

The Concept of Elegance as a Virtue and Way of Life in Classical Islamic Thought

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Abstract:

Although elegance is a concept that has been extensively explored by classical Islamic philosophers and thinkers, it has been largely neglected in modern academic studies. However, the conception of elegance in classical Islamic philosophy and thought offers significant opportunities for overcoming the tension between modernism's rigid rationalism and postmodernism's relative and rule-free structure, particularly in the re-establishment of the relationship between the individual and society. This study approaches elegance not merely as an aesthetic quality, but as a comprehensive ethical-aesthetic framework that integrates knowledge, ethics, reason, eloquence, art and beauty, and aims to highlight the potential this framework holds for contemporary thought. In this context, the study analyses the views on elegance of Washshā', al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, al-Muḥāsibī and Zakariyyā al-Rāzī. It is argued that the concept of elegance in classical Islamic thought—which integrates science, ethics, rhetoric, art and beauty—offers new possibilities for resolving the tension and opposition between the universalist rationality of modernism and postmodern thought's critique of rationality. Viewed from this perspective, it is concluded that, thanks to the aesthetic appeal and transformative power of elegance, rational communication between high culture and low culture can take place without any coercion or domination.

Keywords: Elegance, al-Washshā', al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, al-Muḥāsibī, Zakariyyā al-Rāzī, ethics, beauty, eloquence.

1. Introduction

In the works of classical Islamic philosophers and thinkers, the concept of elegance—associated with ethics, beauty, aesthetics and art—has been examined from Platonic, Aristotelian and Neoplatonic perspectives, resulting in a substantial body of thought on the subject. However, as there are currently no academic studies on the concept of elegance in Islamic philosophy and thought, this concept remains in the shadows. This study argues that the concept of 'elegance' in classical Islamic thought, when re-examined through its foundational texts, offers a comprehensive ethical-aesthetic framework capable of bridging the gap between modernism's rigid rationalism and postmodernism's relativism and non-conformity.

Elegance, which unites the realms of ethics, art, aesthetics, beauty, poetry, love and linguistic discourse, not only enables humanity to be perceived more powerfully and to exert greater influence but also constitutes the condition for inter-subjective understanding and the convergence of shared values. In this respect, while elegance represents the ideal of distinction through high culture and knowledge, it also expresses a philosophy of life that incorporates rational thought into the fabric of existence. From this perspective, it is possible to establish a connection between the concept of elegance in Islamic philosophy and the perception of this virtue in modern Western thought.

In modern Western philosophy, thinkers such as Voltaire (1694–1778), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900), Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) examined the concept of elegance by referring to its roots in Ancient Greece. In contrast, the postmodern period, shaped by critiques of modernism’s claims to universal truth, reason, values, and progress, came to emphasize relativism, individualism, difference, pluralism, and appearance as significant and valuable. In this context, the concept of elegance in Islamic philosophy offers the potential to provide a philosophical critique of both modernism’s rigid rationalism and postmodern thought.

In Islamic culture, people described as ‘elegant’ are those who possess the qualities to guide the masses through their knowledge and moral character. These individuals acquire an aesthetically appealing quality that draws ordinary people to them, elevating them to a position of natural authority or leadership. Thus, truth and justice are not left to the brute force, pleasures, and desires of the masses. In Islamic philosophy, elegance is described as a term encompassing all dimensions of life; it is associated not only with physical beauty, attire and the use of pleasant fragrances, but also with the use of language and logic, abstaining from evil, understanding knowledge and events, and the ability to make witty remarks and jokes (Ibn al-Jawzī 1997, 42). For this reason, in Islamic thought and in this study, elegance denotes a holistic way of life that encompasses both a person’s physical attributes and their inner world and character.

This study aims to analyse the meanings attributed to the term ‘elegance’ not merely as a concept related to aesthetics, but as a comprehensive virtue encompassing reason, morality and art. It examines the refinements possessed by a person described as ‘elegant’, ranging from physical beauty to manner of speech, and from conduct to moral character (Ibn al-Jawzī 1997, 42; al-Rāğib al-Iṣfahānī 1988, 124; al-Rāğib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 118; al-Washshā’ 1953, 52). This study employs qualitative research methods, specifically literature review and content analysis techniques.

The nature of elegance within Islamic society and culture, and the fundamental characteristics that elegant individuals should possess, form the core questions of our study. The most comprehensive answer to these questions is found in the work *al-Muwashshā’ aw al-ẓarf wa-al-ẓurafā’* by al-Washshā’ (d. 325/937), a scholar of Arabic language and literature. Al-Washshā’ seeks to demonstrate that elegance is a way of life and a comprehensive virtue, drawing both on practical observations of the daily behaviour of elegant men and women—gained through observing their actions and listening to their speech—and on religious and philosophical perspectives (al-Washshā’ 1953, 51). As a practical form

of life, elegance manifests itself in the attitudes and styles of elegant people regarding eating, drinking, scent and dress; and in their views on avoiding bad and reprehensible deeds and acquiring beautiful qualities (*jamīlu ṣ-ṣiyām*) and dispositions (al-Washshā' 1953, 51).

