

Queen of Flowers: The Rose and its Significance in Middle Eastern and Islamic Cultures

IBREEZ ESMAIL, University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

This research paper examines the significance of the rose in Middle Eastern and Islamic cultures historically and in modern times and its use as an icon suggesting sanctity and higher status. Persian poetry contains an abundance of references to the divine associations of the rose. This paper focuses on the rose's relationship with the divine and how Muslim poets, artists, and other thinkers have used it in religious ceremonies as a metaphor for paradise. The paper draws on several articles and papers about the history and divinity of the rose in Islamic culture. Writings from Islamic scholars provide a basis for understanding the role of the rose in religious allegory. A range of newspaper articles, blogs, and recipes covering modern uses of the rose is also included. The paper concludes that the rose has an essential role in Islamic cultures due to its symbolism for the divine, which has caused it to be used as a sign of status in traditional practices, medicine, and food.

keywords: Cultural Studies, Islamic Culture, Middle Eastern Culture, Flora, Fauna

While such a small, vibrant plant, the rose has been a powerful source of imagery across many different regions and religions. The rose has played an especially significant role in Islamic culture as a symbol for the divine, specifically evoking the Prophet Muhammad and paradise in ways that have caused it to historically function as a sign of status in religious practices, festivals, and food.

The rose is perceived as a queen within multiple regions and cultures. It has been used to reference the heavenly in multiple religions; in Christianity, the rose has been thought of as a symbol for the Virgin Mary and the 'rosary' is named after the flower.¹ Although the emphasis is placed on the power and significance of the rose in Western culture and religions, it also plays an important role as a metaphor in Islamic cultures. For this paper, Islamic culture will represent regions with prevalent Muslim populations and traditions and generally focus on the Middle East and North Africa areas. Sources will range from the modern era back to the 13th century.

This paper draws on several articles about the history and divinity of the rose in Islamic culture while approaching the subject via poetry, perfumery, and art. Writings from Islamic scholars across many eras provide a basis for understanding the role of the rose in religious allegory. The paper also references a range of newspaper articles, blogs, and recipes that cover modern uses of the rose, especially rosewater, in the Middle East as well as in Persian and Islamic traditional practices and cuisines. The paper will start with a brief presentation of the meaning of scents and perfume in early Islamic culture and through the Ottoman era, which stretched from approximately 1300 to the early years of the twentieth century. Then, it will present some background on the rose, its cultivation, and its development in Islamic culture. Next, the paper will explore the importance of the

rose and its symbolism for the divine through allegory in poetry and art. It will cover different elements of the rose, such as its color and spelling in different languages. Finally, the paper will conclude by considering applications of the rose in modern contexts through traditions, medicines, and food. It will connect these uses with the rose's ongoing relationship with ideas about the divine.

Scents During the Ottoman Empire

Sweet scents have been an integral part of Islamic and Ottoman culture since their inception and remain so today. Historic textual sources describe how these scents permeated every corner of sacred spaces to create a greater connection to the divine. Historically, sweet scents were especially important in Islamic spaces such as the *Kaaba* in Mecca and Prophet Muhammad's Mosque in Medina.² Muslim authorities, such as caliphs and governors, were tasked with ensuring that these destinations were constantly fragrant, through the use of incense burners inside the structures and perfume on the foundations.³ Sweet fragrances are thought to be related to the Islamic idea of paradise: "paradise itself has soil that smells sweet".⁴ By introducing the scents into these spaces, Muslims could connect to paradise by moving past the material aspect of the location into a richer sensory experience.⁵ These scents, therefore, added another layer to the experience of visiting such a sacred place. Additionally, as the scents permeated into visitors' clothing, even after leaving the site, they were able to create a continued connection to the divine. In early Ottoman culture, the ability to use strong, sweet fragrances on the body and within these sacred spaces was a sign of wealth and social capital among the elite.⁶ The provision of scent could be interpreted as

a “symbol of patronage signaling both care for, and control of, these sites.”⁷

Sweet scents were also specifically associated with Prophet Muhammad. Early literary works describe how his scent was sweet and rosy, adding to his prophetic beauty and divinity.⁸ Numerous *hadiths*, traditional sayings of the Prophet, describe the “Prophet’s pleasant body odor, which reflected his piety and proximity to God.”⁹ Circling back to the adoption of scents in sacred spaces, it is possible that when some Muslims entered these spaces, they felt closer to the divine given that they smelled similar to their prophet, who is a strong source of their veneration. Many sources have suggested that the Prophet Muhammed carried scents of paradise on his person, such as the scent of the rose.¹⁰

Other elements of the rose provided additional sources of significance for the divine. The color and form of the rose and the spelling of the word in multiple languages are also important tools to reference religious allegory. Additionally, food and cultural practices were and still are another way to connect with the heavenly. The rose was cultivated regularly during the Ottoman Period to be used in ceremonies such as perfuming the Kaaba in Mecca or in tombs and shrines and has been incorporated into a number of recipes.¹¹ This paper will cover these topics in more depth in later sections.

