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## **The Image of Hur Alayn in the Wording of Arthur Arberry's Translation of the Meaning of the Quranic Verses: A Cultural Perspective**

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### **Abstract:**

*This study focuses on the image of hur alayn as presented by the wording of Arthur Arberry in his translation of the meaning of the sixteen Quranic verses which mention hur alayn in *The Koran Interpreted* (1955). Human attempts at bringing the image of hur alayn, which no eye has seen and no ear has heard, closer to the imagination of the human mind need skillful wording that can appeal to the senses and stimulate imagination of certain sensory experiences. Accuracy and faithfulness of Arberry's translation is beyond the scope of this paper. The researchers present themselves in the paper as the readers who interact with the text and display their responses driven by their cultural sensibility. They perceive the image of hur alayn as that of beautiful, young and virgin female creatures of Paradise who have the physical shape of human women and will be espoused to the righteous human male believers as a reward from God for their good deeds in earthly life. Concepts of purity and chastity are emphasized in the researchers/readers' responses which associate the text's meanings with their culture's meanings of femininity and practices of gender roles. The researchers' reading of the text and processing of its information as individual readers who share the same cultural attitudes seem to have produced similar responses from the cultural perspective.*

**Keywords:** *hur alayn, reader-response, Arberry, cultural perspective*

### **1. Introduction**

'Hur alayn' (the Maidens of Paradise), for Muslims, is one of the beauties and pleasures of Paradise, which no eye has seen and no ear has heard. Human attempts at bringing the image of hur alayn closer to the imagination of the human mind need skillful wording that can appeal to the senses and stimulate imagination of certain sensory experiences because human cognitive capacity comprehends and organizes the mental representation of something that is not immediately present to the senses by involving memory and connecting it to previous knowledge and experience. According to Pinker (1999, p. 36) "our experiences of the world are represented in our minds as mental images". These mental images can then be associated and compared with others, and can be used to synthesize completely new images.

This study focuses on the image of hur alayn as presented by the wording of the British Non-Muslim scholar, Arthur J. Arberry (1905-1969) in his translation of the meaning of the sixteen Quranic verses which mention hur alayn in *The Koran Interpreted* (1955). Accuracy and faithfulness of Arberry's translation is beyond the scope of this paper. The paper acknowledges that the translator's attributes (objectives, interests, abilities, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and stances) shape his response to and understanding of the source text. From the wording of the title of Arberry's book it is inferred that the book is "intended to convey to the reader the idea that an adequate translation of the Quran is impossible" (Rahman 1988, p.24 quoted in Aldahesh 2014, p.27) Abdul-Raof (2005, p. 126) argues that the Quran defies attempts at translating it. In his view, the Quran differs from other religious texts in that it was "revealed in an Arab context of culture that is entirely alien to a target language audience outside the Arab peninsula" and that the liturgical, emotive, and cultural associations of the expressions found in the Quran pose the greatest obstacle to a translator. He makes several interesting points (such as his claim that the context of culture—what he calls the "natural habitat of words"—needs to be preserved for a translation to be successful.

The researchers, being non-native speakers of English and teachers of English as a Foreign Language, have interest and concern to explore how English language interacts with their cultural background and how their cultural sensibility affects their perception of the image of hur alayn constructed in English in Arberry's wording. They present themselves in this study as readers who have awareness of how they are processing the information in a written text in English and how their cultural background affects their responses to the text. They aim in this paper at displaying their responses to the wording of Arberry which constitutes an image of hur alayn in his translation of the sixteen Quranic verses that mention hur alayn driven by their cultural sensibility. In responding to the image of hur alayn as constructed by the wording of Arberry, they do not make any direct comparison or reference to the Arabic Quranic text or

previous readings into the topic. They only display their responses to the words of the English text which integrate their cultural knowledge. That is to say, they do not, for example, comment on Arberry's incomplete description of the eyes of hur alayn or the absence of assimilating them (hur alayn) to the hidden delicate eggs.

