of it, pointing to complete and balanced beauty (Ibn ‘Aṭṭyya 2002).

Thus, it becomes clear that the Qur’ānic expression *bayḍ maknūn* is distinguished by its precise rhetorical construction, which brings together outward beauty (color and delicacy) and inner perfection (protection and harmony). Such comprehensive imagery is not found in pre-Islamic poetry, even though similar individual images may appear.

3.4. *Qāṣirāt al-Ṭarf*

The *al-hūr al-‘īn* are described in the Qur’ān with the expression *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf* (those of modest gaze) in three instances:

- *Wa ‘indahum qāṣirātu al-ṭarfi ‘īn* “And with them will be women of modest gaze, with large, beautiful eyes.” (Q. 37:48).
- *Wa ‘indahum qāṣirātu al-ṭarfi atrāb* “And with them will be women of modest gaze, of equal age” (Q. 38:52).
- *Fihinna qāṣirātu al-ṭarfi lam yatmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jān* “In them are women of modest gaze, untouched by any man or jinn before them.” (Q. 55/56).

The exegetes have interpreted *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf* as referring to women who have restricted their gaze exclusively to their husbands—they do not look at anyone else, neither out of desire nor even casually (al-Ṭabarī 2000). This expression signifies a comprehensive form of chastity that encompasses both outward behavior and inner inclination, reflecting modesty not only in action but also in emotional and affective attachment.

Scholars of rhetoric point out that the Qur’ānic choice of the expression *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf* was made in place of a more direct term like *‘afīfāt* (chaste women), because it conveys a deeper and more nuanced meaning. Outward chastity may, in some cases, coexist with inner longing or desire. In contrast, *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf* “restraining the gaze” indicates complete modesty and a profound emotional and psychological fidelity to one’s husband—not merely the external avoidance of impropriety, but an inward state of devoted reserve and sincere attachment (Maydānī 1996).

This expression is not newly coined in the Qur’ān in terms of its linguistic structure; rather, it is an authentic Arabic phrase that appeared in pre-Islamic poetry in the same form:

مِنَ الْقَاصِرَاتِ الطَّرْفِ لَوْ دَبَّ مَحْوِلٌ/مِنَ الذَّرِّ فَوْقَ الْخَدِّ مِنْهَا لَأَثَرَا

Min al-qāṣirāti al-ṭarfi law dabba muḥwilun/mina al-dharr faṭwaqa al-khaddi minhā la-aththarā

“From among those who lower their gaze—if a withered ant were to crawl across her cheek, it would leave a trace.” (al-Muṣṭawī 2004; Ibn Fāris 1979; Ibn ‘Aṭṭyya 2002).

This couplet combines the softness of the skin with the modesty of the gaze, likening the delicacy of her cheek to such a degree that even an ant—the smallest of creatures—would leave a trace upon it. He describes her as *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf*, meaning she does not look at anyone other than her husband—an expression identical in meaning to that found in the Qur’ān.

Thus, it becomes clear that the expression *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf* in the Qur’ān is not a newly coined linguistic construction, but rather a well-established phrase in pre-Islamic taste. The Qur’ān re-employed it within an ethical and eschatological context, making it one of the attributes of eternal bliss. The distinctiveness of the Qur’ānic usage lies not in the wording itself, but in the nobility of its placement and the elevation of its meaning—where a familiar expression is joined with perfect beauty, complete loyalty, and the ultimate moral delight in Paradise.

3.5. *Uruban*

The *al-hūr al-ʿīn* are described in the verse *ʿUruban atrāban* (Q. 56:37), opening a wide space for reflection on the emotional and psychological dimension this term adds to the Qurʾānic image of the *al-hūr*. The word *ʿurub* is the plural of *ʿarūb*, and early exegetes and linguists agreed that *ʿarūb* refers to a woman who excels in devotion to her husband—one who shows affection, expresses love and contentment, treats him with gentleness, and masters the art of emotional expression toward him.