Although the conceptual framework of the study is largely based on al-Washshā's work, it also draws upon the Sufi and theologian Hārith al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), the moral philosopher al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. 11th century), and the natural philosopher Zakariyyā al-Rāzī (d. 313/925). In his work *Al-Qaṣd wa-l-rujū' ilā Allāh* (al-Muḥāsibī 1986), Hārīs al-Muḥāsibī explained elegance within the framework of the concepts of modesty and fear, through the relationship established with God. Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. early 11th century) argued in his work *al-Dharī'a ilā makārim al-sharī'a* that elegance is a virtue encompassing the virtues of wisdom, chastity and courage, placing it under the umbrella of justice. Zakariyyā al-Rāzī directed philosophical critiques at the elegant way of life in *al-Ṭibb al-rūḥānī*. Within this framework, the conclusion of this article will assess the contribution of the Islamic conception of elegance to modern and postmodern thought regarding humanity and society.

2. The Concept of Elegance in Classical Islamic Philosophy

From a historical perspective, the term 'elegance has been used in Islamic philosophy to denote the 'middle state' that Aristotle investigated and identified in the realms of truth and pleasure, particularly in the context of play, entertainment and humour (Aristotle 2011, 1108a10-35, 1127b33-1128b10, 1176b5-1177a11; Aristūṭālīs 1979, 100, 169, 347-348). Al-Fārābī (d. 339/950) explained that elegance is a fine disposition acquired through the moderation of jest or humour, (al-Fārābī 1987, 201-202; al-Fārābī 1971, 36) while Abū al-Ḥasan al-Āmirī (d. 381/992) stated that it signifies the moderation of rest and recreation, which are essential in human life (al-Āmirī 1991, 218-219).

In Islamic philosophy, the concept of elegance has not been considered limited solely to play, entertainment and humour. From an Aristotelian perspective, it has been argued that the elegant person (al-ẓarīf) is one who realises their own essence, morality, actions, outward appearance and demeanour without compulsion or affectation (al-Fārābī 1991, 95). This argument emphasises that the elegant person possesses ethical and aesthetic integrity and carries out their actions naturally, without strain. Elegance has been treated as a multi-dimensional virtue representing both the outward and inward competence of an individual (Ibn 'Arabshāh 2001, 25, 35, 87, 161, 163, 167, 182; al-Nadīm 2019, 268, 370, 442, 444, 448). For example, while Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (d. 364/975) noted that a love of adornment (*ḥubb al-zīnat*) is a fine trait for elegant people (Ibn Adī 2013, 48-49), Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) subjected the concept of elegance to psychological, ethical and aesthetic analysis, taking into account Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas of love (Ibn Sīnā 1983, 254-260). While Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) did not include this concept in his moral philosophy, al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) placed it under the virtue of chastity, which is the moderation of the power of desire (al-Ghazālī 1964, 281, 283; al-Ghazālī 2005, 936). al-Ghazālī's approach led to elegance being treated, in later periods, as limited to the power of desire.

In Islamic thought and philosophy, elegance—as a subsequently acquired characteristic—has been accepted as a becoming and motion emerging within a dynamic process. The questions of how and why the becoming and motion we describe as elegant occur are among the central questions investigated by Washshā'. By addressing these two questions, we shall enter directly into the discussion of elegance.

3. The Necessity of Elegance and Its Cultivation

Al-Washshā' states that elegance is a fundamental prerequisite for a person's moral, intellectual and spiritual maturity. He emphasises that, because of this necessity, one cannot be separated from elegance nor can one do without it. In his view, anyone who seeks elegance cannot be accused of folly. Elegance stands at the forefront of the highest moral and intellectual values put into practice by scholars and cherished with passion by literary figures. Scholars and literary figures who make elegance an inseparable part of their character and disposition gain respect and are loved amongst their peers (al-Washshā' 1953, 58).

Some people who lack the quality of elegance may succeed in appearing elegant by forcing themselves and imitating the behaviour of elegant individuals. They endure these hardships because of the high virtue in which elegance is held by society and its ability to elevate one's social standing. From the perspective of their own development, they regard the hardship they endure for the sake of elegance as a blessing. At the end of this arduous process, they make elegance a part of their very nature. There is a significant difference between the elegance of those who have made it second nature (al-maṭbū'in) and the elegance of those who strive to be refined by forcing themselves and displaying artificial behaviour (al-mutakallifin) (al-Washshā' 1953, 58). Elegance that has become second nature is more effective and beautiful because it comes from within and is not forced. In forced and artificial elegance, people exert a great deal of effort to appear elegant.

The signs and symptoms of artificiality (taṣannu') are revealed in the movements, speech and gaze of those who have not made elegance a natural part of themselves. No matter how hard they try to conceal them, they cannot completely hide these signs and symptoms. In contrast, when natural elegance is observed, its charm and sweetness are perceived directly. When encountering a person possessing such elegance, a sense of peace and comfort is felt. One opens one's heart to a person who has made elegance a natural part of himself and desires to converse with him. Elegance that has become second nature is revealed in a person's demeanour (shamā'il), character and speech. The strongest evidence of elegance that has become second nature lies in the harmony and unity between thought and action (al-Washshā' 1953, 58-59). For this reason, elegance does not remain hidden within a person; rather, it manifests itself in their movements, speech and social environment. The evidence of a person's elegance can be discerned from their gait, attire and speech. Even without knowing or experiencing inner beauty and sweetness, one can infer the presence of elegance from the beauty and sweetness of their outward appearance. In the attire of elegant individuals, their delicacy and courtesy, the purity of their thoughts and intentions, the beauty of their demeanour,

the care taken in their dress, and the influence they exert on their surroundings are clearly evident. Ordinary people yearn for the presence of elegant individuals who bring peace and comfort to those around them, and they are naturally drawn to such people (al-Washshā' 1953, 59).

