

# Poetry and Landscape Aesthetics in the Arab-Islamic Tradition

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والحسنُ يُظهرُ في شينين رونقه      بيتٌ من الشعرِ أو بيتٌ من الشعرِ

Beauty reveals its glamour in two things:

a line of poetry (*bayt al-shi'r*) and a tent of fur (*bayt al-sha'r*).

(Cited by al-Nābulusī in *Ḥullat al-Dhahab al-Ibrīz...*, 61)<sup>1</sup>

## Literature and Landscape

In *al-Muqataṭaf min Azāhir al-Ṭuraf* (*A Collection of the Flowers of Rarities*), thirteenth-century Andalusian scholar Ibn Sa'īd al-Andalusī (d. 685/1286) relates his delightful encounter with the Ayyūbid Prince al-Nāṣir, son of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, in Aleppo during his trip to the East. Ibn Sa'īd had moved to Aleppo after a long journey from the “tail of habitation” in the West, *dhayl al-ma'mūr*, as he puts it, to the “chest of the East,” *ṣadr al-mashriq*, where he interacted with leading literary scholars in various countries and consulted the holdings of thirty-six libraries in Baghdad.<sup>2</sup> In 644/1246 while in Egypt, he met and became friend with the renowned scholar Ibn al-'Adīm (d. 660/1262), who was there on a mission as al-Nāṣir's envoy, and who later introduced the young, bright, and witty poet to al-Nāṣir's court. After joining the Princely court in Aleppo, Ibn Sa'īd shared with al-Nāṣir his rare collection of literary jewels, which the Prince greatly appreciated. Al-Nāṣir enjoyed the company of his entertaining guest and spent many sessions with him.

On one occasion, after a long learned exchange with al-Nāṣir and upon the latter's advice, Ibn Sa'īd decided to compile his refined collection of poetry in a small book, abridging a larger one he had titled *Bawāsim al-Khamā'il wa Nawāsim al-Asā'il* (*The Gardens' Smiles and the Evenings' Breezes*). The large book contained, Ibn Sa'īd writes, “all the flowers I had collected, and all the subtitles I had come across.”<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to the abridged version, Ibn Sa'īd explained how he restructured his smaller book into “four *fuṣūl* (‘chapters’, also ‘seasons’), as the seasons of the year; and in each chapter there are three

*khamā'il* ('densely planted gardens', sig. *khamīla*), as the number of months in each season. These are contained in three books, one for each *khamīla*; and each *khamīla* contains four layers, except for those contained in the last season."<sup>4</sup> He then went on expounding the analogical basis of the book's layout and showing how it was modelled on an imaginative conception of a delightful garden, characterised by dense plantations, shades, flowers, water, and cool breezes. "The first chapter (*faṣl*, 'season')," he writes, "is on the best flowers of prose... it contains three dense gardens (*khamā'il*) as though they were removed from the land of Bābel."<sup>5</sup> The stories contained in the third chapter, he adds, "are in the likeness of roses among the flowers of a lush landscape (*al-rawḍa al-naḍīra*)."<sup>6</sup> As for the poems contained in the fourth chapter, he further explains, "they mimic the splendour of rosy checks."<sup>7</sup> Ibn Sa'īd concluded his introduction, saying that "when the collection reached a state of completion, as the completeness of a shining full moon, and it gently swayed, as the sawing of a branch with its leaves, it was then brought into existence and I called it *al-Muqtataf min Azāhir al-Ṭuraf*."<sup>8</sup>