This description has been interpreted through various, yet closely related, expressions. It was reported from Ibn ʿAbbās that “*ʿurub* are those who lovingly incline toward their husbands.” Mujāhid (d. 103 AH/721 CE) said: “*Arab are the passionate lovers.*” ʿIkrima (d. 105 AH/723 CE) described it as “*al-mughannūja*,” referring to a woman who is highly coquettish and affectionate. Al-Ḥasan said: “*Arab means the one who loves passionately.*” (al-Ṭabarī 2000). Abū ʿUbayda (D. 209 AH/824 CE) commented that “*ʿarūb* is a woman excellent in marital devotion.” (Abū ʿUbayda 1962)

These interpretations collectively paint the features of this ideal feminine figure—one who combines chastity with charm, tenderness with affection—embodying the highest forms of emotional harmony within the marital relationship. This meaning is not newly introduced in the Qurʾān; rather, it is an authentic Arabic expression known in pre-Islamic times. It appears in a poem by Labīd ibn Rabīʿa (d. 660 CE), who says:

وفي الخدوج عروبٌ غيرُ فاحشةٍ/زَيَّا الرِّوَادِفِ يَعْنِي دُونَهَا الْبَصَرُ

Wa fī al-ḥudūji ʿarūbun ghayru fāḥishatin/rayyā al-rawādif ya ʿshā dūnahā al-baṣar

“Within the howdahs are loving and modest women, whose sweet fragrance and beauty dazzle the eyes.” (Ṭammās 2004).

He described the woman as *ʿarūb ghayru fāḥisha*—meaning she combines modesty and chastity on the one hand, with lawful affection toward her husband on the other. She is full-figured, soft-bodied, and of striking beauty and femininity, to the point that the eye can hardly grasp her features due to her radiance.

This same meaning recurs in other pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry, as in the couplet by Muḥammad ibn Ziyād:

وعروبٌ غيرُ فاحشةٍ/قَدْ مَلَكْنَا وَدَّهَا حَقًّا

Wa ʿarūbun ghayru fāḥishatin/qad malaknā wuddahā ḥaqqiyyan

“And tender, devoted women, not immodest, whose affection we truly possessed.” (Maghribī 1980).

And in the couplet of Aws ibn Ḥajar (d. 620 CE):

وقد لهُوْتُ بِمِثْلِ الرِّيمِ أَنْسَةً/نُصْبِي الْحَلِيمِ عَرُوبٌ غَيْرُ مَكْلَاحٍ

Wa qad lahawtu bimitḥli al-rīmi ānisatan/tuṣbī al-ḥalīma ʿarūbun ghayru miklāḥi

“And I once delighted in a maiden, like a graceful gazelle, Who could captivate even the wise—affectionate, yet not flirtatious.” (Mubarrad 1997).

These textual evidences make clear the unified aesthetic and emotional conception of the *ʿarūb* woman in the Arabic language—as an ideal of charm coupled with chastity, tenderness accompanied by modesty. This image was not invented by the Qurʾān; rather, the Qurʾān reoriented and rearticulated it within a framework of moral elevation, eternal bliss, and spiritual intimacy—an intimacy that transcends the physical and reaches the perfection of the soul.

3.6. *Atrāb*

The *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn* are described in the verse *ʿUruban atrāban* (Q. 56:37), and scholars of exegesis and linguistics unanimously agree that *atrāb* is the plural of *ṭirb*, referring to a woman who is equal in age, status, and appearance to another. Commentators reported that Ibn ʿAbbās said: “*Al-atrāb* are those who are equal” meaning equal in age and stature. Mujāhid interpreted *atrāban* as *amthāl*—those who are alike in form. Qatāda (d. 117 AH/735 CE) said: “It means they are of the same age” indicating that they are in the same stage of life, with no superiority among them in youth or freshness (al-Ṭabarī 2000). This understanding is supported by the linguistic meaning of *ṭirb*, which refers to someone close in age to you or born at the same time—thus having touched the earth (*turāb*) alongside you. Hence, the term *ṭirb* is derived from *turāb* (Ibn Manzūr 1993).

It has been reported from some of the Tābiʿīn and scholars that the *atrāb* in Paradise are assigned a specific age—thirty-three years old—at the peak of youth and freshness. It was also said: “in the likeness of fourteen-year-old boys” as a way of illustrating their freshness, not as a precise specification. Thaʿlab (d. 291/904) stated in his tafsīr that *atrāb* refers to those who are alike in age and form, clarifying that what is meant is not natural birth, but rather creation according to a single pattern, in a state of physical and emotional perfection (Ibn Sīda 2000).

This meaning is also supported by the well-known prophetic hadith in which an elderly woman came to the Prophet asking him to pray that she may enter Paradise. He playfully replied, “No old woman will enter Paradise,” so she turned away weeping. The Prophet then smiled and said, “Have you not read the words of Allah: Indeed, We have created them anew, and made them virgins, devoted and of equal age (*ʿuruban atrāban*)”—a reference to the fact that the people of Paradise will be recreated in a single form, in perfect physical appearance, age, and maturity (Tirmidhī 1993).

