**The Personal Performance of the *Qur’ānic Ghilmān:* Shifting Gendered Boundaries of Sexuality**

**Abstract**

*The article argues that there is a discursive space within juridical texts and qur'ānic commentaries that justify an interpretation postulating a third gender or gender ambiguity. It aims at offering insights into the legal treatment of alternative gender identities by analyzing the personal performance of ghilmān. All the descriptions of ghilmān focused on glorifying their personal performance in contrast to a lack of discussion of their characteristics. These descriptions supported the assumption that ghilmān had another role, sexual partners for male believers, although it was hidden and almost unspoken. The case of the ghilmān extended the gap between the earthly world and heaven because the qur’ānic heavenly spectrum of gender and sexuality widened the earthly framework by shifting the known gendered boundaries.*

**Key words:** *ghilmān, medieval jurisprudence, Qur’ān, personal performance, gender*

**I. Introduction**

Personal performance manifests religion, culture, fashion, gender, and socio-economic status, all shared by members of a society. Personal performance organizes practices, orient judgments, reflects a desired or undesirable reality, and reveal differentiation and segregation. Personal performance is important in determining roles and expectations, concealed or revealed massages, a link between ethical and aesthetical perfection (Rustomji, 2009, pp. 40-62). In Islam, conceptions of personal performance are perceived as part of becoming a better believer by grooming and performing one of God's creations, a manifestation of the symbiosis between moral and traditions of aesthetics. Both represent forms of value: ethics are the form of value that tells people if their actions are good or bad, while aesthetics are the form of value that measures the range of qualities of beauty and ugliness. Aesthetics includes physical and mental differences which do not necessarily embrace harmony as a standard of beauty (Siebers, 2010, p. 17).

In Islam, ethics and aesthetics are interwoven concepts that reflect the comprehensive nature of Islam, influence each other and function as a joint mechanism for promoting ethical values and aesthetic judgements (Chittick, 2014, 3-17; Sandıkçı, and Güliz, 2005, 75-77). For example, the Prophet Muhammad's personal performance bring to bear both aesthetics and ethical aspects to praise God, his creation and the messenger's role. Another example of this mechanism is the frightening descriptions of the angels in hell as clumsy and unaesthetic monsters (al-Qādī, 2001, p. 45). These terrifying images are aimed at urging the believers to choose the right path toward reward in heaven. The result of this joint mechanism of ethical values and aesthetics judgments is legal instructions of ethical significance and visual presentations that are reflected in practice that generate norms and the aesthetics of the believers' personal performance in medieval Islam.

The Islamic afterworld is described as if it was an actual physical world, a mirror of the best of the earthly world, a correspondence between the worlds, a space where living humanity is transformed into purified versions of themselves (Rustomji, 2010, pp. 167-169). The Qur**’**ān portrays the wonder of next life through ideal descriptions of place, objects and feelings. It is a sensual intimate world of pleasures showed as a concrete picture in worldly terms. Over time, heaven became filled with things, namely rewards, a proof that even afterworlds have a history with a chronology of material culture and spiritual significance (Rustomji, 2008, p. 296).

Muslim eschatology whose foundations are found in the Qur’ān is didactic and aimed at motivating the believers and validating the justice of God and his mercy (Taylor, 1968, p. 66). According to the qur’ānic verses, men and women in heaven will wear silk and green clothing and adorn themselves with pearls and gold and silver jewelry.[[1]](#footnote-1) Most of these verses belong to the Meccan period, when the Prophet Muhammad preached to the *mushrikūn* and focused on guiding them toward the right path and the final rewards in heaven. [[2]](#footnote-2)

The symbolic world of this eschatology rests on earthly human experience, its values and conceptions and was influenced by earlier eschatological descriptions, in particular Persian and Judo-Christian (Rippin, 1996, pp. 126, 134-135; Gardet, p. 448). Later juridical sources discuss in detail the behavior of the dead, their personal performance and other earthly aspects. This discussion is based on descriptions that are familiar to the writers and the readers, although they may change according to time and place (Eklund, 1941, pp. 9-10). The human gendered architecture of the qur'anic heaven, that was structured for the pleasures of the individual, standardizes personal performance keeping male hegemonial body distinguishable and comprehensible (Reeser, 2010, p. 93). Or in Butler's words: "all genders are a performance, culturally created categories" (Butler, 2000, p. 203), in our case, a reflection of the cultural normative categories of the Arab Peninsula population on the eve of Islam. At the same time, Jahangir clams that the non-binary nature of Islam manifests itself in many ways (Junaid Jahangir & Hussein Abdullatif, 2018, p. 160). Moreover, the passing from this world enables the presentation of a diversified nonbinary system in heaven, proof that at least in heaven the Qur’ān accepts the existence of diverse sexuality and orientation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**II. Goals and methodology**