Al-Andalus, the native land of Ibn Sa'īd, was known for its exquisite gardens and beautiful landscape poetry, and the visiting scholar seemed keen to deliver with his collection of fine literary samples a taste of the Andalusian natural beauties. Yet, while the imaginative conception of his book and its detailed layout in the form of carefully organised and layered gardens is indeed unique, the preoccupation with garden imageries forms a recognisable trend in Arabic literature. This is evident in a wide range of book titles, such as, among numerous others, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's book on the psychology and morality of love *Rawḍat al-Muḥibīn wa Nuzhat al-Mushtāqīn* (*The Garden of Lovers and the Stroll of Longing Ones*), Ibn al-Badrī's urban history book *Nuzāht al-Anām fī Maḥāsīn al-Shām* (*People's Stroll in the Beauties of Damascus*), al-Muḥibbī's biographical dictionary *Nafḥat al-Rayḥāna* (*The Basel's Fragrance*), and al-Nābulusī's book on rhetoric *Nafaḥāt al-Azhār 'alā Nasamāt al-Ashār* (*The Flowers' Fragrances on the Evening Breezes*), which was a commentary on an earlier poem he wrote in praise of the Prophet Muhammad titled *Nasamāt al-Ashār fī Madḥ al-Nabī al-Mukhtār* (*The Evening Breezes in Praising the Chosen Prophet*).<sup>9</sup> Such titles reveal an inclination towards garden-based poetics and representations of landscape experiences regardless of the contents they describe, which, more often than not, had little or nothing to do with gardens and landscape. On the other hand, Ibn Sa'īd's and many such collection of poetry reveal acute landscape consciousness and landscape aesthetics predicated on a sophisticated socio-urban culture of entertainment and recreation. The sixth *khamīla* in Ibn Sa'īd's book, for example, contains samples from various classical sources of fine poems

concerned with “gardens, rivers, leisure, and relaxation,” as well as open landscape and places of recreation (*mutanazahāt*).<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-Badrī’s *Nuzhat al-Anām* contains a great deal more of such poetic references, showing the intertwined relationship between literature, landscape, and the culture of leisure and entertainment in the urban life of Arab-Islamic cities.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Wine of Bābel**

Perhaps nothing testify more to the continuity of this tradition than ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulusī’s anthology of poems *Khamrat Bābel wa Ghinā’ al-Balābel* (*The Wine of Bābel and the Singing of Nightingales*), which shows that such rhymed titles are often expressive of an aesthetic sensibility and poetic imagination anchored in a great passion for and personal engagements with landscape.<sup>12</sup> ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s poetic sensibility towards landscape can be traced in several of his works, the most important of which for us here is *Khamrat Bābel* as well as his four travel memoirs. The anthology of poems sheds light on the nature of engagement with, and representations of, urban landscape, while his travel memoirs give insights into the poetics of rural and pastoral landscape. The former also shed light on the nature of urban life in Damascus and the socio-spatial practices that used to take place in sites of leisure and entertainment. These sources contain a large collection of poems that deserve an extended study; however, only the anthology will be examined here.

*Khamrat Bābel* shows, among other things, that in the early modern period (seventeenth and eighteenth century), there existed in Damascus a vibrant secular urban space dedicated to leisure, recreation, and entertainment. The social elite—members of notable families, government officials, eminent scholars—gathered regularly in the city’s private and public gardens for recreation and social interaction. The main form of entertainment was spontaneous yet sophisticated poetic exchanges. According to the records of some of these gatherings, women were absent. In these men-only outings, the absence of women was compensated by the amatory elegies and love poetry that often mapped the feminine virtues of the beloved over the landscape. The appreciation of nature’s beauty was thus mediated by poetic imagery celebrating femininity and revealing men’s effeminate languishing character that was often concealed in the presence of women.<sup>13</sup> References to colour, texture, smell, and sound in evocative verbal images reflected the Damascenes’ aesthetic sensibility and revealed their attitude toward urban landscape.<sup>14</sup> In a context where visual depiction of landscape is absent, verbal depiction becomes the main medium of expression. The nature and function of verbal rendering in the aural space of the word presents an expressive alternative to the graphic rendering in the visual space of the image as was the case in Europe.

In *Khamrat Bābel*, the poetic exchanges took place in specific natural and designed visual fields that are identified by three Arabic terms: *bustān*, *ḥadīqa*, and *rawḍa*. Ibn Saʿīd term *khamīla* was not common in the Damascene context. With the little information available on the garden history of Damascus and greater Syria (Bilād al-Shām), it is difficult to identify the different formal characteristics, if any, that each term designates. Here, I loosely refer to these fields as “gardens,” “landscape” and “places of recreation.” While *bustān* and *ḥadīqa* are often used interchangeably, generally, *bustān* tends to refer more to open sites designated for agricultural purposes, whereas *ḥadīqa* refers more to enclosures designated for aesthetic purposes. *Rawḍa* remains a vague term that can refer to both, as well as to undesigned natural settings. *Ḥadīqa* is the only term with visual connotations, as it shares with *ḥadaqa*, “iris,” the same root, of which *ḥaddaqa* means to “stare” at, fix one’s “gaze” on, and “encircle” something.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to ascertain whether the original association between the eye and the garden was based on form or function. The etymology of the term, however, suggests that it was based on form, since a *ḥadīqa*, like an iris, was depicted as a planted circular enclosure conspicuously delineated from its arid surrounds.<sup>16</sup>