All of this indicates that the phrase *atrāban* in the verse does not refer solely to equality in age, but also includes similarity in appearance, beauty and bodily harmony—such that the group appears unified in form and radiance, with no disparity that would diminish the perfection of bliss or create psychological imbalance through preferential distinction. This reflects the fullness of God’s justice and grace in honoring the people of Paradise.

3.7. *al-Yāqūt wa al-Marjān*

In the verse *Kaʿannahunna al-yāqūtu wa al-marjān* “As if they were rubies and coral” (Q. 55:58), there is an exceedingly precise and beautiful simile describing the *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn*. It offers praise for their clarity and splendor through an elevated symbolic image that combines sensory majesty with spiritual meaning. The commentators differed in interpreting this simile: some saw it as indicating the clarity and translucence of their bodies, while others regarded it as a comparison in terms of color, radiance, and purity.

On one hand, some interpreters point out that the comparison to *yāqūt* (ruby) relates to its clarity, brilliance, and translucence—so much so that it has been said: “One can see a thread through it.” (al-Ṭabarī 2000). This meaning is affirmed in the Prophetic hadith: “The marrow of her shin will be visible from behind the bone and flesh” (Bukhārī 2001) which indicates extreme clarity and purity.

On the other hand, *marjān* (coral) is considered a form of small pearl, distinguished by its intense whiteness and freshness—unlike larger pearls, whose clarity may be affected by external factors.

The simile also conveys both physical and symbolic beauty at once; the intent is not an absolute likeness in substance, but rather in perceptible qualities—such as softness, radiance, whiteness and complete clarity. This is further supported by the Arabs’ use of names derived from these gemstones for women in their society, such as Durrat bint Abī

Lahab and Marjānah, the mother of Sa‘īd, indicating that such materials were culturally associated with beauty and prestige (Ibn ‘Atīyya 2002).

Some commentators have suggested that this simile complements the earlier verse: *Fihinna qāṣirātu al-ṭarf* “In them are women of modest gaze” (Q. 55:56), indicating that *qāṣirāt al-ṭarf* “chastity and modesty” are paired with physical and aesthetic clarity (like *yāqūt* and *marjān*). Thus, the text begins by purifying from moral flaws and concludes by adorning with beauty. It can be said that the rhetorical order in the verse reflects a progression from inner qualities to outward attributes, emphasizing the perfection of the complete image of bliss (Rāzī 1999).

From another rhetorical perspective, some scholars hold that the simile also emphasizes the protected nature of the *al-hūr al-‘īn*, likening them to rubies preserved in their ore and coral safeguarded within their shells—untouched by hands, and unseen by eyes. This interpretation aligns perfectly with the preceding verse:

Lam yaṭmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jān “Whom no man or jinn has touched before them” (Q. 55:56).

Thus, *yāqūt* and *marjān* “rubies and coral” serve as a metaphor for beauty that is both preserved and unspoiled. It becomes clear from the totality of these connotations that the Qur’ānic expression elevates the image of woman to a sublime level—combining physical purity, rare beauty, and preserved chastity in a composite portrayal that, as far as is known, was never preceded in pre-Islamic poetry. This points to the originality and distinctiveness of the Qur’ānic depiction, in its unique synthesis of moral and physical beauty.

When we examine pre-Islamic poetry, we do not find women explicitly likened to *yāqūt* (ruby) or *marjān* (coral) using these precise terms, despite the abundance of poetic descriptions of female beauty. Instead, poets typically drew their imagery from familiar elements of their desert environment, such as the egg, the palm tree, the gazelle, or the meadow. The pre-Islamic poet generally derived his similes from his immediate natural surroundings, far removed from the refined clarity of precious stones and gems, which were not part of the stylistic or aesthetic conventions of pre-Islamic eloquence—particularly in describing women.

This reveals that the Qur’ānic expression *Ka-annahunna al-yāqūtu wa al-marjān* “As if they were rubies and coral” (Q. 55:58) stands as one of the rhetorical innovations of the Qur’ān—an image unmatched in pre-Islamic eloquence. It introduces a conception of beauty unfamiliar to the traditional repertoire of Arab similes, offering a new aesthetic ideal that combines rarity, purity, delicacy, and protection. This reflects the depth and uniqueness of the Qur’ānic style in crafting an elevated model of beauty.