The main research question is what we can reveal from the evolution and expansion of the descriptions of the *ghilmān*'s personal appearance in medieval qur'ānic commentaries and jurisprudence about the construction of gender identities and sexual practices in medieval Muslim societies. Additional to the development of the *ghilmān* concept into a third gender, challenging and extending the accepted gendered boundaries. Research literture discuss other genders in islam, homosexuality in our case, but not many of them focus on the qur'ānic *ghilmān*, their personal appearance and its soio-religious and cultural meanings which are the focus of this article. This article expands some aspects already discussed and challenge some others by presenting a more complicated picture of the ghilman's sexual role as a third gendered option.

The article combines history and Islamic studies as a methodology to analyze the historical and cultural context of the personal performance of the qur’ānic *ghilmān* as a key factor for portraying them as a third gender identity. While the historical aspect examines the evolution of these meanings and interpretations in medieval Muslim sources, Islamic studies focus on the role of the juridical texts and qur’ānic commentaries in justifying the existence of a third gender identity. Such an interdisciplinary approach allows a more nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between religion, culture and society, and enables a comprehensive analysis of the concept of *ghilmān*. Stratigraphy, originally from geology, is a branch studying the layering of rocks, but when applied to historical texts it means the layering of meaning and interpretation (Savant, 2013, p. 17). In this sense, stratigraphy can describe the evolution of meanings and interpretations through time and assist in portraying the wider context (Bauer, 2015, p. 12). This metaphor will help trace and analyze the evolution of the qur’ānic descriptions of *ghilmān* in classic medieval commentaries and eschatological works, showing how they have been adopted, adapted, rejected or replaced, or redefined or repurposed over time. These traditions were modified in unexpected ways, according to time, place, foreign influences, local norms and wishes and human expectations, and the final picture is of a blend that attributes sexual roles to *ghilmān*.

This article argues that there is a discursive space within juridical texts and qur'ānic commentaries that justify an interpretation postulating a third gender or gender ambiguity. Although, it is not easy to transport the existence of another gender into premodern Muslim legal sources (Alipour, 2017, p. 165). It aims at offering insights into the legal treatment of alternative gender identities by analyzing the personal performance of *ghilmān*. For reasons of convenience and fluidity the term *ghilmān* (youth) that appears in *Surat al-Ṭur* 52: 24 was chosen for the discussion, but it also includes the term *wildan* that appears in *Surat al-Waqi'a* 56: 17,18 and *Surat al-Insān* 76: 19. Although Rostumji claims that these servant boys were not sex objects, I will suggest that they were created also to offer another sexual variation by focusing on the descriptions of their personal performance (Rustomji, 2008, p. 305). Moreover, their descriptions are not symbolic or spiritual, but physical, and their beauty is not a spiritual perfection, but aspects of an ideal personal performance.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Ghilmān* are an integral part of heaven and of the Muslim eschatological perception. This article's goal is to demonstrate that the *ghilmān* are proof that the Qur’ān, its commentaries and eschatological manuals provide place for sexual diversity in the period of classical Islam (Günther, 2019, p. 309 and footnote 7). By deciphering their personal performance we will learn about their identities and roles and about perceptions of aesthetics, young males' beauty and gender. By analyzing the *ghilmān*'s personal performance we will discover more about their other, unspoken, sexual role which means that men believers were offered in heaven an array of sexual variations that included earthly wives, *huris*, and *ghilmān*. In effect, by offering the *ghilmān* as a sexual object the Qur’ān was authorizing sexual diversity.

**III. The sources**

The nature and characteristics of the sources will be presented only in a brief as an introduction to the analysis of their descriptions of the *ghilmān's* personal performance.