### **Picturing Urban Landscape**

Since landscape painting was not as commonly practised in the Arab-Islamic world as in Europe, poetry remained the main medium for picturing the landscape. Poetic representations, however, can be thought of in terms of “pictorial rhetoric” that plays on the dialectical relationship between vision and textuality and the comparability of the visual and textual depiction or imitation of the sensory world. While al-Nabulsi’s representations in *Khamrat Bābel* are purely textual, his poetic depictions can still be analysed in visual terms as “textual images” or “pictorial rhetoric.” As Melville and Readings explains: “Poetry aims to paint a world upon the mind’s eye, just as painting seeks to present the mute objects of the world in a framework that will make them speak.”<sup>17</sup> The comparability between visual and textual depictions enables us to see not only similarities but also differences. Seen as a “speaking picture,” a poem, still functions more as a “rhetorical exemplum,” addressing the memory rather than the subjective consciousness. Its fluidity engages the imagination more actively while inviting one to participate in the temporal unfolding of the description. The frame of viewing, the “window,” is not spatially defined, and the viewer is not immobilised. An image reveals all at once: it is oriented towards the *instant*, and hence its *instantaneous* mode of revealing. By contrast, a poem reveals over time: it is oriented towards *narrative*, and hence its *sequential* mode of revealing. Poetic imageries, though more fluid than graphic imagery,

were nonetheless governed by the decorum of genre in terms of representational techniques and aesthetic conventions. They were also expressive of localised varied experiences. While romantic representation of nature has always been a main theme in Arabic poetry, those concerned with the beauties of Damascus, for example, and those by ‘Abd al-Ghanī in particular, have a specific flavour expressive of the aesthetic attitude of the Damascenes toward their own landscape.

### **The Presence of the Beloved**

Poetic appreciation and representation of landscape beauties were often mediated by love and longing for the beloved. This is as evident in Ibn Sa‘īd’s collection as it is in ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s anthology, a trend that became more prominent in the early modern period.<sup>18</sup> The desired yet unreachable imaginary beloved, with beautiful eyes and seductive glances, with slender body and delicate stature, who rejoices in ambivalence, and who is often portrayed in a masculine gender, are common themes in Arabic landscape poetry. In *al-Muqtataf*, Ibn Sa‘īd quotes the thirteenth-century Damascene poet Tāj al-Dīn and al-Şarḥadī (also al-Şarkhawī), describing his passion:

Be attentive, in the breeze’s folds there are messages,  
and lean over, for the Ban trees at the foothill are leaning over.  
They leaned over only to seek questions, while within them  
a desire to speak about love, so converse with them and ask questions.  
And convey secretly my love to the breeze, because  
it is my rival when I am excited by the nightingales.  
My question would be a consolation to the breeze,  
while my tears for the way stations are flowing (*sā’il*, also “questioning”).<sup>19</sup>

Preoccupation with the beloved is also a governing theme of the genre that features prominently in ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s *Khamrat Bābel*. In fact, the first half of the anthology, most likely written by the youthful ‘Abd al-Ghanī, is dominated by such amatory elegies and love poetry. Some of the poems were event or context related, yet others were not. He wrote:

The passionate lovers’ eyelids are tired of your love,  
continuously, with much grief, are tearful.  
A body, the sickness nearly effaced all of its features,

so the events of its suffering can be seen on its sides.  
Easy, O you, who has exceeded the limit in antipathy,  
dispassionately leaving my heart while it is earnestly attached.<sup>20</sup>