Ibn Washshā' draws attention to the fact that elegance is not merely external appearance and actions, but also the inner qualities and states that underpin them. According to him, elegant people possess dignity, reverence, serenity, moral principles, good character, sound views and noble aims, and they live their lives consciously and meaningfully (al-Washshā' 1953, 59). In elegant individuals who both utilise and struggle against their carnal desires, moral excellence, correct views and noble aims emerge (al-Washshā' 1953, 59). It is clearly evident that al-Washshā' presents the debate regarding whether elegance should remain at the level of imitation or be internalised as a second nature, adhering to the Islamic philosophers' view that virtue is attained only when it becomes a habit and a disposition. The ontological value of elegance as manifested in society and culture only emerges when it is transformed into habit and settled disposition. The answer to the question of what kind of virtue elegance is within the context of moral philosophy can be found in the explanations of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī.

4. Elegance as an All-Encompassing Virtue

Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī explains the term 'elegance' by likening it to a vessel containing beauties (al-maḥāsin) (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 1988, 124). Based on this analogy, he defines elegance as a state encompassing all spiritual, physical and external virtues (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 118). The moral virtues mentioned in the definition consist of chastity, courage, wisdom and justice (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 1988, 124). By acquiring these virtues, a person is truly described as possessing good character. According to al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī's approach, elegance is positioned as a subordinate virtue under justice, which encompasses all virtues. However, justice does not directly entail elegance. For alongside justice, the virtues of forbearance (ḥilm), mercy (ar-raḥma), gentleness (layyin al-jānib) and a harmonious disposition (suhūlat al-ṭab') emerge first and directly. Depending on the emergence of these virtues, the virtues of freedom, elegance, magnanimity and generosity manifest themselves (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 1988, 124). As an ideal and a goal, humanity can be fully realised alongside the virtues of elegance, freedom, magnanimity and generosity.

If the underlying virtues within justice and their interrelationships are understood, the virtue of elegance will be better comprehended. According to al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, when justice becomes firmly established in a person, the virtue of mercy emerges first. Mercy signifies the feeling of compassion or pity arising from the rightful owner's loss of their due. From mercy, as a virtue, arises the virtue of forbearance, and from forbearance, the virtue of forgiveness (al-'afw). The virtues of humanity and generosity that emerge thereafter encompass all the virtues of the soul. Consequently, humanity manifests itself fully through the acquisition of all the virtues of the soul. To the extent that a person acquires these virtues, he realizes his humanity (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 116,122). Differences between people arise according to the acquisition of the virtue of humanity. Al-Rāghib

al-Isfahānī states that the term ‘humanity’ is limited to praiseworthy actions and dispositions. Consequently, for an action or disposition to be considered human, it must be a praiseworthy action or disposition.

According to al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, since humanity manifests itself in different ways in individuals, a person possessing not all virtues but only certain virtues may also be described as elegant. Just as one who possesses knowledge and courage is called elegant, so too is one who possesses fine clothing, household furnishings and ornate attire. When we consider fine clothing and furnishings, it becomes apparent that elegance is a more comprehensive concept than freedom and generosity (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 118). This is because the knowledge and courage found in an elegant person belong to the category of inner virtues, whilst fine clothing, valuable garments and furnishings belong to the category of external virtues. When we consider bodily virtues alongside psychical and external virtues, it becomes clear that the virtue of elegance encompasses the entirety of a person’s life. As elegance manifests itself in different ways in individuals, individual differences are inevitable.

5. The Ontological and Ethical Dimensions of Elegance

In establishing the theory of elegance, al-Washshā’ draws upon both his own personal observations and experiences, as well as the explanations offered by elegant individuals of his time regarding the fundamental characteristics and principles of elegance. He categorises these explanations into three groups. According to the explanation in the first group, it is stated that elegance has four fundamental principles or supporting pillars (‘imād al-ẓarf), namely: observing the rights of neighbours, keeping one’s word and honouring trusts, abhorrence of shameful things, and seeking salvation by abstaining from sins (ṭalab al-salāma) (al-Washshā’ 1953, 51). In the second, it is argued that the fundamental qualities of elegance are eloquence, fluency, chastity and purity. In the third, it is emphasised that elegance consists of the sum of four characteristics: the sense of modesty (al-ḥayā’), generosity (al-karam), chastity, and abstaining from doubtful matters (al-wara’) (al-Washshā’ 1953, 52). However, we shall set aside the first and second of these explanatory models for later and bring the third to the fore for analysis. We shall clarify the concepts of modesty, generosity, chastity and abstinence—which al-Washshā’ described as the fundamental characteristics of elegance but did not define—by defining them within the framework of al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī’s philosophical analyses and al-Muhasibī’s mystical-psychological approach.