The cultural background of the researchers/readers of this study is that of Arab Muslim women believers who, with precious sensitivity to Arabic, their mother tongue, read Quran as an act of religion worship and have faith in the Divine justice and equity between men and women. Controversial issues regarding the status of women in Islam, namely inheritance and polygamy, have been resolved and reconciled convincingly in their mindset. In their perception, the plus in the man's share in inheritance, which is twice as the woman's, is not a sign of God's preference for man but an addition to his commissioning, duty and responsibility as he should spend it on those of whom he is responsible and on charge. Likewise, the reduction in the woman's commissioning in praying and bearing witness does not mean women's inferiority but kindness and mercy from God on them. In the perception of the researchers/readers, polygamy is a matter of individual choice for women and men. For the woman, it is about how she positions herself. If she perceives herself as the one and only for her husband<sup>1</sup>, she can ask for divorce if her husband takes another wife, and of course, she can refuse to marry the husband of another woman; to be a co-wife and share a man with another woman or other women. The man, on the other hand, can have more than one wife but he must be fair and good to them all equally. It is cherishing for the researchers/readers that the word 'womb' in Arabic, 'rahm', is derived from Allah's name, 'Al-Rahman', which means 'the Almighty', and that the beautiful loving creatures of Paradise have the physical shape of children (wildan mukhaldoon) and women (hur alayn). In content and peace of mind the researchers/readers believe that the rewarding beauties and pleasures that await righteous human women in Paradise are beyond the imagination of the human mind which no eye has seen and no ear has heard and that feelings, desires, needs, and interests of human women and men of Paradise will be different from their earthly ones. The researchers/readers do not perceive hur alayn as rivals to human women but as creatures of a different nature who do not share the female experience of menstruating, child-bearing and breast feeding; those human bodily functions which constitute the base for the researchers/readers 'concept of womankind. They understand that the main (and perhaps the only) function of hur alayn is to entertain and please human righteous men in Paradise and that they will be many in number for each one man yet they love each other and do not feel the human earthly jealousy.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers read the text individually from the cultural perspective then they shared and discussed their responses. Theoretically the paper is underlain by the tenets of the reader-response literary theory. A brief note on reader-response theory is given followed by Arberry's wording of hur alayn in his translation of the meaning of the sixteen Quranic verses that mention hur alayn and the responses of the researchers/readers to Arberry's wording.

## 2. A Note on Reader-Response Theory

Reader-Response literary theory advocates a reader-oriented approach to responding to the text and focuses on how readers create their own meaning to what they are reading supposing that each individual reader extracts his or her own unique meaning out of the text. Theorists of reader-response emphasize the transaction between the reader and the text. Karolides (1992, p. 22) defines transaction as "denoting the special nature between the relationships between the reader and the text during the reading event: mutually acting on each other, affecting each other to evoke an experience or meaning for a particular reader of the text".

Rosenblatt (1938) proposes that the special meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations that the words have for the individual reader largely determine what the work communicates to him. The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition. Fish (1980), in the same vein, argues that meaning is an event that happens when a reader interacts with a text and participates in making meaning. Fish considers meaning a creative engagement between the words on the page and the reader's mind.

Readers' different responses to the same literary text depend on their perspectives, their backgrounds, and their preoccupations. Beach (1993) states that reader-response theorists have identified five theoretical perspectives in which the reader creates meaning through textual, experiential, psychological, social and cultural means. Textual perspective focuses on knowledge of text conventions. Readers apply their knowledge of genre conventions to respond to specific parts of the text to understand what they are reading and look for links between several texts. Through each new experience, readers use their knowledge of the conventions of a genre in their approach to the next text. Experiential perspective focuses on the nature of the readers' engagement with the text, the ways in which they identify with characters, visualize images, and emotionally involve or empathize. Readers construct alternative worlds through their reading conceptualizing the characters, the setting, and the events. They make connections with the text and their own lives, and reflect upon the quality of their own experiences with the text. Psychological perspective focuses on the readers' personalities and development levels. Cognitive and subconscious processes which vary according to unique individual readers may make them engage in a fantasy world, experience the romantic quests of characters and adopt characters' perspectives. Social perspective focuses on how readers' social roles, relationships, motives, needs and conventions operating in particular contexts, constitute the meanings of their responses. The readers define themselves in social context as social beings and recognize that they respond as members of a specific class, community, organization, etc. Finally, cultural perspective focuses on how cultural attitudes and values shape the response. Readers' responses reflect their membership in their cultural communities. They bring their personal background to the reading of a text; a variety of markers including gender, race, religion, class status, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc.

