

﴿ From the Appearance to the Reality ﴾

(The Mirror of the World to the Radiance of the Hereafter)

A Comparative Analysis of the World and the Hereafter

Introduction

In the world we inhabit, images often overshadow realities. In this world of appearances, good and evil, oppression and justice, beauty and ugliness, light and darkness coexist, sometimes to the point that the boundaries between them become indistinct, making the discernment of truth from falsehood difficult.

In this world, the oppressor may appear victorious while the oppressed may seem defeated; ugliness may be disguised as beauty, and darkness may present itself as light.

From an Islamic perspective, however, this world offers a partial, transient, and deceptive reflection of reality. The true world, the Hereafter, is where reality is unveiled, and everything returns to its rightful place.

1. The Dual Definition of the World and the Hereafter in the Qur'an and Tradition:

Islam, in its comprehensive and realist worldview, regards the human being as possessing both corporeal and spiritual dimensions and as journeying between two worlds: the temporal and the eternal. From this standpoint, the world is a fleeting, limited, and instrumental domain, a means to attaining ultimate perfection in the Hereafter.

In contrast, the Hereafter is the realm of reward and the full realization of truths, where veils are lifted, and the inner essence of things becomes manifest.

1.1. The World in the Qur'an: Play, Distraction, and Deception

The Qur'an often describes the world using terms such as amusement, play, a meagre commodity, and deception. For instance:

«اعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهُوَ زِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِي الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ...»

“Know that the life of this world is but play and amusement, adornment, boasting among you, and competition in wealth and children...” (Surah al-Ḥadid, verse 20)

The “life of this world” "الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا" does not refer to the physical Earth or creation, which are signs of divine power and beauty. Rather, it refers to the human way of life characterized by superficial values.

Allah describes this lifestyle using five features:

Play (لَعِبٌ): childish, meaningless acts

Amusement (لَهُوَ): distractions that divert from life's true purpose

Adornment (زِينَةٌ): external beautification

Boasting (تَفَاخُرٌ): pride in possessions

Competition for wealth and offspring (تَكَاثُرٌ فِي الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ): endless material accumulation

Some scholars interpret these as five stages of human life, childhood play, youthful amusement, vanity in adulthood, pride in midlife, and greed in old age.

The verse continues by warning that this life is like rain that delights farmers, but eventually withers, turns yellow, and becomes dry stubble, a metaphor for physical decay from youth to old age.

Ultimately, Allah declares that the worldly life is nothing but a deceptive provision.

1.2. The Hereafter in the Qur'an: The Abode of Reality and Permanence

In contrast, the Qur'an refers to the Hereafter with terms such as «دارالقرار» (the permanent abode), «دارالآخرة» (the world to come), «دارالبقاء» (the everlasting abode), and «دارالحق» (the abode of truth). As it says:

«وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ لَئِيَّ الْحَيَوَانُ لَوَ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ»

“And surely the abode of the Hereafter—that is the true life, if only they knew.” (Surah al-Ankabut (THE SPIDER), verse 64)

The term "الحَيَوَان" (true life) in this verse emphasizes that earthly life is only a shadow of reality. Only in the Hereafter is true, enduring life realized, where everything finds its rightful place.

1.3. Prophetic Traditions: The World as a Farm for the Hereafter

The Ahl al-Bayt (peace be upon them) describe the world as a “farm” for the Hereafter, a place of planting, not permanent residence.

Imam Ali (a) states: “Verily, this world is a place of passage, not a place of permanence.” (Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 42)

Such expressions show that the world has no inherent value unless it serves as a bridge toward eternal perfection.

1.4. The World and the Hereafter: Two Dimensions of One Journey

According to Islamic teachings, the world and the Hereafter are not mutually exclusive or contradictory. They are two stages of one continuous journey. The world is the realm of choice and trial; the Hereafter is the realm of judgment and manifestation.

Actions performed in the world materialize in their true form in the Hereafter. Therefore, if the world is treated as a means, it leads to truth, but if made an end, it becomes a veil from reality.

2. The Imaginary World: A Deceptive Facade

One of the Qur'an's and Sunnah's essential warnings about the world is its misleading appearance. Islam views the world as no more than an "image", one adorned with luxuries and outward beauty that distracts from reality.

