

Shah Abdul Latif's Poetry: A Reading in Eco-Islamic Mystic Poetics

Javed Ali¹

¹Assistant Professor, Jamia Millia Govt Degree College Malir (M), Karachi; javedarajper@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This study investigates Shah Abdul Latif's poetry, dubbed as *Shah-Jo-Risalo* through the lens of ecocriticism. *Shah-Jo-Risalo* is a *magnum opus* in literature and a revered poetic compendium by a venerated Sindhi Islamic-Mystic poet Shah Abdul Latif. The *Risalo* envisions Latif's exquisite mystical thoughts veiled in evocative Islamic-Poetic language. His poetry mirrors his quest for the ultimate destiny and togetherness of the soul with the Supreme. It is laden with Mystic-Philosophical thought; it reflects his observant eye on the natural world with a lofty flight of imagination and interfuses intricate relationships between human and non-human elements manifesting his environmental consciousness at par. Landscapes, waterscapes, flora and fauna are imbued with inherent value and metaphorical spiritual underpinnings. The undertaken study places *Shah-Jo-Risalo* within the ambit of eco-poetics and bespeaks how and in what ways his verses are pregnant with Islamic-Mystic thoughts rooted in the ecological reality of the time. In addition, this study delves into Bhattai's poetic narrative *Shah-Jo-Risalo* to penetrate how and in what ways his verses project human and non-human entities and the relationship between human-human and human-universe. In this connection, this study embraces a qualitative approach and analyses selected verses that describe the geography and landscape of Sindh, highlighting the intrinsic values of the floras, fauna, mountains and waters symbolic of Islamic-Spiritual truths and interconnectedness between living and non-living, both entering into dialogues with each other. Close examination of the various *surs* in Bhattai's poetry reveals constructive and destructive powers are in-built the natural world when examined in the light of an Eco critical lens. The study further unfolds that Bhattai captures the natural beauty in his verses effectively and powerfully expresses the inherent meaning in nature, reflecting his eco-consciousness and promoting ecological awareness for a harmonious co-existence with the natural world. Moreover, Bhattai weaves spiritual strains of divine love and matchless poetic imagination, transforming these humble characters from ancient folktales as a medium of expression to convey Islamic-Mystical insights.

Keywords: Latif's Poetry, Bhattai's eco-spiritual consciousness, Eco-Sindhi poetics, Mystic poetics. Eco criticism, Humans and Non-humans, environmentalism

Introduction:



“The function of poetry ...is to nourish the spirit of man by giving him the cosmos to suckle” -
Francis Ponge. *The Voice of Things*

When we look at the world's literary figures, we come across the unsurpassed names of Plato, Aristotle, Dante, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, John Milton, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and T. S Eliot in the West. Parallel to these names are universally acclaimed literary figures of Farid-ud-Din Attar, Moulana Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, and Imam Ghazali, representatives of the East, who have inspired both Occidentals and Orientals. Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, a Sindhi sage, is among the poetic geniuses whose verses possess moon-like effulgence in the Sufi doctrine and reflect his consciousness of the physical phenomenon of the cosmos. His poetry underscores deep meanings beyond the physical dimensions of the cosmological objects. Through the flight of his imaginative power, he transcends the physical dimension and amalgamates the physical and non-physical to embark on his journey to the Prime. The words are woven beautifully in the *Risalo*. One who listens to his verses is transported into an ecstatic state and finds the message as his own. In other words, it is a detailed reading of Islam as the complete code of life, which he does beautifully by interweaving the objects in the natural world.

Literature Review

Studies on Bhittai predominantly centre around mysticism, nationalism, feminism and folklore. Researchers on Bhittai argue that the poet has preserved local traditions and contributed to Sindhi literature. Some scholarship argue that female characters are the archetype of love and sacrifice on the path to union. As a result, existing scholarship sees Bhittai's poetry as mystical, in which characters go through seven Sufi stations. Despite this, his poetry has been neglected from the perspective of eco-spiritualism.

Ecocriticism, to put it simply, “...is the study of the relationship between the literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty C. 1996). The Ecocritical framework examines how nature is depicted in a poem, novel, or literary genre; how using Earthly objects as Metaphors or personifications influences our treatment of them; and how physical settings contribute to a literary genre. E. Bressler (2011) asserts that the way we live, the foods we eat, the places we work, we play and the way we study are interrelated. Contemporary eco-critical scholarship

pivots around the connection between literature and environment. Much work is done in the West. Islamic spiritual mysticism, especially Sindh Sufi-poetics, has remained unexplored.

This study argues that Bhattai uses natural objects which become manifestations of divine presence. The character's journey becomes spiritual and non-entities possess the living soul and interact with humans on the path of Sufi Islamic mysticism. The symbols become sacred through which Bhattai establishes Islamic mysticism.

This paper argues that poetry in *Shah Jo Risalo* conveys spiritual reality, which is rooted in Islamic mysticism.

