



Otherness and Age

The Construction of Old People's Personal Appearance in Early Islam

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to identify and characterize the differentiated group of the elderly in early Islam as presented in medieval legal sources. This identification serves as a crucial prerequisite for comprehending old age as a form of otherness and for describing and analyzing the guidelines of the elderly's personal performance. The discourse of the personal appearance of the elderly in medieval Islam reflects a complex dynamic that is both exclusive and discriminatory, while also highlighting their position within society and their existence within respected margins. The construction of status and personal appearance for the elderly in this context represents an adjustment to the challenges posed by physical and social decline. This transformation is evident in the reconfiguration of roles and the formation of a new subgroup, although marginal, that preserves the dignity and respect of the elderly, and dedicates a separate discussion to their personal performance. The deconstruction or reconstruction of the status of elder people in medieval legal sources is characterized by a shift from focusing on parameters of personal appearance to focusing on behavioral characteristics: from preoccupation with personal appearance to an emphasis on inner qualities of personality. Although the personal performance of the elderly may lack the same level of appeal, it is redefined and discussed within a new context and altered balance, underscoring its significance throughout all stages of life.

Keywords: elderly, medieval Islam, personal performance, jurisprudence

Introduction

Old age evokes fear and apprehension in people due to the physical and mental decline associated with it. The visual manifestations and symbolic representations of this degeneration elicit anxiety about their own future in younger and middle-aged people. The process of human aging is intricate and irreversible, influenced by a confluence of biological, psychological, social, and spiritual factors (Rather et al. 2019, 66; Twigg 2007, 286; Tulle 2015, 125). Young people have formulated definitions of old age by identifying and delineating complementary attributes related to biology, psychology, socio-religious aspects, and sexuality. Old age and aging are socially constructed concepts, and their verification relies heavily on cultural symbols. All processes related to aging are culturally defined, except for the biological aspects. The decline in sexual attractiveness during old age is characterized by lowering gendered barriers and the construction of a new scale of prestige. As the human body undergoes physical deterioration with old age, old people are bestowed with social and spiritual recognition crediting them with wisdom and experience which remain relatively stable until death.

Cultural and biological factors interplay with the personal performance of old people, thereby creating an interaction between physical changes and socio-cultural and religious factors. Even though the valued body is the young one, the discourse of its control and regulation persists even in old age, as it is an integral part of the socio-cultural and religious order. Girls and women are subjected to prescriptions regarding personal performance more frequently due to their reproductive role and patriarchal fears of their sexuality and seductive powers (Lee 2015, 29). In compensation for the loss of fertility and sexual attractiveness, a new status based on life experience, piety, and wisdom is conferred upon the elderly.

Aims and Methodology

The Qur'an, qur'anic exegesis, hadith literature and fiqh are the basis of Islamic law (Rippin 2000). For the purposes of this study, the classic qur'anic commentaries by al-Tabari (died 923), al-Zamkhshari (died 1144), al-Baydawi (died 1286/1291) and 'Ibn Kathir (died 1373) have been chosen as sources for analysis. These commentaries reflect the ongoing need to interpret and adjust qur'anic verses to the wishes, needs, desires and changing circumstances of various communities. Additionally, hadith literature, collections of traditions on what the Prophet said, did, or tacitly approved, is also considered. It is worth noting that these traditions, whether authentic, fabricated, or a combination of both, reflect, at least partially, the reality of Muslim urban communities during the first centuries of Islam (Robson 1998; Juynboll 2002). Islamic law as a comprehensive system, encompasses all aspects of human life and existence, offering framework and guidance for the believers. Asad (2003, 241) asserts that the "shari'a is an exemplar of practical programs for the cultivation of moral virtue," while Mahmood (2011, 123) expands on this idea by suggesting that ritual practices themselves contribute to the formation of the Muslim morality.

