

The Representation of the Beloved's Body in classical Arabic Poetry

Jokha Alharthi (PhD)

Sultan Qaboos University

College of Arts and Social Sciences- Arabic Department

P.C: 132 P.O.Box: 781 Muscat

Sultanate of Oman

Jokha78@gmail.com T: 0096899445514

Abstract

This paper focuses on the depiction of the body of the beloved in classical Arabic poetry. It begins by examining the images used to portray female beauty in Pre-Islamic poetry, with the link between this portrayal and the conventional pattern of female beauty as suggested throughout other classical Arabic poetry. This led to investigate the stereotypical image of the desirable woman in classical Arabic literature, which is discussed in light of its origins in ancient Arab culture. By its focus on corporeal representation, the Arab poets celebrate the beloved's beauty in all its glory as will be described in detail. In addition, this paper will also explore the metaphoric image of the beloved as 'gazelle' along with its mythic associations.

Keywords: love, poetry, body, beauty, gazelle

1. Introduction

The importance of the body in classical Arabic literary discourse is undoubted. Common themes found in this discourse include such topics as sexuality and eroticism,

feminine ideal, the concept of virility, and so on¹. As special literature developed around describing female beauty, in particular:

Human beauty was a major topic in Arabic aesthetic discourse, and the only subject besides calligraphy of which aesthetic canons were compiled. A special literature deals with female beauty, describing in detail its types, forms, colours, and proportions, and setting criteria for perfection. It also includes a discussion of the tastes and predilections of religious and historic persons for certain women. A large variety of terms were used to describe types of female beauty and grades of beauty and sex appeal.²

Therefore, this literature governed the conventional desirable elements of female beauty, and defined it within certain parameters. The general criteria of beauty remain almost the same in both the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. The later depiction of this beauty was derived from the inherited depiction that materialised in pre-Islamic literature.

I have selected verses of poetry on the criteria of both internal evidence in the poetry itself and external evidence from the *akhbar* (historical anecdotes) that accompany the poems in the classical love corpus. The goal here is not to offer a comprehensive account of the ways in which classical Arabic poetry refers to the body, but rather, to examine in some detail a selection of texts in which the body is manifestly represented.

2. The Conventional Pattern of Female Beauty in Pre-Islamic Literature

Figurative language associated with female beauty involves metaphors based upon deer, oryx, doe, ivory, silver, pure water, sand dunes, grapes, wine, sun, moon, and so on. It is significant, however, that these metaphorical possibilities are not limited to poetry. In fact, one of the oldest passages describing the female body -- attributed to the pre-Islamic period-- appeared in prose form. This passage is attributed to a woman, who was sent to observe another woman's body in order to describe it to the king of the *Kindah* tribe, 'Amr b. Hijr, the grandfather of the famous poet Imru' al-Qays. The king wanted to marry the daughter of

¹ This literature includes many motifs. For example, for feminine ideal motifs such as how to examine a *jāriyah* (female slave) are found. The concept of virility includes motifs such as medicine that promotes virility.

² Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Beauty in Arabic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1999), p. 56.

‘Awf b. Mihlam al-Shaybani. ‘Awf’s daughter was called Umm-Iyas, a brilliant and very beautiful girl. ‘Amr b. Hijr sent a clever woman called ‘Isam to observe Umm-Iyas so that she could describe her to him and report whether what he had heard about her beauty was accurate or not. Hence, ‘Isam went there and saw Umm-Iyas, then went back to the King and described what she had seen. Her discourse recorded the criteria for female beauty. I am quoting ‘Isam’s description of Umm-Iyas at length in order to show how significant and comprehensive this text is in terms of representing female beauty:

Umm-Iyas's forehead is as clear and beautiful as a gleaming mirror covered with completely dark hair just like that of a braided horse tail; her black tresses appear like chains, and when she combs them, they look like clusters of grape washed by heavy rain. Moreover, her eyebrows are very well-designed as if they were drawn by a pen, and dark as if they were coloured by carbon. They are curved around her beautiful eyes which look like the eyes of a beautiful bird. Umm-Iyas's nose which is neither long nor short is as sharp as the blade of a beautiful polished sword. Furthermore, her cheeks are a purplish colour and snow-white as pearls. She has a wonderful small mouth with a charming smile, cheerful prominent white incisors and pearl-like teeth; in addition, her saliva smells like wine and tastes like honey; let alone, her lips which are red like flowers. She is eloquent, clever and quick-witted and she has a beautiful neck which is like a silver made jug. She has fleshy arms which make you think that they are boneless and have no veins; additionally, she has soft hands and her breasts are just like two pomegranates. Besides, her abdomen is neither fat nor thin and is rolled up like folded compacted cobatti³. She also has a navel like a shining piece of ivory that is used for painting. Further, her back is like a stream of water which ends at a fascinating waist. Beneath it there are rumps which force her to sit when she tries to get up, and make her look as if she is standing when she sits. Her rumps are like a little heap of soil matted by drizzle and they are carried by rounded thighs which look like tiered palm pith, and the thighs are carried by fleshy shanks with dark hair. All these parts are carried by two arrowheads like small feet. May God bless them, how can they tolerate all of that weight⁴.

Consequently, ‘Amr b. Hijr proposed to Umm-Iyas immediately.

This precise description of the female body is almost the same description that we encounter in the poets’ portrayal of their beloveds. This woman, Umm-Iyas, has certain elements of beauty that Imru’ al-Qays’s Fatimah has, or al-A‘sha’s Hurayrah has, and so on. The description begins from top to toe, from what is seen and known (such as the face) to what is

³ Arabic plural noun of clothes made of linen Egypt.

⁴ Ibn ‘Abd Rabbihi Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Andalusi, *al-Iqd al-farid*, ed. Muhammad Sa‘id al-‘Aryan (Cairo: matba‘at al-istiqaamah, 1940), vol. 7, pp. 121-122.

unseen (such as the private parts). The woman who describes the body draws a parallel between it and certain natural elements. Her report goes much further than mere observation and is enhanced by her claims about the sweet taste of Umm-Iyas's saliva. Therefore, 'Isam is seeing Umm-Iyas with masculine eyes, rather than with her own, through her detailed description of Umm-Iyas's physical beauty. Her description indicates the overwhelming influence of the prevailing discourse at that time on the classical Arabic culture⁵.

In the light of this, one can understand the power that the desirable image of the female body has over literary expression. The following verses from pre-Islamic poetry present the authoritative image of an attractive woman:

She shows you when you enter privily with her
And she is secure from the eyes of the hateful foemen(...)
A soft breast like a casket of ivory
Chastely guarded from adventurous fingers,
The flanks of a lithe, long, tender body,
Buttocks oppressed by their ponderous cargo⁶

As we can see, these classical verses reflect the dominant concepts of female beauty. The breast shines like 'ivory', the body is 'tender', buttocks 'oppressed by their ponderous cargo', etc. In Imru' al-Qays's *Mu'allaqah* similar elements appear in depicting his woman:

I twisted her side-tresses to me, and she leaned over me;
Slender-waisted she was, and tenderly plump her ankles,
Shapely and taut her belly, white-fleshed, not the least flabby,
Polished the lie of her breast bones, smooth as a burnished mirror...
She turns away, to show a soft cheek, and wards me off
With the glance of a wild deer of *Wajra*, a shy gazelle with its fawn;
She shows me a throat like the throat of an antelope
not ungainly when she lifts it upwards, neither naked of ornament⁷

⁵ Farid al-Zahi, *al-Jasad wa al-surah wa al-muqaddas fi al-Islam* (Beirut: Ifriqiya al-sharq, 1999), p. 75.

⁶ 'Amr b. Kulthum, "Mu'allaqah", in *The Seven Odes: the First Chapter of Arabic Literature*, trans. A.J.Arberry (London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1957), p. 204.

⁷ Imru' al-Qays, "Mu'allaqah", trans. A.J.Arberry, p. 63.

