

## Research Proposal

### “Imagining Beauty: The Foundations of Muslim Aesthetic Reflections in Ismaili Literature”

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“Verily, we say the telos of the rational soul is to compose a meaningful discourse in refined diction, unmarred by superfluity, whether the lilting prose of Arabic orations, or poetry’s rhyming and rhythmic composition, weighed in the balance of intellect.”<sup>1</sup>

Nāṣir-i Khusraw asserts that creating a literary masterpiece is the telos of human reason. This is one of the greatest tributes to the arts in the medieval world. He bases his remark on an Ismaili metaphysical framework wherein harmony, music, and beauty hold pivotal significance. My proposed research seeks to explore aesthetic views that lie in this realm to highlight the significant yet overlooked contributions of Ismaili thinkers to Islamic aesthetics.

Medieval Islamic philosophy did not recognize aesthetics as a separate branch of knowledge. Muslim thinkers, thus, dedicated no works specifically to this subject. Nevertheless, their works are strewn with countless remarks about beauty, interspersed among cosmological, theological, and ethical discourses. The study of these remarks would shed light on a new dimension of Islam, which differs dramatically from its other aspects, such as jurisprudence.

Late in the twentieth century, leading scholars, such as Grabar and Burckhardt, laid the foundational groundwork for academic studies in Islamic aesthetics, focusing on visual arts. Of particular significance are the contributions of Nasr, who elucidated the essence of Islamic arts in the light of Islamic thoughts, an influential approach that was embraced by many scholars, while criticized by Leaman in his thought-provoking introduction to Islamic aesthetics.

Scholarship, over the past century, has mainly concentrated on the material-practical aspect of Islamic aesthetics rather than its conceptual-theoretical dimensions. However, some scholarly endeavors addressing aesthetic theories are remarkable, including Bell’s exploration of Ḥanbalite theories on beauty, Ettinghausen’s examination of al-Ghazālī’s remarks, and Kemal’s essay on the perspectives of Ibn al-Haytham, Ibn Rushd, and Ibn ‘Arabī. Additionally, al-Sidiq’s comprehensive investigation of al-Tawḥīdī’s aesthetic remarks and Puerta-Vilchez’s thorough examination of aesthetic theories from pre-Islamic Arabia through al-Andalus have also provided valuable insights.

Ismaili aesthetics is a relatively unexplored area, and to date, a few studies have addressed it, including two recent investigations by Abdul Hafiz and Oleiwi Kydair on the aesthetic remarks found in the writings of the Brethren of Purity’s epistles. However, Ismaili literature is rich with aesthetic theories, primarily because of its ideological system’s unique nature. It harmoniously weds rationalism and Gnosticism by integrating philosophical discourses of ancient Greece and esoteric interpretations of the Qur’an. Like the Pythagoreans and Aristotle, Ismaili thinkers inquisitively examined material and immaterial phenomena, including beauty, to provide

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<sup>1</sup> Ḥakīm Abū Mu‘īn Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāṣir-i Khusraw Qubādiyānī, *Khwān al-Ikhwān*, ed. ‘Alī-Aṣghar Mīrbāqirī-Fard and Iḥsān Ra‘īsī (Tehran: Shahīd Bihishtī University Press, 2018), 341.

reasoned answers to fundamental human questions. The endeavors of Muḥammad ibn Surkh Nishāpūrī<sup>2</sup> (d. 450 AH/1058 CE) and Abū Ya‘qūb Sijistānī<sup>3</sup> (d. 349 AH/1047 CE) to define beauty and Nāṣir-i Khusraw Qubādiyānī’s<sup>4</sup> (d. after 462 AH/1069 CE) thorough examination of pleasure indicate these figures’ enthusiasm for elucidating aesthetic concepts.

Ismaili thinkers’ esoteric approach to the Qur’an led to the development of creative literary theories and interpretations comparable to aesthetic hermeneutics in numerous respects. Furthermore, Ismailism is a semi-gnostic school highly influenced by Neoplatonic cosmology, which is credited for laying the foundations of modern aesthetics.<sup>5</sup> Ismaili cosmology portrays the immaterial world with the radiance of sheer beauty and the melodious songs of celestial beings. It associates the emergence of forms with the light of beauty reflecting upon nature,<sup>6</sup> and the birth of a prophet with the state of celestial harmony reaching its perfection.<sup>7</sup>

The central role of beauty in Ismaili cosmology and the abundance of aesthetic views in this domain, which have remained less explored to date, entice me to delve into Ismaili perspectives on beauty, harmony, pleasure, textual interpretation, and the relationship between religious positions and beauty. The research will primarily draw on the works of leading Ismaili thinkers in Persian, focusing on Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s prose and poetry and Abū Ya‘qūb Sijistānī’s *Unveiling the Hidden*, written in the Fatimid era, the golden age of Ismailism. It will be supplemented by further primary sources in the background, including Arabic resources from the same period and the epistles of the Brethren of Purity, who were likely affiliated with early Ismailism. The latter made a remarkable contribution to incorporating Greek aesthetic concepts, particularly Pythagorean ideas, into Ismailism, thus enabling us to retrace the foundations of Ismaili aesthetic views. We will also occasionally consult the works of Nizārī Quhistānī (d. 721 AH/1321 CE) and Ḥasan Maḥmūd-i Kātib (d. after 639 AH/1242 CE) from the Nizārī era, which mirror gnostic approaches to beauty.

My proposed research, leading to the publication of a monograph and a paper, will further develop my investigations on Ismaili aesthetic theories conducted through my doctoral dissertation. I am eager to delve deeper into the aesthetic views of prominent Ismaili figures and firmly believe my research would immensely benefit from the supervision of Dr. Shafique Virani, given his continuous endeavors in Ismaili Studies. Above all, Dr. Virani’s ongoing study of Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s views on pleasure<sup>8</sup> intrigues me, as it neatly aligns with my future project.

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<sup>2</sup> Abū Ya‘qūb Sijistānī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, ed. Henry Corbin (Tehran: Ṭahūrī, 1358 AH/1979 CE): 49-59.

<sup>3</sup> Muḥammad ibn Surkh Nishābūrī, *Sharḥ-i Ghaṣīdah-yi Fārsī-yi Khwājah Abū Haytham Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan Jurjānī (A Commentary on the Persian Ode by Khwājah Abū Haytham Aḥmad ibn Ḥasan Jurjānī)*, ed. Henry Corbin and Muḥammad Mu‘īn (Tehran: Dép. d’Iranologie de l’Institut Franco-Iranien, 1334 AH/1955 CE): 58.

<sup>4</sup> Qubādiyānī, *Zād al-Musāfir*, ed. Sayyid Muḥammad ‘Imādī Ḥā’irī (Tehran: Mīrāth-i Maktūb, 1384 AH/2005 CE): 208.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976): 139.

<sup>6</sup> Sijistānī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*: 24.

<sup>7</sup> Qubādiyānī, *Khawān al-Ikhwān*: 357.

<sup>8</sup> Shafique N. Virani, “Pleasures—Sensual and Spiritual: A Chapter from Nāṣir-i Khusraw’s *Pilgrims’ Provision*.” In *I of the Heart: Texts and Studies in Honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, edited by Atif Khalil, Muhammad U. Faruque, and Mohammed Rustom (Leiden: E.J. Brill, forthcoming, 2025).

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