According to al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, modesty—which Allah has instilled in human nature—is a human trait that naturally prevents one from committing evil (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 207). Because of this trait, a person feels shame towards himself, other people, and Allah. If a person feels shame towards others but not towards himself, he is, in fact, someone who devalues himself. A person who feels no shame before God can only be someone who does not know Him. If a person knows that God sees and hears humans, they will feel shame before Him (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 208). According to al-Isfahānī, elegance manifests when a person becomes aware of the innate sense

of shame within himself and acts in accordance with that awareness. Humans must discover that behind their sense of shame lies the presence of God. If a person feels no shame towards himself or God, yet feels ashamed before others, this signifies that he has surrendered himself to social perceptions and conventions. As we shall see below, al-Muhasibī places spiritual shame before God at the very centre of the concept of elegance.

The second characteristic of elegance, generosity, is used to describe traits and actions worthy of praise, provided they have actually been carried out. For example, spending wealth to equip an army in the way of God, or taking on a great financial burden to resolve a tribe's blood feud and bring about peace, reveals the virtue of generosity ((al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 117). al-Iṣfahānī explains generosity as beautifying a person's soul, much like grapes emerging from a vine, so that beauty flows from it (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 1988, 124). The actions we describe as acts of generosity are also regarded as elegant actions. While we grasp elegance through the beautiful virtue of karam, it is through elegance that we discover the radiant divine karam. According to this view, at the core of elegance lies divine beauty and generosity, which can only be discovered through intuition (Bergson 1946, 288-289).

Al-Iṣfahānī addresses the concept of freedom in relation to the concept of karam and argues that true freedom is possible only by not being enslaved to worldly greed, desire and aims. While freedom encompasses all beauties, great and small (al-maḥāsin), karam encompasses only the great beauties. When a person receives goods or assistance from another whilst maintaining a dignified demeanour, without being crushed by a sense of obligation, and liberates himself from the bondage of desires and degradation, this reveals his freedom (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 117-124). Praiseworthy deeds become virtuous only when performed on the basis of knowledge and with the most noble and, namely, for the sake of Allah's pleasure. It is clear that elegance, when accompanied by the virtues of generosity and freedom, leads the elegant individual into the realm of freedom. When the elegant individual makes beauty a part of his very nature and performs beautiful actions and motions, his actions and movements are, in and of themselves, elegant and beautiful, independent of our perception. In this concept of elegance, the material aspect and the ideal aspect come together.

The third characteristic of elegance is chastity, which is the moderation of the power of desire and implies a person's self-restraint against animalistic pleasures such as eating, drinking and sexuality. The pleasure felt in the presence of beautiful colours, pleasant music, lovely scents and orderly forms falls not within the realm of animalistic pleasures, but within that of the virtue of chastity. While the presence of the virtue of chastity facilitates access to beauty, its absence leads to a deprivation of beauty and praiseworthy qualities (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 224). From al-Iṣfahānī's explanations, we understand that the virtue of chastity possesses an aesthetic dimension which, on the one hand, preserves sensory vitality and dynamism, while on the other hand, does not stray from moral integrity.

The fourth characteristic of elegance, al-wara', refers not only to abstaining from the forbidden, but also to avoiding doubtful matters and renouncing most of what is permissible in favour of contenting oneself with the minimum (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 227). For al-Washshā',

true elegance emerges through self-control and abstaining from the forbidden and doubtful things. No matter how eloquently a person speaks or how knowledgeable they may be, if they don't abstain from the forbidden, their elegance is incomplete and flawed (al-Washshā' 1953, 53, 192).

Al-Isfahānī draws attention to the social dimension of elegance by linking fidelity to one's word—which al-Washshā' described as the pillar of elegance—to the notion that human beings are inherently social. From his perspective, there is a very close connection between fidelity to one's word and the idea that, as social beings, humans are bound to cooperate with one another. For the continuity of mutual aid can only be ensured by honouring one's word and being faithful. Faithfulness, which implies consistency between word and deed, is a key principle in ensuring social justice. If one fails to honour one's word and remain faithful, hearts will come to hate one another and coexistence will cease (al-Rāḡib al-Isfahānī 2007, 210). From this perspective, according to both Washshā' and al-Isfahānī, an elegant person is defined as an ideal human being who adheres to the laws of neighbourliness, behaves respectfully and fairly towards neighbours, keeps his word, preserves his honour by refraining from shameful acts, and strives to attain happiness and peace by avoiding sins (al-Rāḡib al-Isfahānī 2007, 200-201; al-Washshā' 1953, 52, 195). Such a person expresses their thoughts in social interactions through witty remarks and jokes; their anger through gentleness; and their desires through generosity. Thus, elegance consists of the convergence of elements that facilitate social relations, such as eloquent speech, patience and kindness (al-Rāḡib al-Isfahānī 2007, 259).

Turning to al-Muḥāsibī, whom I mentioned earlier, he approaches elegance more as a discipline of the soul or the heart. According to him, elegance means abandoning dubious and ugly traits, making generosity and kindness a way of life, purifying one's character of all impurities, and refining one's purpose (al-hamm). An elegant person possessing these qualities chooses their words carefully when speaking, does not hurt anyone, prefers to remain silent rather than engage in idle talk, and remains in a constant state of contemplation. Consequently, he fears and feels ashamed of diminishing his worth or succumbing to his natural inclinations, seeking instead a state in which he may find joy and comfort. When the fear of Allah and the sense of shame before Him take hold of the elegant individual, these two emotions guide his actions. Only such a person can truly feel shame before Allah (al-Rāḡib al-Isfahānī 2007, 192, 209, 234; al-Muḥāsibī 1986, 319). If the fear of Allah (al-khawf) is removed from a person's heart, the awareness that Allah is watching and observing them at all times (al-murāqaba) is also removed (Muḥāsibī 1986, 310).