Once again, the whiteness of the skin, softness of the body, slenderness of waist, and a general resemblance to deer and antelope are emphasised. ‘The names vary but it is, from top to toe, always the same woman: all pampered softness, languor, plenitude’⁸.

3. Moving from *nasib* to *ghazal* and Developing Motifs

Moving to the early Islamic period, *nasib*⁹ celebrates the same image of a desirable woman:

On the morning of departure when her tribe set out
Su‘ad was but a bleating antelope with languid gaze and kohl-lined eye...
When she smiles she flashes side teeth wet
as if with a first draught of wine or with a second,
mixed with cool water from a wadi’s bend...¹⁰

So, it is not an individual--whether she be Su‘ad or Fatimah or ‘Ablah—who emerges, but rather it is the perfect image of a beautiful woman that we see. These previously cited verses and many others indicate that the ‘[poem] has less to do perhaps with the poet’s experience than with the audience’s expectations’¹¹, as it provides the stereotype of female beauty, and establishes a poetic figurative language to represent it.

Moving to the Umayyad age, some motifs in the poem are developed in various aspects beyond what they were in the poems mentioned. Before the Umayyad age, *nasib* used to be the prelude, or the opening section of every poem. Poets would begin their poems by expressing their longing for a woman, describing her beauty, and crying at her campsite ruin. Then, the poems would move onto different themes such as eulogies and satire. However, in the Umayyad age love poetry (*ghazal*) emerges as an independent genre among ‘*udhri*¹² and other poets who dedicated their poetry to love, such as ‘Umar b. Abi Rabi‘ah. Therefore,

⁸ Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 204.

⁹ It is crucial to distinguish between *Nasib* and *Ghazal*. *Nasib* is the lyrical-elegiac opening section of the *qasidah*, while *ghazal* is independent love poetry.

¹⁰ Ka‘b b. Zuhayr, *Banat Su ‘ad*, trans. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, “Pre-Islamic Panegyric and the Poetics of Redemption”, in *Reorientations: Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 24.

¹¹ Hamori, p. 204.

¹² For a detailed definition of ‘*udhri* see: Jacobi, Renate. “‘Udhri poetry”, *Encyclopedia of Arabic literature*, 2nd edition, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 790-794.

ghazal is not just the opening section of a poem (*qasidah: nasib*) any more, but it becomes an independent *qasidah* itself, and the entire poem addresses the theme of love. These poets also limited their poetry to the theme of love, and they never composed eulogies.

Nonetheless, when it comes to depicting the beloved's beauty these poets adopted a similar image to what had been established since the pre-Islamic *nasib*. Therefore, the physical descriptions of Layla, Lubna, Buthaynah, 'Afra', and 'Azzah¹³, are very much the same as the description of Fatimah and 'Ablah from the *Mu'llaqat*. It is always the same features which are stressed: tallness, whiteness, big eyes, long neck, ample bosom, slender waist, heavy hips, and plump legs. 'There are a multitude of such poetic descriptions, differing little in content, the pre-Islamic pattern having been for centuries copied without much variation'¹⁴. However, there is an attempt by 'udhri poets to distinguish themselves from the previous poets by stressing the ethereal nature of their beloved's beauty. This phenomenon gives 'udhri poetry its own distinctive nature among other classical love poetry in spite of their similar depictions of the female body.

4. The Resemblance to the Gazelle

The most significant fact about the depiction of the beloved's eyes is their resemblance to those of a deer and doe. Majnun states that Layla's eyes, while gazing at him, are more beautiful than a deer's black dotting eyes whilst looking after its fawn¹⁵. Jamil, likewise, sometimes describes Buthaynah's eyes as white antelope's eyes, and as brocket's eyes on other occasions¹⁶.

¹³ The beloveds' names in 'udhri poetry.

¹⁴ Behrens-Abouseif, p. 57.

¹⁵ Majnun Layla, Qays b. al-Mulawah. *Diwan Majnun Layla*, ed. 'Adnan Zaki Darwish, 2nd edition (Beirut: Dar sadir, 2003), p. 108.