The aim of this article is to identify and characterize the differentiated group of the elderly in early Islam as presented in medieval legal sources. This identification serves as a crucial prerequisite for comprehending old age as a form of otherness and for describing and analyzing the guidelines of the elderly's personal performance. By deciphering the elderly's personal performance, we will gain insights into the ethical and moral concepts associated with

aging, old age, and the elderly in Muslim societies. Furthermore, the research will shed light on the social and religious status of the elderly and their evolving roles within society, corresponding to age and gender.

The Personal Performance of Muslim Elderly: Social and Moral Implications

The Elderly in Islam

The scarcity of textual evidence concerning the elderly in premodern societies can be attributed to the predominant focus of written sources on the upper and ruling classes during their prime, rather than on the marginalized population of the elderly (Johnson 1998; Thomson and Abenstern 1998, 19). In all Abrahamic religions, human aging is explained as a consequence of human mortality, stemming from an ancient sin, yet all three of them show reverence for elders (Sapp 2008, 22). Despite the physical frailty associated with old age, elderly believers can prioritize piety and receive, honor, dignity, kindness, and appreciation for their earlier efforts and sacrifices (Moody 1990, 17; Bensaid and Grine 2014, 147). The challenges posed by the physical and mental aspects of aging are counterbalanced by faith, devotion, respect, and the promise of reward in the afterlife. While the body undergoes an inevitable process of decline, the spirit may remain unaffected. However, these biological changes do influence changes in personal performance.

Islam is a religious belief, socio-economic order, and legal system. Consequently, Islamic law provides a comprehensive framework for the care of the elderly (Elsaman and Arafa 2012, 1). The Islamic religious perspective sheds light on social values, morals, norms, customs, and practices (Bensaid and Grine 2014, 159). Gaining an understanding of the socio-cultural structure of Islam is essential for comprehending its perspective on the elderly. Within the Islamic context, there are diverse definitions and terminologies to describe elderly people (Asadollahi 2019, 1–2). The Islamic view of aging provides a constructive approach to elderly life that ensures harmonious relationships within individual and society (Mishal 2005, 1).

In the Qur'an, relatively less attention is given to the elderly compared to the emphasis placed on the young (O'Shaughnessy 2001). The verses pertaining to the elderly can be interpreted as reflecting the transformation experiences of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions from positions of effective leadership to being treated with tolerance, pity, and even revulsion (O'Shaughnessy 2001, 194). In Meccan verses, old age is introduced in a negative light, portraying it as a period of weakness and dependence on others. Conversely, Medinan verses describe elderliness in a more positive manner, emphasizing it as a divine grace. Some suggest that this change hints at a shift in the Prophet's own attitude towards greater tolerance for the elderly as he transitioned from adolescence to maturity and eventually old age (O'Shaughnessy 1991). Surat al-'Aṣr 114 provides the most comprehensive description of the life cycle in the Qur'an, contemplating the implications of old age as the afternoon of life, representing the irreversible passage of time constituting the process of aging (Moody 1990, 15). According to qur'anic commentators *ardhal al-'umr* is the final stage of life, characterized by such prolonged duration that people experience dementia, a mental and physical deterioration, resembling childlike qualities devoid of wisdom (Asadollahi 2019, 1).

Al-Ghafir 40:67 and al-Rum 30:54 depict the human life cycle as evidence of God's limitless power in creation, with old age being considered a period of wisdom. In his

commentary to 30:54, 'Ibn Kathir (1997, 3:449) explains the visible and invisible changes typical of the elderly, where loss of physical attractiveness and power are visible, while mental weakness is less apparent. Al-Tabari (1978, 5:200) emphasizes that God's creation of the human cycle of life serves as proof of his eternal and infinite power, in contrast to the temporary nature of the human body, of which gray hair is one of its manifestations.