According to al-Muḥāsibī's approach, elegance is associated with a person purifying his soul of bad traits to become virtuous, pursuing noble goals, refraining from harming others through his words and deeds, and remaining in a state of constant reflection. The fear of Allah and the sense of shame before Him are the most important conditions ensuring the continuity of elegance. For the fear of Allah and the sense of shame before Him impose upon the individual the duty to act with a full sense of responsibility and to exercise self-control over one's life. For this reason, the fear of Allah and the sense of shame must not weaken in a person's life. If a person realises that the changes and transformations within them occur under Allah's supervision and that none of his actions or

inactions remain hidden from Him, he enhances the value of modesty (Muḥāsibī 1986, 317, 319). Al-Washshā', al-Isfahānī and al-Muḥāsibī regard modesty as the inner source of elegance. When modesty is corrupted, elegance becomes nothing more than a mere display.

According to Washshā, elegant individuals exert a psychological and sociological influence on others. By rising to the position of leader and authority within their environment, they resolve even the most difficult problems. They can bring together people of opposing temperaments and a tendency towards conflict and reconcile them. They possess the qualities of keeping secrets, not prying into others' secrets, not speaking on matters they do not know, not exposing hidden faults, not driving a wedge between two friends, and never violating anyone's privacy (al-Washshā' 1953, 192, 195). Al-Isfahānī regards the keeping of secrets as a virtue of the appetitive faculty. A word spoken in confidence to a friend is a trust. The preservation of this trust, as a duty of friendship, is called loyalty (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 212).

Ordinary people respect those elegant individuals who possess moral virtues because of their charm and distinction, and they aspire to reach their level. People of elegance possess the natural grace (*riqqat al-ṭab'*), gentleness and courtesy to skilfully manage people and handle affairs with kindness (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 192, 197). They devise clever and gentle solutions to achieve their goals. They do not openly declare their objectives; they conceal their intentions and thoughts. They do not conduct their affairs openly before everyone's eyes. They resolve problems using the most appropriate means and in a beautiful manner. They trace the issue back to its very source and initiate the solution from that source (al-Washshā' 1953, 197). Al-Isfahānī associates the attitude of concealing one's goals, intentions and thoughts in problem-solving with the keeping of secrets. A person's refusal to reveal a thought in their mind because he regards disclosure as wrong, or his failure to explain to another what he wishes to do before it has been realised, also falls within the scope of keeping secrets. This kind of secrecy signifies being resolute and prudent (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 212).

When it comes to the relationship between elegant individuals and ordinary people, the perfection and aims possessed by elegant individuals must be more valuable and noble than those of ordinary people. For this reason, according to al-Washshā', elegant individuals do not content themselves with the literal meaning of a religious text but also seek its true meaning (*al-ta'wīl*) (al-Washshā' 1953, 59, 98). According to al-Isfahānī, elegant individuals act in concert with the people in fulfilling the outward rulings of religion and acts of worship; they conform to the general order of society and strive to make them virtuous. However, they regard themselves as superior to ordinary people in knowledge, morality and good deeds (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 260). Their regard for themselves as superior to the common people is described as true nobility. According to al-Isfahānī, nobility is, just as food is digested in the stomach and becomes part of the body, something that settles into a person's nature and becomes an inseparable part of him. *Muruwwah*, once made a part of one's nature, encompasses both admirable traits and actions deemed beautiful (*al-aḥsān al-mustaḥsana*) (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 116). When a person has made *muruwah* a part of their nature, their traits and actions are regarded as elegant.

As mentioned above, al-Washshā' informs us that among the fundamental qualities of

elegance are eloquence, rhetorical skill, chastity and purity (al-Washshā' 1953, 51). Of the qualities he mentions, eloquence and rhetorical skill indicate that the concept of elegance is directly related to speech and linguistic ability. For a person to be elegant means that his speech is effective, beautiful, persuasive and logical. Elegance in language is a reflection of one's inner world. A person who speaks eloquently and beautifully generally possesses a clear mind, a deep store of knowledge and a sharp intellect. The elegant individual, by educating himself and striving to acquire knowledge in every field, becomes a vessel containing all knowledge. For a person cannot be truly refined without educating himself morally and acquiring knowledge (al-Washshā' 1953, 52).

Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī states that the qualities of eloquence and fluency emerge in a person enlightened by reason, emphasising that these two qualities are a manifestation of the power of reason (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 143). According to him, eloquence requires the selection of words, their arrangement, attention to their meanings, and the correctness of the constructed phrase. Fluency, on the other hand, refers to the ease and clarity of the pronunciation of the selected words. To put it briefly, whilst eloquence relates to both words and meaning, fluency relates solely to the words (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 152-153). In a person who cultivates, refines, and matures their spirit, spiritual finesse emerges. Consequently, beautiful and wise words can only flow from a person whose spirit and intellect have been refined (al-Washshā' 1953, 52). Hārith al-Muḥāsibī also states that an elegant person is one who chooses his words carefully when speaking, does not hurt anyone, and prefers to remain silent rather than engage in idle talk (Muḥāsibī 1986, 319). This implies that the foundation of linguistic elegance—comprising eloquence and fluency—lies in reason, knowledge and morality.