3.8. *Kawā‘ib Atrāban*

In the verse *Wa kawā‘iba atrāban* “And full-bosomed, equal-in-age women” (Q. 78:33), there is a precise description of the *al-hūr al-‘īn*, and this expression contains two rhetorical components rich in both physical and social connotations. The meaning of *atrāb* has already been addressed—it indicates equality in age, clarifying that they are all in the same stage of physical maturity and complete beauty, with no disparity or decline.

The word *kawā‘ib* is the plural of *kā‘ib*, which refers to a young woman whose breasts have developed and become rounded—indicating a stage of full feminine maturity without sagging. Ibn Zayd explained this expression by saying: “*al-kawā‘ib* are those whose breasts have grown and become firm and round.” (al-Ṭabarī 2000). Linguists have noted that the verb *ka‘aba* is derived from a comparison between the rounded shape of the breast and the *ka‘b* (ankle bone) or *falkah*—a small, rounded ball. Thus, the intended meaning is the perfection of form and complete maturity, while still preserving a softness and attractive fullness (al-Zamakhsharī 1987; Rāzī 1999).

It is mentioned in *al-Sihāh* that *falaka thady al-jāriyah taflikan* means that the young girl's breast became rounded—an expression that today would refer to a proportionate, fully feminine figure (al-Jawhārī 1987). Therefore, *kawā'ib* does not merely denote physical development, but also signifies the peak of beauty in the prime of youth, representing a natural and preserved allure.

This description complements the expression *atrāban*, completing the Qur'ānic portrayal with the image of *al-hūr* in the prime of youth—perfect in form, equal in beauty. It is a style that reflects the extraordinary precision of the Qur'ānic depiction of the women of Paradise—without excess or vulgarity, but with perfect expression and elevated suggestion.

This expression also appears in the poetry of Imru' al-Qays, where he says:

جزعت ولم أجزع من اليبين مجزعا/وعزيت قلبا بالكواعب مولعا

Jaza'tu wa lam ajza' min al-bayni majza'an/wa 'azzaytu qalban bi-l-kawā'ibi mūla'ā

"I was distressed, yet not with the usual sorrow of parting, And I consoled a heart infatuated with the *kawā'ib*." (al-Mustawī 2004).

Here, he consoles himself with the *kawā'ib*—that is, women whose breasts have begun to develop—using the term in the same sense of youthful feminine beauty.

3.9. *Abkāran/Lam Yatmithhunna Insun Qablahum wa-Lā Jān*

Among the most distinctive descriptions that the Qur'ān attributes to the *al-hūr al-'īn* are found in the following verses:

- *Fa-ja 'alnāhunna abkāran* "So We made them virgins" (Q. 56:36).
- *Lam yatmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jān* "Whom no man or jinn has touched before them" (Q. 55:56).

These expressions highlight the unique Qur'ānic emphasis on purity, exclusivity, and the pristine nature of the *al-hūr al-'īn*. These two descriptions appear in different contexts—both in terms of surah and sequence—but they are semantically complementary in portraying an ideal image of purity and safeguarded femininity in Paradise.

The description *abkāran* indicates that they have never been deflowered, and—as noted by the commentators—it also implies the continual renewal of virginity with each encounter, as part of the ongoing pleasures of Paradise. As for the negation of *ṭamth* in the verse from Surat al-Rahmān, it is a more precise expression, interpreted by exegetes as a denial of any prior contact—whether from human or jinn—which includes deflowering, intercourse, and anything similar. This reinforces the meaning of complete purity and absolute protection (Rāzī 1999).

Imru' al-Qays consistently refers to virgins using the term *adhārā* (maidens), as in his *Mu'allaqa*:

ويوم عقرت للغداری مطيبي/فيا عجباً من كورها المتحمل

Wa yawma 'aqartu lil-'adhārā maṭiyyatī/fā-yā 'ajaban min kawrihā al-mutahammali

"And the day I sacrificed my mount for the maidens—how strange the burden it bore!" (al-Mustawī 2004).

Pre-Islamic poetry also employs the word *bikr* to denote a virgin, as in the couplet of al-Muraqqish al-Akbar:

ورب أسيلة الخدين بكر/منعمة لها فرح وجيد

Wa rubba asilati al-khaddayni bikrin/muna 'amatin lahā far'un wa jidun

"And many a soft-cheeked virgin, pampered, with flowing hair and a graceful neck." (al-Dubbī n.d.).