According to al-'Tin 95:5, God created humans in the finest state, then reduced them to the worst one. The commentators explain that God created humans in their most perfect form, but he is also responsible for their eventual physical and mental decline (al-Baydawi 1996, 5:507–8). Al-Tabari (1978, 15:312–13) adds that the lowliest state (*arthal al-'umr*) is characterized by a lack of control over one's thoughts and actions. However, believers will be forgiven by God and judged based on their virtuous behavior prior to reaching old age. Others explain that the lowest status refers to hell, to where sinners will be consigned in their most repugnant personal performance, resembling a pig or with white hair, hunched back, impaired senses, frailty, and mental weakness (al-Baydawi 1996, 5:507–8). Al-'Isra 17:23–24 contains the most emphatic verses pertaining to the elderly, emphasizing their entitlement to material and moral protection, as well as respectful treatment during their old age. Al-Zamakhshar (1987, 4:20) and 'Ibn Kathir (1997, 3:37–39) elaborate on the obligation to care for parents in the best possible manner, demonstrating patience and mercy toward them, for they are the very reason for the existence of all human beings.

Qur'an and hadith protected the rights of the elderly, both morally and legally, and defined the principles guiding familial responsibilities in ensuring physical, mental, and emotional well-being for the elderly. This esteemed group enjoys a secured and protected status, justified on religious, moral, and legal grounds (Mahmood 1989; Elsaman and Arafa 2012, 9). The Qur'an even provides some exemptions from certain religious duties for the elderly as a means of accommodating their needs. For instance, instead of requiring fasting, charity is permitted as an alternate form of worship that aligns with their capabilities. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of treating the elderly with respect and dignity, prohibiting ridicule or indifference toward them. Instead, it emphasizes the need to empower them by providing them with special attention and care (Hakim 1989, 35). At the same time, old people are perceived as mentors for the younger generation, imparting wisdom and experience, thus establishing their new status (Ravan 2015, 307).

Physical and Mental Aspects of the Elderly

According to commentary to Maryam 19:4, old age is associated with both revealed physical aspects and concealed mental aspects. Al-Zamkhshari (1987, 3:4) explains that white hair represents a revealed aspect that spreads all over the body like fire in wood, while weakness of the bones is a concealed aspect. This perception of revealed and concealed aspects raises questions about the importance, prioritization, and role of personal performance in defining old age. The commentators add that the whiteness of gray hair brightens the flames of hell which are probably red, yellow, or orange (al-Baydawi 1996, 4:4). Another example of physical weakness is al-Qasas 28:23 where Shuayb's daughters took over his responsibility of watering his flocks due to his physical weakness. In their commentary to Ya Sin 36:68 al-Zamakhshari, al-Tabari, and 'Ibn Kathir explain that old age according to the human life cycle is manifested by physical and mental weakness.

Additionally, the loss of fertility in men and women, an aspect of physical weakness, is mentioned in a few verses. In Maryam 19:8 God told Zakariyya that he will have a child, but Zakariyya who was skeptical due to his wife's barrenness and his own advanced age, expressed doubt (Al-'Imran 3:40 is another version of Zakariyya's story). Al-Tabari (1978, 3:349) explains that Zakariyya's doubts were influenced by the devil who attempted to ridicule and confuse him by suggesting that the voice he heard was not that of angels. According to al-Zamakhshari (1987, 2:40) only God has the power to enable an old man and his barren wife to conceive a child. Another story involving Abraham and Sara is mentioned in Hud 11:72 and Qaf 51:29, where Abraham's wife, Sara, laughs upon being informed that she will bear a son, in spite of her barrenness and Abraham's old age. These stories exemplify the greatness, grace, and extraordinary abilities of God, which surpass human biology and the process of aging.