1. Qur’ān and commentaries

The historic basis of the Qur’ān is the social-religious reality of the seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula. While the Quran's aim is to reshape the life of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, it is still based on and reflects the seventh century social-religious reality there. But, Muslim belief claims that the messages of the Qurʼān are universal and eternal and are not dependent on time or historical circumstances (Watt, 1988, p. 2). The Qur’ān reflects the prophet Muḥammad’s thoughts and ideas that were intended for proselytization of the idolaters of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula (Welch, Paret and Pearson, pp. 401-435). According to Muslim belief and tradition, the Qurʼān represents God's revelations to the prophet Muḥammad that were collected in a book after the prophet’s death. The collection of Muḥammad’s preaching into a book and then reshaping it as prophecy, gave him legitimacy as a recipient of divine revelations.

Muslim commentary on the Qur’ān attempts to give explanations and interpretations for a better understanding of the qur’ānic verses that represent God's words. Some of the leading medieval commentators that I have chosen to represent the classical commentary in this article are al-Ṭabarī (died 923), al-Al-Zamkhsharī (died 1144), al-Bayḍāwī (died 1286/1291) and ʼIbn Kathīr (died 1373).

1. Jurisprudence

Jurisprudence is a religious and moral system of law consisting of theoretical, substantive, and practical aspects. Islam, a law-based religion, has developed a complicated living system of jurisprudence that discusses all aspects of the believers’ life. *Ḥadīth* collections and medieval legal compendiums were composed in different places in the Muslim East throughout the medieval era. Because Muslim life depends on jurisprudence, this body of literature sought to fit the often-abstract law to the community’s needs, aspirations, changes, and developments. A basic methodological question regarding these sources is whether they represent theoretical and hypothetical discussions or reality.[[5]](#footnote-5) My preliminary assumption is that these sources represent theory and practice together in a synthesis that thwarts the attempt to separate them. This weave is a creation of moral boundaries through socialization, with a defined sphere for interpretations and variations of time and place (Maghen, 2011, pp. 232-234). Moreover, the information that comes from these sources reflects a mixture of wishes, norms, fashions, foreign influences, and variations of time and place.

1. Eschatological literature

Concepts of eschatology and the hereafter are fundamental in Islam and the history of faith in an afterlife extends from the 7th century to the present as a conceptual chronology of evolution and interpretation (Günther and Lawson, 2016, pp. 1-28; Rustomji, 2010, pp. 166-175; Kinberg, pp. 12-20). Following the Qur’ān, Muslim views about eschatology are found in qur’ānic commentaries, *ḥadīth* literature, *fiqh* and in a genre that was dedicated to it, eschatological literature. There are classical Muslim scholars from various schools of theology and juridical background that devoted chapters or even books to eschatological issues and some of them will be discussed here (Günther, 2019, pp. 308-309).

**IV. Who are you the ghilmān?**

The qur’ānic heaven is an eternal physical abode where the believers are rewarded for their earthly good deeds, and several verses are devoted to its sensual pleasures such as clothing, food and drink, furniture, and fulfilling sexual desires (Tourage, 2020, p. 55). In addition to *ḥūr al-῾ayn*, young boys of eternal youth will circulate among male believers and serve them.[[6]](#footnote-6) These youths called *wildān mukhalladūn* (*al-Waqi῾aa* 56: 17; *al-Insān* 76: 19) and *ghilmān* (*al-Ṭur* 52: 24) are unique heavenly creations, part of the rich qur’ānic scenes of joys waiting for the believers.[[7]](#footnote-7) The believers are being served in heaven because according to the eschatology of the Qur’ān they do not work, but rather there are servants who ensure their blissful life. The function of *ghilmān* is to serve, and they form a nameless, faceless working class. They are living beings, but they are not human, and they did not live on earth and face judgment (Rustomji, 2008, p. 91). They function as objects and not beings, but they are not slaves in the conventional sense because they cannot be freed or transformed into believers. There are some versions about their number which range from seventy to a few thousands, and according to *ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā each one of them is different and unique (*ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 160). The exaggerated number is well exemplified by the description of two lines of *ghilmān* that welcome each believer who is unable to see the ends of the lines because of their length (*ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 60).