Early Rose Use and Cultivation

Roses have been an important part of Islamic culture and dynasties which has contributed to the flower’s presence in many Asian regions both in the East and West. It was a regular practice to grow roses in special gardens; in Persian and Mughal areas, these gardens were seen as reflections of paradise. Palaces, such as the Golestan Palace of Tehran, built in 1865, became namesakes for

these flowers, receiving name like “The Palace of Roses.”¹² In the Ottoman Empire, roses were classified into ten different classes. Roses were ranked in the following manner from one to ten: The Simple Leaf Rose, The Ripper Rose, The Pazulu Rose, The Cinnamon Rose, The Stamp Leaf Rose, The Hundred Leaf Rose, The Tevekkeli Rose, The Rust Rose, The Indian Roses, and the Summer Winter Rose/The Everblooming Rose.¹³ A number of these names were based on the original location, appearance, and other distinguishing properties of the roses.

Rose production in the form of rosewater, syrup, and essential oils was common in Persia, and is still produced in this region today.¹⁴ These products were used both locally and traded across Asia, to regions as far away as China.¹⁵ From a local Persian perspective, rose petals were used within the royal house as a way to perfume the bedroom of the Sultan. Other practices included throwing roses in the water to welcome Mughal emperors home.¹⁶ It can be concluded that rose cultivation was, and still is, an integral part of Islamic culture.

Symbolism of the Rose

Spiritually, the rose has a number of different sources of origin within Islamic culture. Persian poets throughout history believed that Allah created the white rose as the queen of flowers.¹⁷ The nightingale, another source of allegory in Islam, fell in love with the rose and flew too close resulting in its wings being pierced by the flower’s thorns, turning the petals red. In Turkish and Arab tradition, the rose is thought to have originated from the perspiration of Prophet Muhammad.¹⁸

The rose has long been a symbol of divinity within Islamic culture. Generally speaking, the rose acts as a pathway to Allah through the stem of the flower. The Sufi poet, Rumi, who lived from 1207 to 1273, wrote, “What

is the scent of the Rose? The breadth of reason and intelligence, a sweet guide on the way to the eternal kingdom.”¹⁹ This connects back to the the emphasis of a rose’s scent, and it can be interpreted that the common usage of scents within Islamic culture comes from the significance of the sweet, floral fragrance the rose is thought to emit in heaven.

The rose is commonly used to describe Prophet Muhammad and his supernatural beauty as his scent and appearance have been closely compared to the rose in Islamic literature.²⁰ For example, many sources attested that he had a rosy complexion and that he averred that, “He who desires to smell my own perfume, let him smell the red rose,” signifying his olfactory relationship to the flower.²¹ The rose is also interpreted as a graceful and delicate creation, acting as another symbol for the Prophet’s “graceful disposition and harmonious complexion.”²² A sixteenth-century Ottoman poet, Hakani, wrote that “Muhammad’s body was of a medium height, much like the rose buds in the garden of paradise, that his round and wide-open face resembled the rose, and that nobody had smelled anything more beautiful than his body’s rose scent.”²³ The Prophet was also said to constantly be surrounded by roses in the garden of paradise.²⁴

In short, the rose became the flower of the Prophet, symbolizing both his physical and supernatural forms and qualities. In texts, such as the *Qur’an*, depictions called the “rose of the Prophet” were included to create a deeper connection with the divine and to gain protective blessings. For example, some Ottoman *Qur’ans* and *hilyes*, descriptive albums of the Prophet, include rose-shaped calligraphic icons.²⁵ Even when these drawings weren’t accompanied by religious text, they still can evoke devotional thoughts, actions, and connections.

The Physicality of the Rose

The physical appearance of the rose also creates allegory within Islamic culture. The color of the rose is used in the *Qur’an* to describe heaven: in Surah 55:35, the religious text states, “When the heaven is rent asunder and becomes rosy red-melting like grease.”²⁶ The color pink is also a strong metaphor for the divine, given that it is the combination of red and white. The fusion of these colors is thought to encapsulate the connection between God and the Prophet Muhammad and more broadly divinity and the human race. Red specifically represents the human aspects of the rose, through the *Qur’an*’s description of humankind as originating from a blood clot.