Mental weakness and fragile emotional states are also depicted in the Qur'an as characteristics of the elderly. In al-Hajj 22:5 memory loss is described, and some reach such an advanced age that they forget all that they once knew. This gloomy description of aged people employs the term *arthal al-'umr*, previously mentioned (al-Zamakhshari 1987, 3:144; al-Tabari 1978, 10:156–57). Another term used to describe this miserable state is *haram*, which denotes old age and senility, representing a regression to a condition of limited understanding reminiscent of early childhood (al-Zamakhshari 1987, 3:144). According to 'Ibn Kathir (1997, 6:81), once a person reaches his fifties, God eases his judgment; in his sixties, he is permitted to turn repentantly to God. If he passes his seventies, he is beloved by "the people of the sky" (probably heaven), and if he lives to his eighties, God records his good deeds and disregards his transgressions. Upon reaching his nineties, God forgives his sins, and he is granted entry into heaven. In the case of senility, God judges him based on his righteous actions during lucid periods. Al-Nahl 16:70 presents another depiction of mental weakness and al-Tabari (1978, 8:187) and al-Zamakhshari (1987, 2:619) explain that the loss of memory resembles the ignorance of childhood and youth, erasing past knowledge. To these impairments, al-Baydawi (1996, 44:5) adds difficulties in understanding, and the decline of power and mental faculties. He explains that God constructs human bodies, both physically and mentally, and balances the bodily deterioration with the strengthening of wisdom.

Personal Performance

The two fundamental rights of the elderly are equality and care, both of which are intertwined with personal performance. Equality is expressed in the separate discussion of their personal performance while care is demonstrated through provisions and choices for concealing body parts. The right to maintain appropriate personal appearance adheres to the basic juristic instructions with some adjustments and accommodations to meet the needs and desires of the elderly. The discussion of the elderly's personal performance is proof of their socio-religious existence and visibility within society, highlighting the importance of personal performance at any age.

The discourse found in the sources regarding the personal performance of the elderly is rare, possibly due to the absence of clear definitions and treatment of the elderly. Another explanation may be that aged men and women were perceived as less sexually attractive, hence there was no need to extensively discuss their personal appearance and embarrassing them by exposing their weakness in juridical discussions. Sexual attraction, which was an important

criterion during adulthood, is replaced in the elderly with a new status that is not dependent on sexuality or personal performance. The option to exchange sexual attractiveness, a powerful criterion for women in patriarchal societies, for life experience and devotion enables women to achieve new status, which is sometimes even more prestigious.

According to al-Nur 24:31 women are allowed to display their ornaments to presumably old men who no longer have sexual desire (O'Shaughnessy 2001, 193). Al-Zamkhshari (1987, 3:231–32) explains that *al-'irbāa* (idiots or not such as have need of women) may refer to old men who have lost sexual interest in women, thus eliminating fear of seduction. However, one verse specifically addresses old women, creating a gendered differentiation and even discrimination, as these women are defined by their loss of fertility and sexual attractiveness. Al-Nur 24:60, permits elderly women, past the age of fecundity, to remove their upper garments as long as they do not reveal their adornments. This category of women is defined by physical parameters typical of menopause. These women, who are no longer sexually attractive due to the decline in their youthful personal performance and fertility, are permitted to remove their upper garments in the private sphere while in the presence of relatives, husbands, or masters. However, restrictions still persist in the public sphere, where exposing their adornments is prohibited. Al-Zamakhshari (1987, 5:79) explains that concealed jewelry and body parts should not be revealed in any way, and al-Baydawi (1996, 2:97) adds that the prohibition is aimed at “white body parts,” referring to areas that were not exposed to the sun. The second part of the verse, phrased as a recommendation rather than a prohibition, advises against adopting the ameliorations in old age and instead encourages continued modest personal performance. The conclusion is a contradictory instruction; while permission is given for relief in manners of personal performance, nevertheless it is not recommended, and no punishment is mentioned for implementing such a relief. Perhaps these contradictory tendencies regarding older women reflect a struggle between accepted manners and desired norms. Incidentally, al-Nawawi (1966, 8:211) mentions that old women are allowed to cut off more hair than young women, using the same qur'anic expression used to describe women beyond their fertile age.