## 3. Hur Alayn in the Wording of Arthur Arberry's Translation of the Meaning of the Quranic Verses

- i. and with them wide-eyed maidens restraining their glances (37:48)
- ii. as if they were hidden pearls (37:49)

- iii. and with them maidens restraining their glances of equal age(38:52)
- iv. Even so; and We shall espouse them to wide-eyed houris (44:54)
- v. and We shall espouse them to wide-eyed houris (52:20)
- vi. Therein maidens restraining theirglances, untouched before them by any man or jinn (55:56)
- vii. lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral (55:58)
- viii. therein maidens good and comely (55:70)
- ix. houris, cloistered in cool pavilions (55:72)
- x. untouched before them by any man orjinn (55:74)
- xi. and wide-eyed houris (56:22)
- xii. as the likeness of hidden pearls (56:23)
- xiii. Perfectly We formed them, perfect(56:35)
- xiv. and Wemade them spotless virgins (56:36)
- xv. chastely amorous(56:37)
- xvi. and maidens with swelling breasts, like of age(78:33)

#### 4. Arberry's Wording of Hur Alayn in a Paragraph

Houris of equal age, perfectly formed with wide eyes and swelling breasts. Lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral, and as the likeness of hidden pearls, they are cloistered in cool pavilions. Maidens restraining their glances, untouched before their spouses by any man or jinn. They are made comely, chastely amorous, spotless, and good.

#### 5. The Researchers'/Readers' Responses to Arberry's Wording of the Image of Hur Alayn

##### 5.1. Response of Researcher/Reader (1)

Arberry's words that describe hur alayn stimulate the readers to construct an image of something they have never seen before: the perfectly formed houris, who are in Paradise as a reward for righteous human male believers alongside with other pleasures and beauties of Paradise like fruits, gardens, silken clothes, etc. The word 'houris' implies that hur alayn are not children of Adam and Eve, they are non-human creatures of a different nature. It moreover implies that they are good and beautiful creatures. In Arberry's wording those beautiful female creatures will be 'espoused' to human righteous men in Paradise. The researcher/reader accordingly uses the word 'spouses', which indicates neutral gender, to refer to the human men who will be espoused to hur alayn and prefers it to 'husbands' which is culturally associated with earthly gender roles in her mind set.

Hur alayn are 'of equal age' among themselves and to their human spouses. Age difference means hierarchy in relationships. The older is always wiser, experienced and more mature and is to be respected and obeyed by the younger. The younger might be stronger and healthier than the older. Being all of the same age means no competing differences and abilities. Besides, it sounds like they make harmonious companionship of mates of equal age who share the same needs and interests.

The 'wideeyes' of hur alayn is an important sign of their beauty. Arabs since the ancient times have considered wide eyes as a prominent feature of the beauty of the human face and they assimilated the human wide eyes to the wide eyes of the gazelle or the oryx. The beauty of the eye is not only in how it looks but also in the language it communicates. The 'swelling breasts' of hur alaynimplies that the feminine beauty of their bosoms will eroticize and arise desire in their spouses.

Assimilating hur alayn to the precious stones; the 'lovely rubies', the 'beautiful coral' and the 'hidden pearls', gives the sense that they are dearly valued and adorably treasured. The red/white crystallized color of the precious stones suggests that hur alayn have transparent fair complexion. Like the delicate, beautiful, attractive and glamorous rubies, coral and pearls which are carefully maintained, hur alayn are 'cloistered in cool pavilions'; secluded in comfortable beautiful tenets.

The modest gaze of hur alayn who are 'restraining their glances' when looking at their spouses suggests their seductive shyness. They do not look daringly and boldly into their spouses' eyes yet their beautiful eyes communicate their willingness and delight. They are 'maidens' who have 'never been touched before their spouses' by anyone' man or jinn'. They are made 'comely' and 'amorous': pleasant, loving and passionate. The word 'comely' gives the sense of the initiative manner of hur alayn and their courting of their spouses.' Chastely' implies that they are blanketing their desire for their spouses by their coyness.