The identification of the *ghilmān* does not clarify why their labor is needed, but some explanations are suggested. al-Zamkhsharī and al-Ṭabarī in their exegesis to 52: 24 explain that these precious servants promised to male believers are an indication of the exclusiveness of the believers, and their role is to enlighten the believers. Or in other words, if the servants' personal performance is so magnificence, one can only imagine the believers' personal performance (al-Zamkhsharī, 1987, pp. 411-412; al-Ṭabarī, 1978, pp. 40-41). Al-Zamkhsharī adds that they are the children of earthly believers who did not do any good for which they should be rewarded, nor any sins for which they must be punished, or alternatively that they are the children of sinners (al-Zamkhsharī, 1987, p. 412). According to al-Bayḍāwī some claim that that they are the believers' children, or their unborn children, or even their future children (al-Bayḍāwī, 1996, p. 248). *ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā claims that they are Muslim or non-Muslim children, while ʼIbn Kathīr claims that they are servants (*ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 60; ʼIbn Kathīr, 1997, pp. 259-260). ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya explains that because there is no birth in heaven, the *ghilmān* are the Muslims' children who died with no sins or good deeds. Others claim that they are the polytheists' children who God made servants to the believers in heaven, or that they are special creations that God raised in heaven like *ḥur al-῾ayn*, as part of the final reward (ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, pp. 465-466).

According to Rustomji, the *ghilmān* are purified beings in substance and in purpose, objects and mechanisms that were allowed for the believers' pleasures (Rustomji, 2019, p. 299). Abdel Haleem asserts that the physical pleasures of paradise have been exaggerated and there is no mention of eating, drinking, or sexual activity, indicating that the material rewards are symbolic (Abdel Haleem, 1999, p. 97). Alazmh claims that paradisal pleasures are not anomalous, therefore, *ghilmān* are part of the actual sensual, sexual setting of paradise in the Qur’ān, and not an allegory (Al-Azmeh, 1995, pp. 215-216). Salama goes further by claiming that *ghilmān al-janna* are a gender existing between men and women, an expansion of the binary gendered system into a third gender, an object for desire for men, despite the clear prohibition on homosexuality. She adds that the qur’ānic prohibition on *liwat* reflects practices that did not vanish, indicating that there was an option to widen the gendered spectrum, analogous to the fact that wine was forbidden on earth and yet permitted in heaven (Salama, 2005, pp. 15-17).

**V. The *ghilmān's* status and roles**

It seems that according to heavenly hierarchy male believers come first, then the believers' wives, after them *ḥur al-῾ayn* and last are the *ghilmān*.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is not clear whether this a reflection of the earthly reality or is it a hint at the educational role of the Qur’ān to guide the believers to the preferred ways of practicing sexuality. *Ḥur al-῾ayn* provide companionship and sexual pleasures while the *ghilmān* are servants, creatures of the working class, and these are some of their major roles:

1. Manifestation of God's power – as al-Bayhaqī describes, thousands of servants will wait for the believers and each one of them has a different role. (al-Bayhaqī, 1988, p. 199). In his commentary to 76: 19**,** al-Ṭabarī adds that a thousand youth will run to each one of the believers in heaven to serve him (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, p. 272). According to ʼIbn Kathīr When the *ghilmān* will spread to serve their masters, one should be astonished by their number, their beautiful colors, and their clothing and jewelry. All these exaggerated descriptions are aimed at glorifying God and his unlimited power to create and reward his believers with precious heavenly creators.
2. Private service – The *ghilmān* are silent servants that will serve the believers food and wine and run their household.
3. Welcoming and greeting the believers – The *ghilmān* will welcome the believers in heaven and gather around them as children do to a close, intimate friend (al-*ʾ*Andalūsī, 2002, p. 39; *ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 48).
4. Announcement and identification - The *ghilmān* will inform *ḥur al-῾ayn* of the believer's earthly name (al-*ʾ*Andalūsī, 2002, p. 40; *ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 48).
5. A mediating role – The *ghilmān* are eternal and young, descriptions that are partly familiar from the earthly world such as youth, and partly different as in eternity. This mediating role emphasize the gap between the earthly world and heaven and assist the believers by illustrating heaven's benefits.
6. A model of ideal beauty and esthetics – The *ghilmān* manifest beauty and ease with their youth and purity, and the highest state of spiritual and esthetic existence (Rustomji, 2008, pp. 90-91.