Baldness and gray or white hair on the head and body are permanent physical changes indicating the beginning of old age. The most discussed aspect of old people's personal performance is gray hair, probably because it is a physical and visible criterion for defining aging, and the head is the primary human organ for communication. However, it should be noted that no references were found regarding baldness, despite it being one of the most visible signs of aging, particularly among men. Gray hair also represents physical and mental weakness and the end of life, serving as a reminder of life's impermanence and the need for piety to prepare for the afterlife.

The *Qur'an* pays little attention to white hair, focusing only on men's white hair, as do juridical sources that discuss only men's hair, an indication of a gendered differentiation. Gray hair is often associated with the loss of youth, vital beauty, and earthly pleasures (Shuraydi 2014, 141). However, it can also be interpreted spiritually as a manifestation of divine grace, symbolizing recognition of the efforts and sacrifices made earlier in life. For example, gray hair assumes a distinct form of light on the day of resurrection, signifying religious stature (Bensaid and Grine 2014, 147; al-Ghazali 1981, 1:144).

In Maryam 19:4 Zakariyya describes himself as old, weak, and having gray hair. The commentators explain that white or gray hair is a sign of old age and weakness of the bones ('Ibn Kathir 1997, 3:483; al-Zamkhshari 1987, 4:4). Al-Rum 30:54 states that God created man in a state of weakness, subsequently granting him strength, but weakening him in old age, as demonstrated by the graying of his hair (Hakim 1989, 27). According to al-Tabari (1978, 9:106), this verse is proof of the endless power of God, while 'Ibn Kathir (1997, 8: 133) elucidates that it provides a comprehensive portrayal of the human life cycle, encompassing in old age internal and external changes of the body and mental skills. Although the term elderly in 30:54 is phrased in the plural form, it is more reasonable to interpret it as referring only to men due to female inferiority in Muslim patriarchal society, and the fact that women's hair was concealed.

Gray hair serves as an indicator of age, with its presence or absence being used to estimate advanced age. According to 'Ibn Anas (1992, 2:120), Abraham was the first person to have gray hair, and when he asked God about its significance, he was informed that it symbolizes dignity. Dark hair commonly represents youth, likely reflecting the predominant hair color among most young Arabs (Shuraydi 2014, 6). Dyeing one's hair was a prevalent practice among the elderly to regain a semblance of youth and beauty, and 'Ibn al-Jawzi even devoted a chapter to these practices (Shuraydi 2014, 340). The focus on men's gray hair and the ways to dye it aligns with the objective of preserving the youthful personal performance and sexual attractiveness of the patriarchs, while women are almost absent from this discussion. Because women's hair was concealed by head coverings, there was no need for juridical discussions concerning its dyeing. Additionally, old women were no longer regarded as fertile or sexually attractive, thereby obviating the need to discuss ways of improving their personal appearance.

Hadith literature that discusses men's gray hair presents three different opinions. The first opinion claims that the Prophet Muhammad prohibited the plucking of white hair, as it would illuminate one's path on the day of resurrection ('Ibn Qudama 1972, 75; 'Abu Da'ud, 1988, 2:791; al-Tirmidhi 1988, 10:260–61; al-Nasa'i 1988, 8:136). 'Ibn Sa'd (1905–18, 3–4:79) notes that Muhammad resembled Abraham, the first *hanif*, in his appearance because both had very little white hair. The hadith portrays the Prophet as the ideal elderly man, as evidenced by the presence of up to twenty white hairs on his head and beard at the time of his demise (Kueny 2020, 268; al-Bukhari 1985, 7:517). 'Ibn Hanbal (1969, 3:198) states that the Prophet did not dye his gray hair, while Abu Bakr did, thereby establishing a differentiated status for the Prophet. Conversely, other traditions claim that the Prophet did dye his hair and beard to conceal the white in it ('Ibn Sa'd 1905–18, 1–2:129, 135–42; 'Ibn Qudama 1972, 3:75). It is even mentioned that one of the Prophet's wives showed people a strand of his hair dyed with *henna* and *katam* (al-Tabari 1978, 3:182).