This "imaginary world" is the same one that can portray evil as good, oppression as victory, darkness as light, and ugliness as beauty. This is where «insight» and «faith» become essential.

2.1. The World's Deceptiveness in the Qur'an

The Qur'an often refers to the world's capacity to mislead. One example appears in Satan's speech:

«قَالَ فَبِمَا أَغْوَيْتَنِي لَأُزَيِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَأُغْوِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ»

“He said: Because You have led me astray, I will certainly make [evil] attractive for them on earth and lead all of them astray.”

(Surah al-Hijr, verse 39)

This “adornment” of evil represents the construction of an imaginary world, an illusion that conceals reality.

Another verse reads:

«زُيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ حُبُّ الشَّهَوَاتِ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ وَالْبَنِينَ وَالْقَنَاطِيرِ الْمُقَنْطَرَةِ... ذَلِكَ مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَاللَّهُ عِنْدَهُ حُسْنُ الْمَآبِ»

“Beautified for people is the love of desires, of women, children, treasures of gold and silver... That is the enjoyment of worldly life, but with God is the best return.” (Surah Al Imran, verse 14)

2.2. Imam Ali (a) on the World's Deceptiveness

In Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam Ali vividly describes the world as deceitful and unstable: “The world is a place of sorrow, trial, and tribulation. Among its deceptions is that a man may awaken secure but sleep in fear.” (Hikmah 430)

Elsewhere, he likens it to a snake: “The world is like a snake, smooth to the touch but its inner venom is deadly.” (Hikmah 119)

2.3. The Mystical View: The World as Illusory Imagination

In Islamic mysticism, especially in the works of Ibn Arabi and Mulla Şadra, the world is called the realm of imagination, not the divine imagination, but a deceptive one. According to Mulla Şadra, the material world occupies the lowest plane of existence and is merely a dim reflection of the higher worlds of intellect and image.

This worldview teaches that the world’s illusions are projections of the mind, not reality itself. Only the insightful seeker can pierce the veil and perceive the light of truth.

Why is the Imaginary World Dangerous?

- It blurs moral discernment.
- It delays repentance and transformation.
- It dresses oppression as justice and falsehood as truth.

In this world, someone who appears righteous may in fact be a thief of faith, while someone shunned by society may be honoured by Allah. These contradictions affirm the significance of the Hereafter as the realm of ultimate clarity.

3. The Hereafter: The Unveiling of Truth

If the world is the domain of concealment and mixture, the Hereafter is the realm of disclosure and distinction. In the Hereafter, all that appeared ambiguous or misleading in the world is shown in its true form.

It is, in Qur’anic terms, dar al-ḥaqq, the abode of truth, where falsehood can no longer wear the mask of virtue.

3.1. “The Day Secrets Are Disclosed”

The Qur’an states:

«يَوْمَ تُبْلَى السَّرَائِرُ»

“The Day when secrets are laid bare.”

(Surah al-Tariq (THE MORNING STAR), verse 9)

On that day, people will be judged not by appearance, wealth, or speech, but by their intentions and the true essence of their deeds.

3.2. Embodiment of Deeds

According to Islamic teachings, deeds are not lost but assume real forms in the Hereafter, reflecting their inner essence.

Imam Sadiq (a) says:

«ما مِنْ عَبْدٍ يَخْرُجُ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا عُرِضَتْ عَلَيْهِ أَعْمَالُهُ صُوراً فِي قَبْرِهِ، إِنْ كَانَ مُحْسِناً فِي أَبِي صُورٍ، وَإِنْ كَانَ مُسِيئاً فِي أَقْبَحِ صُورٍ.»

“No servant departs this world but that his deeds are presented to him in images in his grave, if righteous, in the most beautiful forms; if evil, in the most repulsive.”

Traditions describe that:

- Prayer appears as radiant light.
- Backbiting as a foul odour or harmful creature.
- Not giving alms as serpents coiled around the neck.

This embodiment illustrates divine justice: one faces exactly what one has earned, no more, no less.

3.3. Light and Darkness: The Essence of Human Souls

In the Hereafter, souls are either luminous or dark, depending on their earthly lives. Regarding believers, the Qur’an says:

«يَسْعَى نُورُهُمْ بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَانِهِمْ...»