**VI. Do the *ghilmān* have a sexual shadowed role?**

The Qur’ān establishes a normative framework for guiding Muslims in questions of gender and sexuality (Vaid, 2017, p. 54). The qur’ānic heaven offers an erotic atmosphere with creative possibilities for sexual pleasures, but the nature of these rewards is not completely clear, is it a fantasy or reality, and what is the dialectic between the two? (Tourage, 2020, p. 64). The qur’ānic heaven is sensual and sexual and the rewarded believers are surrounded with earthly sensual pleasures. Heavenly bodies are gendered and sexualized, have desires and are desired in ways that are not disciplined and controlled by worldly forces. This is part of a methodology to increase the attractiveness of heaven, where every desire of the body and wish of the mind will come true (Günther, 2020, p. 482). The uniqueness of heavenly pleasures present contrasts between the earthly world and heaven, and serve as an incentive to urge believers to choose the right path. There is a built-in tension between earth and heaven, prohibited and forbidden, accepted norms and silent desires.

According to Lange the inhabitants of heaven have a different capacity for enjoyment of pleasures, food and sex for example are endless, in contrast to the situation on earth (Lange, 2016, p. 151). The sexual imaginary of heaven constitutes liminal zones that are more open to interpretations, and its margins are defined by constructed social, cultural, bodily and theological borders. Sexuality in heaven is loud and clear and represents an earthly patriarchal world view, only male believers can practice their sexuality with their earthly wives, *ḥur al-῾ayn* and probably *ghilmān*. The focus on the *ghilmān*'s appearance exemplifies its importance, reflects the connection between personal performance and sexuality, and hint at an extension of the binary gendered earthly patriarchy. El-Rouayheb adds that, although not widespread, some jurists speculated that there was sex between men in heaven, whether by *ghilmān* or believers, based on the argument that sodomy and wine were forbidden only in earthly life (El-Rouayheb, 2005, pp. 128-137).

The discussion of the *huris* and *ghilmān*'s beauty presents a hierarchy of a working class that is aimed to fulfill male believers wishes, they are beings and things, a mechanism to fulfill the believers pleasures (Rustomji, 2008, p. 299). Although there is similarity in the focus of the descriptions on the personal performance of *ḥur al-῾ayn* and *ghilmān* and their ideal beauty, the *huris* sexual role is explained explicitly, while the sexual role of the *ghilmān* stays unclear or shadowy (al-Suyūtī, 1993, p. 72). This similarity raises questions regarding the *ghilmān*'s sexual role, do these expectations from the afterworld reflect hidden wishful desires or is it an finite reality that is expected to be continued in heaven? In other words, if the *ghilmān* have a sexual role in heaven, does it mean that homosexuality is permitted there as opposed to earthly life?[[9]](#footnote-9) Is it possible that more sexual variations are offered for men as part of heavenly reward? What are the expectations from the *ghilmān* and why is their personal performance so important?

To answer these questions, which are challenging by their nature, we shall analyze the descriptions of the *ghilmān's* personal performance in the medieval sources already mentioned above. An analysis of these descriptions will shed some light on their personal performance, a major parameter of their existence. In addition, it will hint at a wider spectrum of their services, including a sexual role, and present a sexual spectrum beyond the binary gendered differentiation. The focus on the *ghilmān's* personal performance leaves open many questions about their identity. For example, there is no mention whether they are Muslims, or if they have any private history except the fact that they were created by God to serve male believers. Furthermore, no traits are described other than their lovely and young appearance, a fact that strengthen the hypothesis that they had a sexual role unique for male believers.

**VII. The ghilmān's personal performance**

By adopting the concept of flat or round character, a term that was borrowed from literature, we can, at least partially, explain the focus of the sources in the *ghilmāns*' personal performance. Nothing is known about the *ghilmān* except their personal performance and that they were servants who serve food and drink. It appears from the sources that the *ghilmān*, like **flat characters,** have little or no complex emotions, thoughts, motivations, or personality, and they don't undergo any kind of change or development (Forster, 1927, pp. 48-55). They conform to the stereotype of good-looking servants, external characteristics, a focus that may hint at their concealed sexual role. The *ghilmān's* personal performance represents physical beauty which is the ideal, and spiritual beauty that symbolizes the purity of heaven. The aesthetics of the *ghilmān*, measured by qualities of beauty, is most important and manifests standards of beauty and harmony. They are not defined by their personality, morals or characteristics, but by parameters of aesthetics, and their beauty and aesthetics are based on earthly experience. The following analyzes will divide the descriptions of the ghilmān into three main categories: age, adornment with jewelry, and the significance of employing the idiom pearls.