The second opinion offers a middle way, by which if someone has white hair and wishes to conceal it due to considerations of his feelings, hair dyeing is permitted. But, according to Arazi (1998, 383), the first generations of Islam were instructed to dye their hair, suggesting it was not a matter of free choice. Notably, some jurists permitted only women to dye their hair as a means of beautifying themselves for their husbands, reflecting a gendered differentiation. Some of the known plants from which orange dye can be made for hair dyeing were *henna*, *katam*, *waras*, and *ḡa'afra* (Juynboll 1986, 51). Some traditions claim that people who dye their

hair black will not enter heaven on the day of resurrection (ʿAbu Daʿud 1988, 2:792; al-Nasaʿi 1988, 8:188). Ibn ʿAbi Dunya (1992, 48–50) reports that the first instances of dyeing gray hair black were carried out by *firʿann* or the people of Mecca, who sought to emulate the appearance of ravens, hopefully frightening their enemies. It seems that jurists’ opposition to dyeing one’s hair black, particularly for men, is based on its foreign origin (Juynebool 1986, 72).

According to a third opinion, hair color distinguishes between Muslims and people of other monotheistic religions, hence Muslims must dye their white hair (al-Nasaʿi 1988, 8:137, 184; Ibn Maja 1972, 2:287; al-Bukhari 1985, 7:519; al-Tirmidhi 1988, 2:150). ʿAbu Daʿud (1988, 49) mentions that on the day Mecca was conquered, the Prophet ordered the believers to dye their white hair black, with the intention of dispelling the notion that the Muslim conquerors are old and weak. Additionally, Ibn ʿAbi Dunya (1992, 83) asserts that dying gray hair black or, alternatively using *henna* and *katam*, which were permitted options, serves to frighten the enemies, and proves advantageous for marriage. At the same time, it was prohibited to whiten one’s beard, as it was perceived as an attempt to create an artificial appearance of maturity and thus attain a higher status within the community.

An example illustrating the categorization of gray hair as a manifestation of fear and proof of God’s endless power can be found in Al-Muzzamil 73:17. This verse presents a deviation from the conventional biological and life cycle norms by depicting the graying of children’s hair. Consequently, gray hair is not only a sign of physical frailty associated with elderly, but also of moral weakness. The children of the heretics who fear the last judgement, experience such profound trauma that their hair turns gray. Al-Tabari rhetorically questions, “how is it that you (the heretics) are afraid of the day of judgment when your children’s hair will turn gray?” (1978, 14:172; Ibn Kathir 1997, 4:467). He explains that the graying of the children’s hair is linked to their fear stemming from their status as heretics, hell being their fate. Al-Zamakhshari (1987, 4:641) and al-Baydawi (1996, 5:407–8) add that aging before one’s time serves as a manifestation of fear and moral weakness that diminishes power and expedites the graying process.

Deciphering the Elderly’s Socio-Cultural and Religious Code Marginality

The lack of references in medieval legal sources to the elderly and their personal performance might be attributed to the widespread perception that old people are a marginalized group. Moreover, most of the sources were written by and for elite male urban groups, resulting in only scanty mention of marginal groups (Johnson 1998, 16; Thomson and Abenstern 1998, 19). The marginalization of the elderly can be attributed, in part, to relatively low numbers of people who reached old age in premodern societies due to factors such as poor nutrition, wars, and diseases. Additionally, fear of the elderly and the implications of aging played a role in their marginalization. Another factor contributing to the paucity of information about the elderly is the absence of birth-date documentation, and the fluid definitions of old age contingent on time, place, gender, and socio-economic considerations. While legal sources extensively discuss distinctions between childhood and adolescence in various aspects of life, including personal performance, references to the elderly are rare. This gap may explain the detailed discussion regarding white hair, primarily in men, as a fundamental criterion for defining the elderly based on visible physical parameters.