6. The External Rules of Elegance and Physical Beauty

While the soul is cultivated and disciplined through the inner rules of elegance, both the body and social identity are disciplined through its outer rules. Consequently, elegance is not a matter of arbitrariness; on the contrary, it encompasses a set of clearly defined moral, aesthetic and cultural rules (sharā'i' maḥdūdātun) (al-Washshā' 1953, 159). Al-Washshā' states that the lifestyle practices of the elegants are based on specific rules, and that those who deviate from these rules cannot be termed "elegant". Within the elegant class, there exists a defined limit (ḥadd maḥdūd) and a shared standard of beauty (mustaḥsan ma'lūm) regarding attire, fragrance, clothing, gifts, food and drink. The styles of dress for men and women are distinctly separate. Both men and women remain within the boundaries of elegance established for them and do not encroach upon each other's domains. To put it more plainly, a man must remain a man in his most elegant state, and a woman must remain a woman in her most elegant state (al-Washshā' 1953, 159-160).

Women use all the fragrances characteristic of the elegant, but men do not use the fragrances used by women. Women wear jewellery, necklaces, rings, coloured beads and ornaments in accordance with established standards of elegance; they may use pearls and jewels crafted in a wide variety of styles (al-Washshā' 1953, 165). Among the elements that complete an elegant person's

elegance are the neatness of their attire, the application of a pleasant fragrance, freedom from dirt, and the cleanliness of the body (al-Washshā' 1953, 196). When it comes to eating and drinking, those of elegance practise the styles of dining they find beautiful whilst avoiding those they find unattractive. This is because they believe that flaws in dining manners damage one's social standing and make one's shortcomings visible (al-Washshā' 1953, 167).

Al-Washshā' emphasises the notion that the elegance of a thing lies not only in its appearance but also in the meaning it conveys. Some women who appear elegant may, in fact, be lacking in elegance. This deficiency relates to a woman possessing shortcomings in her inner world and moral stance, despite appearing elegant, polite and attractive on the outside. A person who is both fluent (faṣīḥan) and chaste and virtuous ('afīfan) is truly elegant. Wealthy yet immoral individuals, however, may appear generous simply because they possess the external trappings of elegance, namely wealth. Yet, as this constitutes a deficiency and a flaw, that will be an incomplete form of elegance. True elegance is impossible where wealth and immorality converge. Those in whom these two traits are combined, though they may appear elegant on the surface, are devoid of true elegance because they are morally flawed and corrupted.

Al-Washshā' also states that elegance, from a physical perspective, refers to the beauty of the face and body (al-Washshā' 1953, 52). Rāghib al-Isfahānī notes that beauty (al-jamāl) has two varieties. The first is being tall. A height worthy of praise (al-madh) is not merely a physical trait, but also a symbol of the ascent towards the ideal and the perfect (al-'ālī wa-l-fā'iḳ). The second type of beauty refers to possessing a well-proportioned, fit and resilient, majestic and upright posture, broad-shouldered, toned and lean physique (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 114).

Al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī states that the second type of beauty is not merely the beauty perceived by men and women based on physical attractiveness, guided by carnal desires. According to him, true beauty is a physical structure that does not naturally cause discomfort when viewed, but rather is observed with pleasure and tranquillity. This physical structure points to the virtue of the soul. For physical beauty is a reflection of the virtues of the soul or inner beauty. Indeed, when the virtues of the soul are reflected in the body, they bestow upon it an aesthetic radiance, attractiveness, vitality, balance and harmony. Consequently, the source of physical beauty lies in the virtues of the soul.

According to al-Isfahānī, from the perspective of aesthetic and ethical integrity, two judgements are made for every individual. The first concerns a person's body and outward appearance; the second concerns a person's soul and inner world. As these two judgements are rarely distinct from one another, one has traditionally turned first to physical structures and outward appearance to understand the states of the soul. For this reason, it has been stated that the radiance and joy on the face reflect the inner peace, virtue and happiness within the soul (al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī 2007, 114).

Al-Isfahānī notes that the traces present in the soul appear on the face and in the eyes. Just as with a mirror, one can draw conclusions about a person's inner state by observing his face and eyes. Consequently, the soul's emotions—such as joy, sorrow, contentment and anger—generally manifest in the face and eyes. While it is not a mandatory rule, the notion that a face deemed

beautiful signifies the virtue of the soul is, for the most part and generally speaking, a valid principle (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 115). Al-Iṣfahānī, with some exceptions, generally believes that a beautiful face and eyes point to a virtuous soul. Underlying this is the belief that there is a strong harmony between physical beauty and spiritual beauty.