¹⁶ Jamil b. Abdallah. *Diwan Jamil Buthaynah*, ed. Fawzi 'Atawi (Beirut: Dar sa'b, 1980), pp. 59, 85.

In fact, the comparison of the beloved with a gazelle is one of the major topoi of classical Arabic love poetry. In his long description of the beauty of his beloved, Imru' al-Qays uses this comparison as we have seen in his aforementioned verses.

The image of a lonely frightened deer left behind with her little fawn becomes a parallel image to that of the beloved, who is described as having the same big dark eyes, and the same long neck. This is an important theme within *'udhri* poetry, as Jamil repeats this image three or four times¹⁷, and Majnun adopts it as a core motif of the similes in his poetry. Layla is often portrayed as a gazelle in Majnun's verses, he even declares that the gazelle is almost Layla herself, except of course, for the antlers¹⁸. Layla's neck, in particular, is depicted like the neck of a gazelle¹⁹. Kuthayyir offers a series of images in order to achieve the position where the beloved is as beautiful as, or more than, a doe:

The white-breasted shining-backed gazelle,
who takes her young to the cool of the shade
and scratches with her horns the fruit of an Arak tree
and reaches with her hooves if the branches are high,
is no more beautiful of eye or neck or throat than she
when she wears her finery²⁰

He also says:

She captured me with the eyes of a gazelle
who is accompanied by her white newly-born to the Arak trees
in the bend of the wadi of Bisha
where the plaintive doves sing;
as if those doves who called loudly in the morning
become at noon chanting songstresses for wine-drinkers²¹

This doe is usually a white deer: *rim*. Once again, whiteness is stressed in *ghazal*. Reading Sells's analysis of some classical Arabic poems, I would also argue that in these verses quoted above, the poet 'set up a descriptive point only to be overrun through the semantic

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 59, 85, 111.

¹⁸ Majnun, p. 217.

¹⁹ Majnun, p. 176.

²⁰ Kuthayyir 'Azzah, Kuthayyir b. 'Abd al-Rahman. *Diwan Kuthayyir 'Azzah*, ed. Majid Tarad (Beirut: Dar al-kitab al-'arabi, 2004).p. 153.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 70.

overflow of the passage. The movement of the poem continually overflows the descriptive points the simile poses'²². The metaphor introduced here is that of the beloved as a doe. Kuthayyir introduces the doe apparently as a metaphor for the beloved by saying: 'she captured me with a doe's eyes'. Nevertheless, the poet becomes preoccupied with the depiction of the doe, and forgets his original motivation: a description of the beloved. The doe is shaking *Arak* berries. In the other verses the doe is following her fawn to *Arak*, where the doves are singing. Then, again, Kuthayyir leaves the doe that he is describing and becomes preoccupied with the description of the doves. The doves are like beautiful singers in a drinking gathering.

At a superficial level, the gazelle is a metaphor of the beloved as they share beautiful features like stunning eyes and sleek, aesthetically pleasing contours of the body. As argued by Khan, especially for Majnun, 'gazelles are generally considered among the most serene of animals, their presence lends a pastoral air to his wildness'²³. There is also another suggestion regarding the gazelle used as a trope, which connects with mythology. The gazelle was considered sacred, and Arabs would allow them to go free instead of killing them²⁴. An anecdote states that a gazelle was caught by a group of hunters, and Majnun bought the gazelle and set it free: 'It ran away when I set it free. O, gazelle, you owe your freedom to Layla'²⁵. Bürgel demonstrates that 'sparing or freeing a gazelle out of a certain feeling or affection for a person it resembled was a literary topos already in early Islamic times'²⁶. In

²² Michael A.Sells, "Guises of the *Ghul* Dissembling Simile and Semantic Overflow in the Classical Arabic Nasib", in *Reorientations: Arabic and Persian Poetry*, ed. Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych (Bloomington : Indiana University Press,1994), p. 141.