These examples show that the concept of virginity as beauty and distinction was well established in pre-Islamic poetic language. However, this usage in pre-Islamic poetry remained within the realm of physical and aesthetic description; it did not—unlike the Qur’ānic expression—carry eschatological or theological dimensions, nor did it imply absolute purity or a comprehensive negation of contact by any created being. Moreover, pre-Islamic poetry is not known to have employed any direct or indirect expression equivalent to the Qur’ānic negation of *ṭamth*, making the Qur’ānic formulation unique in its construction and distinguished by its rhetorical precision and doctrinal depth. On the other hand, in other verses, the Qur’ān emphasizes the purity and beauty of the spouses in Paradise with the expression *fiḥā azwājūn muṭaḥḥarātun* “Therein are pure spouses” (Q. 2:25; Q. 3:15; Q. 4:57). These expressions underline that in the afterlife, the nature of woman will attain a purity that transcends earthly desires (Kudriavtseva and Rezvan 2017).

The analysis of the Qur’ānic texts, through a careful examination, has revealed the depth of the aesthetic and symbolic construction of the attributes of the *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn*, portraying them as an ideal model of femininity within eschatological discourse. It has become clear that the Qur’ānic expression does not present the qualities of the *al-ḥūr* merely as sensory descriptions for pleasure, but rather reconfigures them within a holistic framework that blends physical beauty with moral purity, making the body a domain of ethical bliss rather than instinctual provocation. This observation aligns with the view that the Qur’ān transforms the words and expressions used in pre-Islamic poetry within the context of its representations of the afterlife (El Masri 2015).

The evaluation of Qur’ānic and pre-Islamic poetic representations of women draws particular attention to the attributes of the *al-ḥūr al-ʿīn* as described in the Qur’ān, including *Ka-annahunna al-lu’lu’ al-maknūn*, *Qāṣirātu al-ṭarf*, *Kawāʿiba atrāban*, *ʿUruban*, and *Lam yatmithhunna insun qablahum wa-lā jān*. These descriptions, when examined in light of classical exegetical sources, reveal a highly structured and symbolically rich construction, emphasizing an idealized model of femininity within eschatological discourse. Artistic comparisons with the poetic imagery in the works of Imru’ al-Qays underscore a significant contrast in the aims and functions of depiction. Whereas the portrayal of women in Imru’ al-Qays’s poetry is predominantly sensual, reflecting a personal and ephemeral experience centered on bodily beauty and desire, the Qur’ānic depiction elevates the female image to a transcendent ideal. In this framework, women are presented not merely as objects of visual or sensual pleasure but as symbols of reward and recompense, with physical purity intimately linked to spiritual elevation. Therefore, these evaluative reveals that while there exists a stylistic, rhetorical, and semantic interaction between the expressions used in Arabic poetry and their usage within the Qur’ānic context (Bauer 2010), the Qur’ān demonstrates a unique capacity to transform aesthetic motifs into an integrated moral and divine vision. Thus, it distinguishes the Qur’ānic discourse on the depiction of women from the predominantly corporeal portrayals found in pre-Islamic poetry.

Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993) argues that the meanings of Qur’ānic words can undergo semantic shifts over time or within different contexts, such that a single word may acquire distinct meanings depending on its usage (Izutsu 2002). This approach can also be applied to the representations of women in the Qur’ānic depictions of Paradise. In this sense, the female images in the Qur’ān, shaped by the linguistic and cultural context of the time, were influenced by earlier portrayals of women in the Arabic poetic tradition. Within the Qur’ānic text, however, these images underwent a transformation and acquired new layers of meaning. In other words, the female figures found in pre-Islamic poetry were reinterpreted in the Qur’ān as *al-ḥūr* or women of Paradise, thereby gaining both aesthetic and functional dimensions in their transmission to the audience.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that the Qur'ān did not abolish pre-Islamic vocabulary, but rather employed it and redirected its meaning—the word remains the same, but the context is different, and the purpose is higher. This reflects the Qur'ān's remarkable ability to compose meanings—not through mere repetition, but by reconstructing the word within an integrated theological, linguistic, and aesthetic framework. Thus, the Qur'ānic expression of feminine beauty represents a pivotal moment in the history of Arabic eloquence—not only in the manner of expression, but in the very purpose behind that expression. Therefore, it is understood that while the Qur'ānic discourse draws upon the poetic traditions of the Jāhili period, it simultaneously transforms them within its own religious framework and elevates them beyond their original form (El Masri 2017).