7. The Relationship Between Elegance and Desire and Love

Elegant individuals have been compelled to use their desires (al-hawā) to acquire the qualities that constitute elegance, and to endure suffering (al-jawā) for this very purpose. Since desire is part of human nature, it is impossible to eradicate it. Consequently, a knowledgeable and virtuous person cannot remain detached from desire. For desire is not a weakness, but rather a powerful and vibrant source of energy that opens the mind, broadens the heart and revives the intellect. However, when properly managed, desire becomes a life-giving force for the mind; it encourages a coward to face a situation they would otherwise lack the courage for; it directs the miser towards generosity; it unlocks the tongue of the tongue-tied; it increases the resolve and determination of the helpless (al-Washshā' 1953, 59). One who befriends desire finds solace and benefits from it. As a psychological source of strength in overcoming negative obstacles, al-hawā humbles the powerful just as it subdues the arrogant (al-Washshā' 1953, 60).

Al-hawā, which influences human will, causes a person to reveal the secrets he tries to hide, his true intentions, weaknesses, or hidden desires. Everyone who resists and flees from desire eventually surrenders to it. For this reason, al-Washshā' states that desire, which is inherent in human nature, is a powerful guiding force that drives people to action, influences their decisions and directs them. Those who do not utilise this power and authority of desire cannot attain moral and aesthetic beauty. Therefore, rather than declaring desire an enemy, one must utilise its transformative power for moral progress (al-Washshā' 1953, 60).

A person in love, even if he tries to conceal his love, cannot hide its signs and cannot suppress his desire through patience. Love (al-ʿishq) and desire merge within this person and become an inseparable part of their being. This situation is reflected in the lover's body and behavior (al-Washshā' 1953, 61; Miskawayh 2016, 244). If love becomes corrupted and desire is tainted, love ceases to exist and desire loses its meaning. This indicates both a corruption of the purity of the heart and a departure from the tradition of elegance. Al-Washshā' states that love, as a noble virtue, cannot coexist with sinfulness or immorality (al-fisq). For, in his view, when love is combined with sinfulness and immorality, its power weakens and its purity is corrupted (al-Washshā' 1953, 97-98). Al-Iṣfahānī also states that love—which he defines as the extreme form of affection—has two types: love based on pleasure and love based on virtue. The lover loves the beloved either for pleasure or for virtue. From a moral perspective, love based on pleasure is condemned, whilst love based on virtue is praised (al-Rāḡib al-Iṣfahānī 2007, 256-257). Therefore, if a lover's love is virtue-based, it is morally valuable. In this love, there is no sin or immorality.

In Islamic culture and thought, the strongest critique of the concept of elegance and the elegant way of life was made by the philosopher Zakariyyā al-Rāzī. At the heart of his critique lies

the notion that, for a virtuous life, one must combat the desires and love embraced by those who pursue elegance. A person can only become virtuous and perfect by making it a habit to use his reason and rational evidence. Suppressing and resisting desires through the use of reason is the highest and most honourable of virtues. Yet desire and nature always pursue pleasures without thought or consideration of the consequences. But man was not created to be preoccupied with pleasures and lusts in life; rather, he was created to gain insight and a profound perspective, and to use his intellect (al-Rāzī 1999, 89). People of noble purpose and noble spirit have regarded it as valuable to keep their distance from the affliction of love, engaging instead with both the world's necessary duties and the requirements of religious and spiritual development (al-Rāzī 1999, 103-104; Miskawayh 2016, 104, 209).

Al-Rāzī criticises those he regards as fools and people of low standing—the so-called ‘people of elegance—for opposing philosophers with ridiculous and worthless words and harbouring hostility towards them. In his view, the subtlety of nature and the clarity of the mind manifest themselves solely in the realms of science and reason. The subtlety of nature, along with the clarity and superiority of the mind, are revealed only through the comprehension of complex and hidden matters, sciences requiring attention and subtlety, and profound subjects; through the resolution of complex problems and the creation of useful arts. These qualities, however, are found only in philosophers (al-Rāzī 1999, 110).

Al-Rāzī asserts that poetry and fluency (*al-faṣāḥa*) are by no means related to reason and wisdom. The fact that a person is a poet or an orator does not necessarily mean that he is intelligent or wise. Consequently, a person may be an excellent poet yet possess limited intellectual capacity. Due to their ignorance and lack of reason, poets and orators believe that knowledge and wisdom consist solely of grammar, poetry, fluency and eloquence. Yet none of these can be regarded as wisdom. Al-Rāzī states that a person with an ugly soul has no value in physical beauty. In his view, focusing on physical beauty and exerting effort for it may be a behaviour specific to women and effeminate men (al-Rāzī 1999, 111, 113).

Al-Washshā’ believes that the criticisms levelled at the concept of elegance and the elegant way of life are unfounded. He states that his explanation of love, shaped by moral values, ought to suffice for those of sound mind (al-Washshā’ 1953, 141). Nevertheless, those who fail to realise that the experience of love leads to moral perfection can only be flawed and ignorant individuals. The duty of intelligent people is to observe and criticise the behaviour of those driven by desire. This criticism is one of the most important duties for intelligent people. For there is a need for the supervision of reason in the transition from passion to moral and intellectual maturity. Those endowed with reason also have the duty to analyse and safeguard this transition in the best possible way (al-Washshā’ 1953, 59).