**Age**

Death is the end of biological life, and the period of old age that separates life from death is perceived as an in-between zone. In Islam, as in some other religions and cultures, the human fear of this last worldly station and its bodily and mental implications is reflected in the admiration of youth. The physical and mental degeneration repulses because its visual performance and symbolic representations evoke in youth and in middle-aged people anxiety for the future. The process of human ageing is complex and irreversible, and it is influenced by biological, psychological, social, and spiritual factors (Rather, Khan Khttak and Yusof, 2019, p. 66). In the Qur’ān, the elderly receive far less attention then the young (O'Shaughnessy, 2001, 177-195). According to commentary to *Maryam* 19: 4, old age has revealed and concealed aspects and al-Zamkhsharī explains that white hair is a revealed aspect, while weakness of the bones is a concealed aspect (al-Zamkhsharī, 1987, p. 4).

Mental weakness and a fragile emotional state are also part of the qur’ānic descriptions of the elderly. According to *al-Ḥajj* 22: 5 memory is lost, and some will be left to live on to such an age that they forget all they once knew, a gloomy description of aged people by using the expression *arthal al-῾umr* (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, pp. 156-157). Another word that is used for this disheartening description is *haram* which means old age and senility, a return to early childhood that was characterized by limited understanding (al-Zamkhsharī, 1987, p. 144). *al-Naḥl* 16: 70 is another version of the description of mental weakness and al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī explain that loss of memory resembles the ignorance of childhood and youth, stripped of past knowledge (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, p. 187; al-Zamkhsharī, 1987, p. 619).

Knowing what the years will bring, the fear of physical and mental deterioration give rise to aversion and rejection of the "old" body. The old body symbolizes the temporariness of this world, part of the punishment for the original sin, but the reward for devotion is eternal youth in heaven. The human admiration of youth is reflected also in the descriptions of the *ghilmān*'s eternal youth as a central parameter of their existence. Immortality of heaven's inhabitants, part of the final reward, was extended to the *ghilmān*, whose beauty is based on eternal youth. Although ageing may manifest itself by graying hair, falling teeth and senility, the *ghilmān* will not be exposed to any of them (ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, pp. 463-464; *ʾ*Andalūsī, 2002, p. 26). In his commentary to 76: 19 al-Ṭabarī explains that the adjective *mukhalladūn* means that they are young forever. He adds that the Arabs used to say that when men grew older, yet their hair remained black and they did not lose their teeth, they were called *mukhalladūn*, namely, staying in a permanent state of young personal performance. Commentaries to 56: 17-18 strengthen the perception that the *ghilmān* will stay forever young and fresh (al-Bayḍāwī, 1996, p. 286; al-Ṭabarī, 1978, p. 223; al-Zamkhsharī, 1987, pp.457-460; ʼIbn Kathīr, 1997, p. 98). According to al-Andalūsī's metaphor, their youth is like a hidden or well-kept pearl that is kept away from rain and sun and its brightness, clearness, and whiteness is like that of a pearl (*ʾ*Andalūsī, 2002, p. 79). Rostomje claims that the commentators focus on what makes youth beautiful and their conclusion is that youth are beautiful because of their effervescence, "which is ephemeral on earth and extended indefinitely and always accessible in the garden" (Rustomji, 2008, p. 301).