4. Conclusions

This study is part of contemporary efforts to explore the complex relationship between Qur'ānic rhetoric and pre-Islamic poetic heritage, focusing on a specific theme: the depiction of woman and her beauty in both the Qur'ān and the poetry of Imru' al-Qays, who represents a refined artistic model of pre-Islamic love poetry. The comparison stems from a linguistic and literary awareness that the Qur'ānic text was revealed in the language of the Arabs and employed their rhetorical tools, yet it reconstructed meanings and concepts within a transcendent divine vision. This vision elevates aesthetic notions into the realm of purity and eschatological reward—unlike the earthly perspective that dominates pre-Islamic poetry, where woman was often portrayed as an object of temptation, sensual pleasure, and emotional longing.

The study has shown that the Qur'ān employs many pre-Islamic terms—such as *hūr*, *lu'lu'* (pearl), *bayāḍ* (whiteness), *ʿin* (wide eyes), and *kawāʿib* (full-bosomed)—but it elevates them from their limited sensual connotations to a broader and more sublime symbolic and spiritual realm. In the Qur'ān, the *al-hūr* are not merely alluring women, but beings specially created for Paradise—purified in nature, modest in conduct, and preserved in seclusion. Their attributes, such as *kawāʿib*, *ʿurub*, *atrāb*, and *al-lu'lu' al-maknūn*, are not expressions of abstract sensual excitement, but rather a sanctified portrayal of perfect beauty—beauty that forms part of the divine reward prepared for the righteous. By contrast, Imru' al-Qays stands as a prominent example of the pre-Islamic poet who portrayed woman through the lens of a pursuing lover and a contemplative Bedouin. His poetry is filled with detailed physical descriptions, a sensual inclination, and similes drawn from the harsh natural environment—such as *mahā* (wild cows), gazelles, and desert sands. His couplets reflect a deeply personal and emotional tendency, shaped by moments of desire, loss, and memory, without being framed by any theological perspective or moral dimension.

Through analysis and comparison, the study has demonstrated that the Qur'ān did not sever its connection with pre-Islamic poetry in terms of language and style. However, it transcended its imaginative and conceptual horizons, establishing a new semantic framework in which beauty serves as a means of inspiring longing for Paradise—not arousing desire—and the portrayal of woman is governed by a system of values and divine reward, rather than by the logic of temptation and seduction. By tracing the terminology, rhetorical structure, and similes, it becomes clear that Qur'ānic expression does not negate pre-Islamic eloquence, but rather embraces it and redirects it within a new epistemological context—one that reflects the civilizational and religious transformation brought by Islam. This is what makes pre-Islamic poetry—despite the difference in intent—a vital tool for understanding the earliest form of the Arabic language, and a valuable support in grasping many of the rhetorical and cultural meanings embedded in the Qur'ānic discourse.

In conclusion, this study calls for a renewed reading of pre-Islamic poetry—not merely as a literary artifact, but as a foundational layer of Arab aesthetic consciousness.

It emphasizes the need to understand how the Qur'ān reoriented this aesthetic sensibility, transforming it from the sensual to the spiritual and from the instinctual to the ideal. Furthermore, the study advocates expanding comparative research between Qur'ānic discourse and pre-Islamic Arabic texts to better grasp the full extent of the semantic and rhetorical transformation that revelation introduced into Arabic expression. Ultimately, the findings deepen previous scholarly insights on the linguistic and aesthetic continuity between Jāhilī poetry and the Qur'ān, demonstrating that the Qur'ān did not reject this legacy but reshaped it into a transformative and transcendent force.

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Notes

- ¹ The title given to the distinguished collection of odes by seven (or sometimes ten) poets from the pre-Islamic period (Tülücü 2020).
- ² The *Talīl* School refers to a classical style of Arabic poetry, especially prominent in pre-Islamic odes (*qasīdas*), where poets begin their poem by stopping at the ruins (*talāl*) of a beloved's deserted campsite. They lament the past, evoke nostalgia, and reflect on lost love and time (Süleyman 2020).
- ³ Zajjāj (d. 311 AH/923 CE) reports that linguists are in consensus that the term *terā'ib* refers to the area on the chest where a necklace is worn (Zajjāj 1988).
- ⁴ For a comprehensive discussion of the transformative imagery employed in the Qur'ānic descriptions of Paradise's blessings, see (Aksoy 2024).

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