Admiration of Youth: The Desired Personal Performance

The desired personal performance of youth is characterized by dark hair, physical strength, sexual attractiveness, adherence to restrictions on displaying the body, and strict dress codes mandating the concealment of certain body parts, particularly of women. Upon reaching old age, these parameters lose their importance and personal performance is no longer an important criterion defining status.¹ In the Qur'an old women are defined by the cessation of menstruation and loss of fertility, while men are defined by their gray hair. Although these parameters are physical in nature, the end of fertility remains invisible whereas gray hair is visible, a manifestation of gendered differentiation. Despite attempts to view graying hair as a positive and spiritually encouraging trait, the need to create new criteria for self-esteem and for an effective contribution to society reflects the prevailing admiration for youth (Bensaid and Grine 2014, 147). Interestingly, opponents to hair dyeing argued that it did not deceive female partners, as other bodily indicators served as a silent testimony to the true biological age (Arazi 1998, 384).

Despite the inevitable physical changes that accompany old age and impact personal performance, the reward promised in heaven for the true believers is eternal youth, adorned with precious garments and jewelry.² In heaven, people will embody the age of 33, considered the ideal age of physical and mental maturity, and they will be exempt from aging. This heavenly reward includes a release from bodily secretions, some of which are associated with maturity as menstruation, while others, like urination, are often no longer under the control of old people (Ozgen 2019, 258).

Exclusivity and Status

The Qur'an and hadith literature emphasize the importance of showing respect toward the elderly as an essential moral principle. During the construction of a new status, physical attributes like power and attractive personal appearance lose significance in the elderly. These attributes are replaced with wisdom, honor, piety, moral qualities, and life experience, which contribute to the construction of a new socio-religious status. This new symbolic status emerged from the physical and mental changes replacing the visible manifestations of youth with the glorification of experience and wisdom.

The Muslim perception regards graying hair not as physical change associated with despondency and depression, but rather as a spiritual phenomenon (Bensaid and Grine 2014, 148). For example, some traditions make reference to a distinct spiritual character of aged people by describing gray hair as a distinguishing light of the elderly on the Day of Resurrection (al-Tirmidhi 1988, 3:224). The physical and social changes that accompany old age are interpreted in psychological terms, serving to construct the new symbolic socio-cultural status of old people or in Bilu's words: "the symbolic emanates from the bodily" (2003, 174). This

¹ Medieval Muslim sources define youth as the age between teenagers and mid-thirties (see: Shuraydi 1970, 63, 123).

² True believers will be rewarded in heaven for their piety in various spiritual and material ways, including precious clothing and adornment as described in al-Kahf 18:31; Fatir 35:33; al-Dukhan 44:53; al-'Insan 76:21, 12; al-Hajj 22:23; al-Rahman 55:22, 58.

transition from the symbolic emanation of youth to a new symbolism rooted in wisdom and piety replaces the centrality of physical attributes and personal performance by shifting the focus toward moral qualities and behavior that are not necessarily visible.

Aesthetics

The concept of aesthetics arises from the judgment of taste, which involves the evaluation and appreciation of beauty, while ethics is concerned with determining moral rightness and wrongness. Aesthetic judgments encompass physical and mental variations that do not necessarily embrace harmony and health as standards of beauty (Siebers 2010, 17). The use of aesthetic theory allows us to examine encounters and exchanges, and question what constitutes an aesthetic body and whether the aging body can be considered aesthetic (Siebers 2010, 27). In other words, does this inevitable human change classify the older body as somehow mentally and physically inferior?