**Adornments with jewelry**

In their commentary to 56: 17-18 and 76: 19al-Ṭabarī and others claim that the *ghiman*'s eternal youth means that they could adorn themselves with earrings and bracelets that were perceived appropriate for youth, but not for men (al-Ṭabarī, 1978, pp. 223, 272; al-Zamkhsharī, 1987, pp. 273-274, 457-460; ʼIbn Kathīr, 1997, pp. 98, 486-490). ʼIbn Kathīr adds that when the *ghilmān* deployed to serve their masters, everyone was astonished by their beautiful clothing and jewelry. The use of adornments as part of the *ghilmān's* personal performance is aimed at emphasizing their youth and beauty because male adults should be less adorned with jewelry, certainly not with gold or earrings.[[10]](#footnote-10)

To understand this argument, we should turn to the legal discussion on adorning male and female children with jewelry and to the discussion of ear piercing. We can assume that parents used to adorn their children with jewelry and that the jurists had to discuss this practice and decide whether to allow or prohibit it. There are various opinions regarding adorning children with jewelry and age and gender are an important parameter in the decision. According to al-Nawawī(died 1277) there are those who define boys' adornment with jewelry as prohibited, while others allow it until the age of seven (*ḥaqq al-tamyyiz*). A third group allows the adornment with jewelry if children are *ṣibyān* (boys and youth) with no demarcation of a specific age (al-Nawawī, 1966, p. 44). Jurists of different schools of law agreed that there is no religious purpose or other need to pierce boys' ears because it is a mutilation with no religious or medical need, while some of them permit the piercing of girls' ears (al-’Asrūshanī,**1997, p. 146; ’**Ibn al-Jawzī, **1984, p. 15;** ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1961, p. 18).

**The metaphor of pearls**

Pearls appear in the Qur’ān as an adornment for the believers in heaven, part of their material reward, and as a metaphor that describes the *ghilmān*. In *al-Ḥajj* 22: 23 and *Faṭir* 35: 33 God will shower his grace upon the believers by adorning them with pearls and in *al-Ṭur* 52: 24and *al-Insān* 76: 19 the *ghilmān* are described as pearls. Pearls, precious stones, were praised for their beauty, rarity, and economic value, in addition to their metaphorical use as symbol of purity. (Dietrich, p. 821). To decipher the multiple meanings of peals, the discussion will be divided into physical and visible traits of pearls and to metaphorical images.

Physical and visible traits - Pearls are admired for their beauty, symmetry, glistening, brightness that is showered on each other, cleanliness, whiteness that symbolizes purity and innocence, smooth and elegance, all descriptions that are attributed to *ghilmān* (al-Bayḍāwī, 1996, pp. 248, 286; ʼIbn Kathīr, 1997, pp. 98, 259-260). In other words, all the physical characteristics of pearls that are used to describe the *ghilmān* are connected to personal appearance. According to ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya the effect of scattering pearls issue from form their quality and quantity like the groups of *ghilmān* who are not static because their role is to fulfill the believers' needs and wishes. The effect of spread pearls is impressive no less than gold or silk, it is a beautiful sight, much more than if the pearls were collected in one place (ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, p. 465; *ʾ*Ibn *ʾ*Abi Dunyā, 1997, p. 160). Another interesting idea, although not mentioned in the sources, is that *ghilmān* are compared to pearls created from a living organ, not vegetal or inanimate, to emphasize their unique human nature.

Metaphorical images - Pearls are rare, fine, well-guarded, admirable, valuable, and their quality is everlasting. Because they are delicate, they are formed inside a shell as a defense from potential threats, as are *ghilmān* who are formed only in heaven, a protected environment. Like pearls, the *ghilmān* are highly [valued](https://www.definitions.net/definition/valued) and are unique because their creation is delicate, and their “magical” appearance is a grace from God and a manifestation of his unlimited powers. Some add that the *ghilmān*'s beauty arises from their spiritual purity which is everlasting like pearls.

**VIII. Conclusions**

An adoption of the method of stratigraphy enabled the layering of meanings and interpretations of the sources and revealing the evolution and expansion of the *ghilmān*'s personal appearance and its implications on their expanded roles. Over time, these descriptions were adapted, rejected, replaced or modified according to time, place, foreign influences, wishes and expectations in a way that created an expansion of the *ghilmān*'s roles. Through a careful analysis of the *ghilmān*'s personal performance, we added to the traditional accepted roles another variation for sexual pleasures, offered for men as part of the heavenly reward. The research supported the assumption that *ghilmān* did not offer the believers only food and drinks, but also sexual services. In a paradigm borrowed from literature, *ghilmān* were defined as flat characters, implying that the information about them is limited and their characteristics were not expanded or developed. All the descriptions of *ghilmān* focused on glorifying their personal performance in contrast to a lack of discussion of their characteristics. These descriptions supported the assumption that *ghilmān* had another role, sexual partners for male believers, although it was hidden and almost unspoken.