On the other hand, white signifies light, or *nur*, which represents Allah’s presence and being.²⁷ The physical structure of the rose is also significant in Islamic culture. One interpretation of the rose has three layers of five petals, then six, and then seven. The inner layer represents the five pillars of Islam: faith, prayer, alms, fasting, and pilgrimage. The second layer represents the six directions of belief: above, below, front, back, right, left. The third layer represents the seven verses in the opening chapter of the *Qur’an*. Last, the addition of all the numbers, 18, is the number value of *Hayy* which meaning “God as the ‘Eternally Living one’.”²⁸

The Wording of the Rose

Lastly, the actual words for the rose in Ottoman Turkish, *gul* and *verd*, have religious symbolism. The former is associated with Allah’s sacred names. It is made up of the letters *kaf*, which means “Sufficient” and *lam*, which means “Gracious.” The singular letters of the word, *verd*, also have Islamic significance: “‘v’ stands for *velilik* (guardianship/friendship),

the ‘r’ for *Rahim* (Merciful), and the ‘d’ for *Davetci* (Inviter). These three constituent letters of the term thereby pay homage to Muhammad’s divinely decreed apostleship by describing him as both God’s intimate friend and His caller to belief.”²⁹

The Arabic translation of the term rose is *warda*, which also yields an Islamic connotation that dates back to a Quranic verse.³⁰ The source—Surah Ar-Rahman, Ayat 37 (كَالَّذِي هَانَ وُرْدَةٌ فَكَانَتْ السَّمَاءُ انْشَقَّتْ فَإِذَا)—speaks of how the color of the sky on the Day of Resurrection would resemble that of a rose in its shade of redness.³¹

Modern Uses of the Rose

There are a number of sources of symbolism for the rose within Islamic culture that come from its physical appearance, scent, and spelling. It is possible that in some modern contexts some of these associations may have been partially forgotten. However, many Muslims today still incorporate roses into their traditional practices, medicine, and food, demonstrating the flower’s continued relevance.

The Rose in Tradition

The rose is used in a number of traditional Islamic practices in order to receive further protection and blessings. Rosewater is used to perfume a number of religious structures. For example, rosewater is currently used to wash the *Kaaba* twice a year in Mecca, Saudi Arabia.³² Specifically, rose oil is burnt in the *Kaaba*’s oil lamps and the black cloth covering the structure is sprinkled with rose water.³³ In the past, when certain buildings were converted to mosques they were also purified through rose water: “when Sultan Mehmet II conquered Istanbul in 1453, he had the renowned Aya Sophia church in

Istanbul washed thoroughly with rose water before converting it into a mosque.”³⁴

Roses are also used to welcome guests into some Arab households and in funeral practices. When entering an Arab household, guests are welcomed through the sprinkling of rosewater on their hands. At the end of the night, their hands are sprinkled again to ensure that there are no lingering odors from eating together.³⁵ In funeral settings, rosewater is offered to participants to wash their hands before reading the *Qur’an* during the service.³⁶ It is also used as a way for visitors to acquire blessings from important religious figures, such as *Imam Ali*, through “dipping their hands into the (rose) perfumed water and applying it to their faces,” at the location of his tomb. The power of scent returns, as the more fragrant the tomb, the higher the deceased stood in society.³⁷

Finally, the rose is also included in traditional dress. During the late Ottoman period, some Muslims would wear talismans that have the Prophet Muhammad’s name engraved in the center of a rose to provide them with further protection. Others wore rings that contain abstracted, rose-like designs.³⁸ The rose has also been embroidered on turbans and garments and has been especially common among members of the Qadiri Sufi order. Rose-tinted paper is also popular in Islamic prayer books as a method of further visual connection to the divine.³⁹

It can be interpreted that the use of the rose in tradition is a way to increase the sensory experience of connecting with the divine, given the flower’s allegory for paradise and Prophet Muhammad. Due to its divine symbolism, the rose is seen as a cleansing force that can be used to wash and scent houses of prayer as well as guests you bring into your household. It can also be used as a way to further connect with the deceased and ensure that they have blessings before they enter heaven.⁴⁰ Finally, wearing the rose on

articles of clothing is a way to continuously carry your spirituality with you and can be used as a protective force against sources of evil.