Hur alayn are created 'spotless'. They do not experience the human bodily functions such as urinating, excreting and menstruating. The permanent state of cleanness of their bodies, which emphasizes their external physical beauty, indicates also their stable unchanging mood. Permanently beautiful and clean, they are ready all the time to please their spouses. They are also created 'good'. They do not have inner conflicts and tensions to choose between good and evil. They do not feel hatred, envy, jealousy, or any type of negative emotion whatsoever. They are made pure, clean and beautiful internally and externally.

##### 5.2. Response of Researcher/Reader (2)

Among the pleasures of Paradise is the beautiful Maidens of Paradise. 'Houris' are extraordinary virgin females in Paradise who await the righteous believers in the Hereafter as a reward from God for their good deeds in this life. Those females are characterized by distinguished features such as chastity, virginity, purity, permanent youth, intimate relationship with their husbands and aesthetic connotations of physical beauty of their 'wide eyes', white skins and 'swelling breasts' which are fully rounded (not sagging) as a sign of their youth and virginity. They are of 'equal age' with their husbands and among themselves. Same age allows them to be perfectly matched in their spiritual and emotional needs.

Their likeness to 'rubies', 'corals' and 'pearls' signifies the beautiful white, bright and radiant skin of their bodies, as well as, the transparency and the pink color of their faces. Those virgin females are deliberately kept in a place where they cannot easily be seen like the pearls inside their shells. The gems also indicate their worth and higher dignity. They are 'cloistered in cool pavilions' as a sign of their devoted love, obedience and loyalty towards their beloved husbands. 'Cloistered' moreover implies that they are protected from and unexposed to the difficulties and demands of ordinary life. The tents they are restrained in will probably be similar to those of the rich people in public parks.

'Restraining their glances' describes how they do not desire to look at any men except their husbands, seeing them as the most handsome men in Paradise. Here is an emphasis on the concept of chastity, sexual morality, faithfulness and loyalty of those fair females to their husbands. These females are chaste and shy; their eyes and hearts are clear and free of all evil characteristics which harm their chastity and sanctity. They are virgins who are 'untouched by any man or jinn' before their husbands.

'Comely' and 'chastely amorous' signify the intimate relationships between Hur alayn and their husbands. They have intense love for their husbands showing it by their fine words, beautiful appearance, and being skillful at having sex with their husbands. Hur alayn are 'spotless': being clean and free of all impurities, and 'good': having characteristics of good qualities and manners such as faithfulness, obedience, devotion and consent.

## 6. Conclusion

In their responses to Arberry's text, focusing on how English language interacts with their cultural background and how their cultural sensibility affects their perception of the image of Hur alayn constructed in English, the researchers/readers have associated the text's meanings with their culture's meanings of femininity and practices of gender roles. Their perception of aesthetic connotations of physical and spiritual beauty reflects the way they have been socialized to respond according to their gender roles and cultural attitudes. They are aware that their cultural traditions place special value and significance on notions of personal purity, virginity and chastity which accordingly has been emphasized and glorified in their responses. The researchers' reading of the text and processing of its information as individual readers who share the same cultural attitudes seem to have produced similar responses from the cultural perspective.

Focusing on how they construct meaning in their experience with the text, the researchers/readers' responses might have been limited by their knowledge of English being non-native speakers of the language and by their imagination capacities to construct more accurate image(s) of Hur alayn. Arberry's words may be carriers of extra meanings that they have not reached and may convey meanings different from what they have perceived and understood.

## 7. End Notes

1-Allowing the man to have more than one wife at the same time up to a total of four.

2-The researchers would like to mention in this context that Khadija bint Khuwaylid (first wife of Prophet Mohammad) and Fatima Alzahra (daughter of Prophet Mohammad and first wife of Ali bin Abi Talib), whose marriages present perfect examples of love and respect between the spouses, are their ideals and role models. In their lifetimes, Khadija and her daughter, Fatima, each was the one and only for her husband.

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