It seems to me that al-Washshā’ does not reject reason or the guidance of reason in the elegant way of life; on the contrary, he emphasises that elegance must manifest itself through the use of reason. We might say that al-Rāzī’s criticism—that elegance and the elegant way of life are unrelated to reason and wisdom and are therefore worthless—is an excessive critique. In his critique, whilst reason and science are deemed valuable, everyday life shaped by emotions such as love is regarded as worthless.

8. Conclusion and Discussion

The concept of elegance offers a conceptual framework that could facilitate the re-establishment of the relationship between the individual and society, both by transcending the limitations of modernist rationality and by balancing the issues of relativism and fragmentation arising from the critique of postmodern rationality. In my view, this possibility can be realised by viewing postmodernism as, in fact, a continuation of modernism. Jürgen Habermas, who considers modernity to be an unfinished project, suggests that the continuation of modernity can be ensured on the basis of the concept of communicative reason—grounded in intersubjective dialogue—by maintaining a critical distance from both the instrumental reason of modernists and postmodernism. Communicative reason is a form of reason that opens the way for intersubjective understanding and convergence on shared values, and makes compromise possible without coercion. Accompanied by linguistic discourse, this form of reason can define the boundaries of a shared form of life by keeping people within a framework of compromise and understanding (Habermas 1987, 324; Habermas 1997, 38, 53).

Habermas's concept of communicative reason shows us that we cannot exclude rationality from our understanding of human existence and social order. For the postmodernist notion that there is no such thing as an absolutely objective truth or a rational foundation harbours the danger of arbitrariness and nihilism. Habermas proposes the creation of a rational communicative sphere in which everyone participates equally to eliminate this danger. However, as Richard Rorty has pointed out, Habermas struggles to establish this rational communicative sphere because he takes Kant's distinction between science, morality and art too seriously and fails to fully integrate these three spheres of value (Rorty 2006, 352-364). In contrast, in the Islamic conception of elegance, knowledge, ethics, logic, eloquence, art and beauty are not separated from one another, and so the sphere of rational communication is saved from fragmentation.

Similarly, Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that a rational relationship between the individual and society can be established through tradition. According to him, the beauty inherent in a tradition manifests itself in all forms of social life and shapes the social whole. Since people perceive their own values, rules and identities in every sphere of social life, they do not become alienated from themselves or from social life. Since beauty does not serve an external purpose, it carries its own value within itself. Drawing on his interpretation of Plato's Phaedrus, Gadamer states that souls can ascend to the summit of truth only through the experience of love and beauty. According to his interpretation, beauty, which makes the ideal visible, manifests itself most brilliantly and draws us to itself. In the face of beauty manifested in nature and art, we experience truth and harmony as if in a state of enlightenment. Consequently, everything that is beautiful fulfils an ontological function in bridging the chasm between the ideal world and the material world (Gadamer 1986, 14-15).

In the conception of elegance, whilst high and low culture are distinctly separated on the one hand, on the other hand these two cultures are reconstituted through aesthetics and beauty. This separation and union do not entail control or domination over society. On the contrary, the union of those in low culture with those in high culture occurs through the former naturally succumbing to and being influenced by the gravitational pull of beauty. Through beauty, high culture is both

preserved and sustained, as well as sought after. On this basis, we can say that a bridge between modernism and postmodernism naturally emerges. Although a contrast between modernism and postmodernism may arise in this relationship, this contrast is reunited and integrated within the concept of elegance. This union and integration takes place through the elegant individual.

When the inner world of the refined individual becomes rationalised, their actions, words and way of life also become rationalised. This rationality is open to change and transformation. Al-Washshā' has discussed how the transformative and changing power of love and desire leads to cultural transformation and change. Nothing can resist this power. It is precisely here that new forms of thought, ethics, art and beauty emerge, inseparable from one another, depending on the reciprocal relationship between the use and control of love and desire. Within this framework, we can say that the modern, in and of itself, potentially carries the postmodern condition. What is important here, however, is that this potential is realised in a way that brings forth the ideal of humanity. On the one hand, love and desire shatter the established values and preconceptions upheld by modernity, whilst on the other, they create new forms through new values.

When we consider contemporary debates on modernism and postmodernism, the Islamic conception of elegance strongly emphasises the need for the constant renewal, integration and harmonisation of knowledge, ethics, art, culture and lifestyle. Al-Rāzī, who takes a critical approach to the concept of elegance, argues that language, literature, love and the arts amount to a rejection of philosophy, whilst al-Washshā, al-Isfahānī and al-Muḥāsibī advocate a moderate rationalism that moves away from the rigid rationalism of philosophy and encompasses ethics, art, emotion and beauty. Moderate rationalism can be defined as both modern and postmodern. Viewed from this perspective, the concept of elegance in Islamic thought demonstrates to us that a rationality and set of moral norms devoid of aesthetics, love and beauty in modern society will prove inadequate in the functioning of modern social life and the establishment of justice. The concept of elegance in Islam suggests to the modern individual that both their individual distinctiveness and their participation in society are only possible by making beauty an integral part of their very nature.

Consequently, the concept of elegance, with its structure that integrates knowledge, ethics and aesthetics, both transcends the rigid tendencies of modern rationality and defines the boundaries of postmodern relativism and lawlessness. For this reason, the concept of elegance in Islamic philosophy offers a holistic possibility for re-establishing the relationship between human beings, society and values in the contemporary world.

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