The Rose in Medicine

The rose has been a source of medicinal wonder within Islamic culture throughout history and until the present. The rose played an important role in Ottoman medicine beginning in the 14th century and appeared in most medical textbooks written by Ottoman physicians. For example, *Edviye-i Müfrefe*, a medical text written by Ishak bin Murat in the 14th century, mentions dried rose petal powder as a remedy to treat scabies and pimples.⁴¹ Even long before then, in the late tenth and early eleventh century (the Abbasid era), the Muslim physician, Ibn-Sina, had emphasized the importance of the rose in his medical text, “The Canon of Medicine,” stating that ingesting it enhanced one’s memory and was beneficial for eye diseases.⁴² Different forms of the flower are used for different purposes: “rose ointment and/or rose water to relieve headaches, rose oil to sooth stomach pain and...to alleviate heart pain”⁴³ as well as rose jam to heal lung issues.⁴⁴ The rose has also been used in the traditional drink, sherbet, to relieve nausea and indigestion.⁴⁵ On top of the scientific basis to the healing provided by roses, it is possible that Islamic medical cultures have drawn the healing properties of the flower from its connection to Prophet Muhammad.

The Rose in Food

The rose is a common ingredient in Islamic cuisines due to its sweet, distinct flavor and its connection to the divine. Rosewater is one of the most common forms of rose used in cookbooks and can appear as *golâb*, *jolab*, or *julep*. A Persian cookbook published in 2017,

called *The legendary cuisine of Persia*, uses the flower in almost all of its beverages, desserts, and confections.⁴⁶ The rose ranges in its role in cooking: in some dishes it is lightly added in at the end, while in others, it is fully incorporated as the base flavor. For example, some Persian cookbooks call for the cook to sprinkle rosewater on top of rice, meat, noodles, and pastries while other generously use it to flavor milk pudding, ice cream, and cookies.⁴⁷ The use of roses in food also seems to be slightly based on the seasons, with spring and summer dishes using more of the flower. In Maryam Sinaiee’s acclaimed 2019 cookbook called *From the Land of Nightingales & Roses*, dried rose petals and rosewater are incorporated into many more of the dishes from the warmer seasons than those of the cold ones.⁴⁸ Additionally, rosewater is traditionally consumed to break the fast during the month of *Ramadan* when the sun sets, and Muslims are allowed to eat.⁴⁹ Ingesting rose products is not only a sensory experience, but also a spiritual experience as it creates a full sensory immersion of both tasting, smelling, and feeling the food as well as an internal connection to the divine.

Conclusion and Further Research

The rose has offered a powerful source of allegory within Islamic cultures, spanning across many generations and geographies. Its link to paradise, Prophet Muhammad, and other aspects of divinity have made it an integral part of Islamic poetry, tradition, medicine, and cuisines. While rose-growing may not be as common a practice as it once was, the appeal of the rose persists among Muslim communities today, especially in culinary forms.

However, although this paper provides a thorough overview of the use and significance of the rose in traditional and

modern Islamic culture, it is important to remember that this paper only covers broader themes and specific traditions in certain regions may differ greatly. Modern uses of the rose need to be investigated further. Research also needs to be conducted on the significance of the rose depending on environmental factors such as geographic location or sect of Islam. It would be

interesting to understand if the use of the rose differs by gender, age, or marital status within certain Islamic cultures. These are just some ideas on further directions for research, but it is apparent that there is much more work that needs to be conducted to build upon this basis of understanding of the significance of the rose.

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⁵ Bursi, "Scents of Space."

⁶ Ergin, "The Fragrance of the Divine."

⁷ Bursi, "Scents of Space."

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¹⁵ Zwemer, "The Rose and Islam."

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¹⁷ Zwemer, "The Rose and Islam."

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²¹ Gruber, "The Rose of the Prophet."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Zhou, "Rose, Tulip, and Peony."

²⁵ Gruber, "The Rose of the Prophet."

²⁶ Zwemer, "The Rose and Islam."

²⁷ Gruber, "The Rose of the Prophet."

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³¹ Ibid.

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³³ Ergin, “The Fragrance of the Divine.”

³⁴ Celik, “The Rose: A Flower.”

³⁵ Lalit Kumar. “Rose Water: An Intrinsic Part Of The Arab Culture.” Hashems Nuts and Coffee Gallery, November 17, 2012.

³⁶ A ‘Lam Hušang. “GOLAB.” In *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, December 15, 2001.

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³⁸ Gruber, “The Rose of the Prophet.”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ergin, “The Fragrance of the Divine.”

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