²³ Khan, Ruqayya Yasmine. *Sexuality and Secrecy in the Medieval Arabic Romance of Majnun Layla* (Unpublished PhD in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, The University of Pennsylvania, 1997, p. 95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁵ Kinany, Ahmad Khaldun. *The Development of Gazal in Arabic Literature* (Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods) (Damascus: Syrian University Press, 1951).p. 283.

²⁶ Bürgel, "The Lady Gazelle and Her Murderous Glances", *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 20, Number 1, (1989),p. 4.

another anecdote, Majnun killed a wolf which killed a deer and then he buried the deer and burnt the cadaver of the wolf²⁷. Thus, the ‘gazelles are so placed in this narrative (Majnun’s) precisely because they lend a sentimental, romantic cast to the poet-lover’s state of wildness’²⁸.

Moreover, the emphasis on the image of a deer with its fawn could be understood in the light of the woman who has become sacred through motherhood. This process has its roots in ancient Arab religious belief, which used to worship the goddess-mother. The ancient Arabs portrayed her as a mother-deer and a mother-oryx²⁹. It seems that the poets simply inherited this image and they applied it to their beloveds. However, the ‘*udhri* poets used these images without seeing their beloveds in term of motherhood.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper I show how the beloved’s body is depicted in classical Arabic poetry. There are certain elements in this depiction that make use of many images and metaphors inherited from the previous period’s literature. This led to the discussion of the desirable image of a female body and its connection with gazelle.

References

- [1] Al-BATAL, ALI, *al-Surah fi al-shi‘r al-‘arabi hatta akhir al-qarn al-thani al-hijri*. Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1983.
- [2] Al-Isfahani, Abu al-Faraj ‘Ali b. al-Husayn. *al-Aghani*. Beirut: Dar ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1997.
- [3] Al-Zahi, Farid, *al-Jasad wa al-surah wa al-muqaddas fi al-Islam*. Beirut: Ifriqiya al-sharq, 1999.
- [4] Arberry, A.J, *The Seven Odes: the First Chapter of Arabic Literature*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1957.
- [5] Behrens-Abouseif, Doris, *Beauty in Arabic Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1999).

²⁷ Al-Isfahani, Abu al-Faraj ‘Ali b. al-Husayn. *al-Aghani*. Beirut: Dar ihya’ al-turath al-‘arabi, 1997.vol. 2, p. 377.

²⁸ Khan, p. 96.

²⁹ Al-Batal, Ali, *al-Surah fi al-shi‘r al-‘arabi hatta akhir al-qarn al-thani al-hijri* (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1983), p. 95

- [6] Bürgel, J. C. "The Lady Gazelle and Her Murderous Glances", *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 20, Number 1, (1989). pp. 1-11.
- [7] Hamori, Andras. *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974.
- [8] Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Andalusi, *al-'Iqd al-farid*, ed. Muhammad Sa'id al-'Aryan. Cairo: Matba'at al-istiqamah, 1940.
- [9] Jacobi, Renate. "'Udhri poetry", *Encyclopedia of Arabic literature*, 2nd edition. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 790-794.
- [10] Khan, Ruqayya Yasmine. *Sexuality and Secrecy in the Medieval Arabic Romance of Majnun Layla*. Unpublished PhD in the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, the University of Pennsylvania, 1997.
- [11] Kinany, Ahmad Khaldun. *The Development of Gazal in Arabic Literature (Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods)*. Damascus: Syrian University Press, 1951.
- [12] Kuthayyir 'Azzah, Kuthayyir b. 'Abd al-Rahman. *Diwan Kuthayyir 'Azzah*, ed. Majid Tarad. Beirut: Dar al-kitab al-'arabi, 2004.
- [13] Majnun Layla, Qays b. al-Mulawah. *Diwan Majnun Layla*, ed. 'Adnan Zaki Darwish, 2nd edition. Beirut: Dar sadir, 2003.
- [14] Ma'mar, Jamil b. Abdallah. *Diwan Jamil Buthaynah*, ed. Fawzi 'Atawi. Beirut: Dar sa'b, 1980.
- [15] Stetkevych, Suzanne Pinckney. (ed.) *Reorientations: Arabic and Persian Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.