The qur’ānic heavenly taxonomy of gender and sexuality established an independent, conceptual and normative framework approaching questions of gender and sexuality that exist there only, part of the incentive to urge the believers to follow the right path. The case of the *ghilmān* extended the gap between the earthly world and heaven because the qur’ānic heavenly spectrum of gender and sexuality widened the earthly framework by shifting the known gendered boundaries. These detailed descriptions, including praising of the physical beauty of the *ghilmān*, are connected to bodily pleasures, part of a complementary message for more options to practice sexuality. There is a connection between personal performance, gender differentiations, sex roles and sexual variations. The social, gendered and sexual stratification in heaven starts with male believers at the top, then come female believers, and at the bottom *ḥur al-῾ayn* and lower are the *ghilmān*, that supply services, including sex, exclusively for male believers. The conclusion is that non-equal pleasures are offered for the believers and that heavenly rewards are gendered. Women, as opposed to men, were not rewarded sexually with special heavenly creatures that were born for their amusement like the *huris* and the *ghilmān*. While the sexual role of the *huris* is revealed, the sexual role of *ghilmān* is concealed and the detailed discussion of their personal performance established their sexual role as another variation offered for male believers.

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1. *Luqmān* 31: 18, *Fāṭir* 35: 33, *al-Dukhān* 44: 53, *al-Muzzammil* 76: 21, *al-Ḥājj* 22: 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more examples of the descriptions of heaven see: al- Ghazālī**, 1981, p. 527;** **’**Ibn Ḥazm, 1969, p. 12; ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1982, p. 196; al-Qādī, 2001, p. 54; ʼIbn Qayyim al-Jawzīyya, 1997, p. 347; al-Haythamī, 1968, pp. 398, 410; al-Suyūtī, 1993, p. 65.

For more about al-Ghazali's physical descriptions and their role to prepare and guide the believers for more abstract and spiritual of the after world see: Marmura, 1989, p. 51; Gianotti, 2001, pp. 173-174. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. #  For more about the Islamic discourse based on the Qur**’**ān that does not use natural or unnatural to describe sexualities see: Kugle, 2003, p. 197.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more about beauty in Islam see: Abouseif, 1998; Khuri, 2001. For more about beauty in heaven see: Rustomji, 2017, pp. 295-307. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more about legal Muslim jurisprudence, the compatibility and the obstacles which confront research of a topic in Islamic law see: Maghen, 1999, pp. 351-354; Maghen, 2005, pp. 281-283; Chaim Rispler, 2007, p. 15; Aziz al-Azmeh, 1988, p. 251; Schacht, 886-891. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For more about *ḥur al-῾ayn* see: Rustomji, 2017, pp. 266-277. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. According to Lane *ghilmān* are young men, youth boys or male children, before reaching young manhood which is called *shabāb*. For more see Lane, 1980, pp. 2286-2287. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *al-Ṭūr* 52: 20, *al-Dukhān* 44: 54, *Ṣād* 38: 52, *al-Ṣāfāt* 37: 47-49, *al-Raḥmān* 55: 56, 58, 70, 72, 74, *al-Waqi῾aa* 56: 22-23, 35-36.

For more about *ḥur al-῾ayn* see: Wensinck, p. 581; Haddad and Smith, 1975, pp. 47-48; Wadud-Muhsin, 1992, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For some research about homosexuality in Islam from the last two decades see the following examples: Maḥmūd, 2000; Adang, 2003, pp. 5-31; Rowson, 2003, pp. 45-72; Rusmir, 2003; Ze’evi, 2006; Habib 2010; Kugle, 2012; Ragab, 2015, pp. 428-54; Brown, 2017, pp. 1-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. At the eve of Islam men were adorned with gold jewelry, but the jurists' announced gendered differentiation by claiming that only women would be permitted to adorn themselves with gold jewelry in the earthly world, while men were prohibited from it.

For more see: al-Nasā’ī, 1988, pp. 165-68, 195; al- Bukhārī**,** 1985, pp. 501-503. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)