“Their light will run before them and on their right...”

(Surah al-Hadid, verse 12)

In contrast, for disbelievers:

«وَوَظَنُوا أَنَّهُمْ مَّأْخُودُونَ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَحَبِطَ عَنْهُمْ مَا كَانُوا يَفْتَرُونَ»

“They assumed they were rightly guided, but the truth will be revealed, and their lies exposed.” (Surah al-Qasas, (THE STORY) verse 74)

3.4. The Absolute Manifestation of Truth and Falsehood

In the Hereafter, no place remains for lies, hypocrisy, or manipulation. The Qur'an declares:

«وَقُلْ جَاءَ الْحَقُّ وَزَهَقَ الْبَاطِلُ إِنَّ الْبَاطِلَ كَانَ زَهُوقًا»

“Truth has come, and falsehood has perished. Surely falsehood is ever bound to perish.” (Surah al-Isra, verse 81)

4. The Place of Beauty and Ugliness in the Two Realms:

Another key difference between the world and the Hereafter lies in their criteria and expressions of beauty and ugliness.

4.1. Worldly Beauty: Decorated but Superficial

In the world, beauty is often judged by appearance, wealth, fame, and social approval. These traits, while lacking true moral substance, may still attract admiration.

Hypocrisy, pride, envy, greed, and deceit may remain hidden or even appear as charity or concern. In the Hereafter, however, these vices manifest in hideous and terrifying forms. Qur'anic verses describe sinners' faces as darkened:

«تَرَى الَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا عَلَى اللَّهِ وُجُوهُهُمْ مُسْوَدَّةٌ»

“You will see the faces of those who lied about God blackened.”

(Surah al-Zumar, (THE TROOPS) verse 60)

4.2. Eternal Beauty: The Manifestation of Inner Purity

In the Hereafter, beauty and ugliness are measured solely by inner reality, intention, and moral substance. There, outward and inward will be unified, and only truth remains.

According to the Qur'an and traditions, true beauty lies in qualities such as sincerity, piety, kindness, patience, knowledge, humility, justice, and self-sacrifice. These may go unseen in the world, but in the Hereafter, they are the source of radiance.

Imam Sadiq (a) said:

«إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَنْظُرُ إِلَى صُورِكُمْ وَلَا إِلَى أَجْسَادِكُمْ، وَلَكِنْ يَنْظُرُ إِلَى قُلُوبِكُمْ وَأَعْمَالِكُمْ»

“Indeed, God does not look at your appearances or bodies, but He looks at your hearts and deeds.”

(al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 276)

Such inner beauty becomes luminous in the Hereafter. Some reports mention that the faces of believers shine with intense light, while the faces of disbelievers and hypocrites are dark and grotesque.

5. Conclusion: Life Under the Light of Reality or the Shadow of Appearances?

A deeper engagement with Qur'anic teachings, hadith, and Islamic wisdom reveals a fundamental distinction between the world of images and the world of truth.

The present world, though tangible, is but a shadow of reality, a shifting blend of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, justice and oppression, and beauty and ugliness.

This world often hides truths behind veils, requiring faith, insight, and divine guidance to uncover them.

The Hereafter, by contrast, is the realm of unveiling, where nothing remains hidden from those who seek truth. There, deeds, intentions, and inner realities are revealed in full clarity.

No room remains for deception, hypocrisy, or pretence. Each person is shown as they truly are, not as they once appeared.

The world is a passage, not a dwelling. It is a test image. If one clings to it, it veils the truth; but if used as a tool, it leads to the truth.

As Imam Ali (a) says:

«مَنْ أَبْصَرَ بِهَا بَصَرَتْهُ، وَمَنْ أَبْصَرَ إِلَيْهَا أَعْمَتْهُ.»

“Whoever sees through the world gains insight, and whoever looks at it [with attachment] becomes blind.”

(Nahj al-Balaghah, Hikmah 421)

Thus, only by opening the eye of the heart, transcending surface appearances, and seeking the essence of things can one journey from the world of images to the world of truth. This truth-centred vision not only illuminates the path to the Hereafter, it grants inner peace, dignity, meaning, and stability in this life as well.