In this frame of representation, femininity—subtle and ideal—always remains intangible. It hovers as a mysterious quality created solely for the suffering of passionate men, who seem unable to unite with the objects of their burning desires. The intangible yet highly desirable femininity renders her qualities ethereal and detached from the embodied reality, thereby allowing the poet to map them over his immediate objects of engagement. In *Khamrat Bābel*, the objects of engagement were, of course, elements of the landscape. The Sufis excelled in this technique, especially in mapping feminine qualities over divinity. Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Tarjumān al-Ashwāq* is one of the finest examples of this genre.<sup>21</sup> As a passionate admirer and defender of Ibn ‘Arabī, ‘Abd al-Ghanī was deeply influenced by the great master, yet it is important to note here that in *Khamrat Bābel* he was certainly not following in the master’s footsteps. The engrossing sensuality of ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s poetry was explicitly and unashamedly dedicated to earthly pleasure. His mystical poems were deliberately compiled in a separate anthology.<sup>22</sup>

Within the governing decorum of the genre there are culturally-coded associations between elements of nature and elements of femininity that are expressive of the Damascene taste. For example, Damascus was famous for its red roses. Picturing the redness of the rose as mimicking the colour of the beloved’s cheeks is a common theme in ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s imageries:

To my eyes was revealed a rose on a branch,  
red, like the cheek of my passionate lover.  
Its whiteness in the middle of its redness has a glow,  
like a crescent moon of pearls in a sky of carnelians.<sup>23</sup>

Another recurrent image depicts the subtle swaying of a branch by a gentle breeze as mimicking the delicate and seductive swaying of the beloved’s body. In the following lines ‘Abd al-Ghanī adds to the natural aesthetics of the feminine body the likeness of the hip’s curvature to the shape of a dune, and the blackness of the hair to the darkness of the night:

He visited me as the night was pulling its tail,  
in the likeness of full moon, too transcendent to be reached.

With a delicate body, he scored my heart by his sway,  
as the branch went on deliberately exposing his swaying.  
When he appeared, we thought it was a crescent moon,  
one that from the sky of the heart never fades away.  
A slender branch of a Ban tree, from his hip comes the shade of a dune,  
a full moon, from his hair comes the darkness of the night.<sup>24</sup>

In several poems ‘Abd al-Ghanī reveals the feminine body’s main characteristics that were appreciated by Damascene men. They include detailed references to the figure, the face, the smile, the teeth, the eyes, the hair, the stomach, the hands, the curvature of the body, as well as to certain types of seductive looks, body movements, poses, and dispositions. They reveal a desire for the body to be slightly plump, the figure to be delicate, the eyes’ white to be bright, the front teeth to be with a slight opening, the stomach to be flat, and the hips to be fleshy and round.<sup>25</sup> Purity, softness, and delicacy, however, were the collective feminine qualities most repeatedly mapped over the landscape. Describing some of these feminine qualities, ‘Abd al-Ghanī wrote:

Has soft fingers and pure cheek, so delicate  
it almost gets wounded by quick-passing glances.<sup>26</sup>

How do I rid myself of your eyes, how?  
while drawing on me the swords of coquetry and seduction.<sup>27</sup>

Some poems expressed the sensuality of the femininity-landscape association through explicitly wild and erotic imageries:

A rose I came across in a garden,  
red on its fresh tender branch.  
It looks like the cheek of the beloved, that is  
bleeding from excessive kissing and biting.<sup>28</sup>

And:

I embraced him while the night’s attire was let down;  
the more I kissed the more he smiled.  
Until his chest absorbed mine in bonding,

And the two hearts warmed up the cold-hearted.<sup>29</sup>

Not all poems presented femininity as a lens to view the landscape, of course. There are many poems that describe specific places and elements of landscape design, particularly fountains, using a wide range of non-gendered imagery and associations. The flickering of the sun's reflections on a running stream of water, for example, is often likened to a shining sword being drawn from its sheath. Describing a fountain in a garden setting, 'Abd al-Ghanī wrote:

A fountain with which the minds are dazzled,  
and the thoughts are perplexed trying to describe it.  
It looks like a gazing eyeball,  
an eye unable to sleep from the ecstasy of love.  
Crying without having left her hometown  
one day, and without her family giving up their desires.  
What a beautiful and well crafted pipe-work,  
within which the water rises up and descends down.  
A mace of silver, under which,  
the water bubbles cast many circles.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the landscape sensibility and aesthetic attitude that *Khamrat Bābel* reveals, as a later manifestation of a long literary tradition, contrasts with those of the picturesque that developed in Europe around the same time.<sup>31</sup> 'Abd al-Ghanī and his group expressed no distinction in their appreciation of rural and urban landscape. Even as a traveller, 'Abd al-Ghanī revealed no conscious search for virgin nature, nor did he seem to have an ideal landscape in mind. Engagement with native beauties and the sensuality of nature were always dictated by the state of the moment (*ḥāl*) as it revealed its workings through the poetic imagination of the group. Many gatherings were repeatedly held in the same place and the poetic expressions were always different. *Khamrat Bābel* presented what the educated, cultured taste of the Damascene considered to be aesthetically pleasing: a dynamic and imaginative interplay between the self, the place, and the beloved, moulded within the decorum of Arabic poetry and the habitual exercise of comparison and association between femininity and landscape.

Be gentle with the branches of the Ruba, O breeze,

because it is by passionate longing they are swaying.  
Your wine has gone through them to intoxication,  
so that they began bending their straight figures.  
We were in an intimate gathering place,  
whose air was freshened by delicious fragrances.  
The water was flowing up and down,  
in a pool, spreading and throwing ordered pearls.  
Rods of glass bent by a hand,  
made of pipes for the breeze to strike.  
Underneath us was a brook of running water  
Flowing like a sharp-cutting sword...  
What a day it was for us there, so delightful,  
in a gathering place like the gardens of paradise.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> S. al-Munajjid and S. Wild (eds.), *Rihlatān ilā Lubnān* (Beirut: Orient Institute, 1979), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Sa'īd al-Andalusī, *al-Muqataṭaf min Azāhir al-Ṭuraf* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma lil-Kitāb, 1984), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Qayyim al-Janziyya, *Rawḍat al-Muḥibīn wa Nuzhat al-Mushtāqīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1995); Ibn al-Badrī, *Nuzhat al-Anām fī Maḥāsīn al-Shām* (Damascus: Dār al-Bashā'ir, 2006); al-Muḥibbī, *Nafhat al-Rayḥāna* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2005, 3 vols); al-Nābulusī, *Nafahāt al-Azhār 'alā Nasamāt al-Ashār* (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Sa'īd, *al-Muqataṭaf...*, 149-59.

<sup>11</sup> This has a long history and resonate with similar practices in other cultures, see Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> The anthology was edited by Aḥmad al-Jundī and published under a modified title, *Burj Bābel wa Shadow al-Balābel* (Damascus: Dār al-Ma'rifa, 1988). Substituting *Khamrat* (wine) with *Burj* (tower) reflects a desire to avoid the reference to "wine" in the title. Hereafter I will refer to the anthology by its published title.

<sup>13</sup> This was a part of wider regional trend, see Shirine Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2008)

<sup>14</sup> See my study "The Wine of Babel: Landscape, Gender and Poetry in Early Modern Damascus," *Literature & Aesthetics* 17, 1 (July 2007): 107-124.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab al-Muḥīt*, *H.D.Q.*

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., *H.D.Q.*

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Melville and Bill Readings (eds.), *Vision and Textuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>18</sup> See Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli, *The Age of the Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early Modern Ottoman and European Culture And Society* (Durham, Duke University Press 2005, 2<sup>nd</sup> print. 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Ibn Sa'īd's, *Muqataṭaf*, 139.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Nābulusī, *Burj Bābel*, 22.

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- <sup>21</sup> Ibn ‘Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978).
- <sup>22</sup> I translated parts of ‘Abd al-Ghanī’s famous mystical poem on truth in my “The Poetics of Concealment: Al-Nābulusī’s Encounter with the Dome of the Rock.” *Muqarnas* 22 (2005): 110-27.
- <sup>23</sup> Al-Nābulusī, *Burj Bābel*, 143.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>25</sup> See detailed descriptions in *Burj Bābel*, 155-58
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-28.
- <sup>31</sup> On the rise of the picturesque, See Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1989).
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-22.