Within Islam, concepts of personal performance are perceived as part of becoming a better believer by grooming God's creation, manifesting the symbiosis between morality and traditions of aesthetics. The personal performance of the Prophet Muhammad, for instance, encompasses both aesthetic and ethical aspects. Medieval Muslim visual culture legitimized the definition of moral values, which could critique or reinforce existing aesthetic norms through a process of adoption and rejection. The result was the establishment of legal instructions that encompassed ethical significance and aspects of appearance, generating norms and aesthetics of believers' personal performance. The aesthetics of aging exemplifies the integration between ethics and aesthetics, devaluing the significance of personal performance and the admiration of youth, and aiding in the establishment of moral values and behavior for the elderly that are not contingent upon visual components.

God's Power: Didactics and Pedagogy

Al-'Asr 102 presents a description of the human condition as subject to the disintegrating effects of time. Within legal texts the human body is understood as a sacred trust bestowed by God, deserving of honor and reverence (Ozgen 2019, 250). As objects and subjects of aesthetics, bodies, particularly aging bodies, elicit emotional responses and invite judgments of acceptance and rejection. The physical body becomes interchangeable with the social body through re-identification and branding of moral characteristics (Richardson 2012, 14). The educational goal is to teach the believers patience and mercy, an inclusive attitude, emphasizing God's inclusive attitude to all creators.

While there is no earthly remedy for old age, the personal appearances of both youth and the elderly are ultimately in the hands of God. In heaven, the weakness of the earthly bodies will be exchanged for a permanent state of youth. The final reward for the blessed in heaven is rejuvenation and eternal youth in the likeness of Adam and at the same age as Jesus, accompanied by youthful personal performance and physical strength (Gardet 1998; 'Ibn Hanbal 1969, 13:315). In this transcendent realm, the elderly are rejuvenated, regaining their youthful vigor, and even the graying hair is restored to its original color (Shuraydi 2014, 331).

Conclusions

The discourse of the personal appearance of the elderly in medieval Islam reflects a complex dynamic that is both exclusive and discriminatory, while also highlighting their position within society and their existence within respected margins. The construction of status and personal appearance for the elderly in this context represents an adjustment to the challenges posed by physical and social decline. This transformation is evident in the reconfiguration of roles and the formation of a new subgroup, although marginal, that preserves the dignity and respect of the elderly, and dedicates a separate discussion to their personal performance (Lange and Grossman 2010, 60–62). The deconstruction or reconstruction of the status of elder people is characterized by a shift from focusing on parameters of personal appearance to focusing on behavioral characteristics—from preoccupation with personal appearance to an emphasis on inner qualities of personality. By emphasizing nonvisual characteristics, a new framework for evaluating old people emerges, compensating for the diminishing significance of their personal performance. Aspects such as sexual attraction and youthful performance are exchanged for values of respect and mental traits. The public physical and visual manifestations related to aging such as graying hair, physical weakness, and a relaxed dress code signify a transition and transformation in social and mental status. The interplay between the physical changes experienced by the elderly, their socio-religious status, and their personal performance underscores the importance placed on personal performance throughout the Muslim life cycle. Thus, this discourse aids in the reconstruction of the socio-religious status of the elderly within medieval Muslim societies, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of their identity and the shifting dynamics of their status.

The discourse on the personal appearance of the elderly reveals a fluctuating dynamic characterized by an oscillation between inclusive attitudes that acknowledge their wisdom, piety, and right to equality, and a coinciding inclination to admire and glorify youth, often resulting in the exclusion and discrimination against the elderly. The prevailing identity and status previously predicated upon attributes such as fertility, sexual attraction, and physical strength undergo a transformation, giving rise to a new identity that emphasizes wisdom, respect, and life experience. These two complementary dimensions, some representing negative aspects like bodily decline, and others representing positive aspects such as intellectual acuity, knowledge, and religious maturity, extend the confines of the physical body and its performance. Although the personal performance of the elderly may lack the same level of appeal, it is redefined and discussed within a new context and altered balance, underscoring its significance throughout all stages of life. In the present case, this discourse contributes to the reestablishment of the socio-religious status of the elderly within medieval Muslim societies.

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