Theoretical framework

This study combines eco-criticism, Islamic ecological philosophy and Sufi mystical thoughts as its literary frameworks. It is laden with Mystic-Philosophical thought; it reflects his observant eye on the natural world with a lofty flight of imagination; it interweaves intricate relationships between human and non-human elements; and it manifests his environmental consciousness at par. Landscapes, waterscapes, flora and fauna are imbued with inherent value and metaphorical spiritual underpinnings. So the three concepts of eco-criticism, Islamic ecological philosophy and Sufi mysticism are relevant and interconnected.

Eco-spiritual Mysticism in *Sur Sassui*

The outcast at birth by fate - signifies multifaceted aspects - of the soul's forgetfulness and separation - is symbolic of consequential anguish emerging from separation, displays a longing for reunion with the Supreme. She is the epitome of the struggle for reunion. She boldly faces the journey's trials and tribulations and upholds values of steadfastness, patience, and reliance on the creator. *Sassui's* parting from *Punhoon* inflicts pain on her mind, heart and soul. She cannot exist in separateness. To claim togetherness, she leaves everything behind to meet *Punhoon*. Shah Abdul Latif signifies *Sassui's* separation from *Punhoon* as the disintegration of the soul from the divine. *Sassui* seeks her beloved, demonstrates resilience and remains steadfast, sincere and committed. As Coleridge expresses a smack of Hamlet in himself, *Sassui's* readers, with perceptible eyes, will see a smack of *Sassui* in them. Thereby Bhattai paints, before readers, a vivid picture of the human soul yearning for the Prime soul. Bhattai teaches beautifully that the restless soul, an outcast in the world, is the one who struggles to get reunited with the Prime Spirit. She saves her soul from being tainted on her journey to the beloved. Through *Sassui*, Bhattai beautifully expresses the purpose of life and humans' existence on Earth. It reminds us of humanity's return to its origin and serves as a constant reminder. *Sassui* introspectively

reminds herself in the first line of the ways of life, governed by some external force This Bhattai's *bait* expresses *Sassui's* plights and separation of the soul. The disconnectedness causes isolation and pain, whereas connectedness heals it.

”ويديل ٿي وايون ڪري، ڪنل ڪوڪاري
هن پن پنهنجا ساريا، هوءَ هنجون هنڌن لاءِ هاري.“
(سر معزوري، 873)

A dismembered twig and the separated soul are wailing
The dismembered recollects the foliage and the latter laments the separation.

This expression underscores the twig's anguish when separated from the leaves nourishing it. It is a call to the health of the ecosystem. It is not a severed and disintegrated twig, but it heralds the disintegration of the environment leading to deforestation and degradation. By personifying the twig's lament, the poet expresses the emotional aspect of the natural world.

Sassui has lost the self and is immersed in the thoughts of her beloved, *Punhoon*. She decries the soul's separation that the natural world partakes in her grief. Pains befriend with her. She lives in the company. As a result, *Sassui's* pain has permeated everything. The *Sassui's* anguish has affected the wind, the skies, birds, cattle and beasts. The winds are mournful; the trees sway sympathetically. Consequentially, these painful hot winds are drying everything. Ecocritically, the skies are witness to *Sassui's* pain. The birds, cattle, and beasts join the skies as witnesses to the consequential bearings of separateness. Thus, the *Risalo* draws readers' to be mindful of the empathy of the natural world as it reverberates with human emotions. This depicts the interconnectedness of everything in the universe which resonates with the same emotion.

”لڳي ڪوسو واءُ، لوڪ مڙوئي لهسيو،
اين منجهان آئيو، هيءُ! هيءُ! جو هڳاءُ،
طيورن تنواريو، پنهنونءَ پڄاڻانءَ
رسيو سور شبنان ڪي، وحشن وڻانءَ،
مروئن موت قبوليو، اپر افسوساءِ،
بر پڻ ڪن بڪاءُ، اڪنڊيا آري لءِ گهڻو.“
(سر سسئي آبري، 756)

The universe seems to be seared with scorching winds

(Consequential to *Sassui's* parting)
The skies mourned her grief
The birds decried the *Punhoon's* flight
The cattle were awe-struck with pain
The beast offered to sacrifice at *Sassui's* altar
Everything expressed their love effusively for the beloved, *Punhoon*.

Eco-spiritual Mysticism in *Sur Marvi*

Marvi embodies love and longing for the origin, love for simple living, reverence for natural objects and pain emanating from parting ways serve as a reminder of the return to nature and humble living. Marvi highlights a note of *Sassui*-like craving for a reunion with the beloved. Unlike *Sassui*, her *Punhoon* is her cottage and native birthplace. She is symbolic of love and longing. Her yearning for humble living and pure sincerity constitute her constitution. She declines the gifts, palaces comfort and treasures at the hand of Umar. She remembers trees. Crops, and huts, thereby she refuses to sacrifice the simple rural life at the altar of palatial life. She reminds us of the relationship with the environment reflecting and highlighting strains of deep ecocriticism and consciousness. Some *baitis* are adduced herein in favour of this argument.

”ايء نه مارن ريت جي سيڻ مٿانن سون تي،
اچي عمر ڪوٽ ۾، ڪنڊيس ڪان ڪريت،
پڪن جي پريت، ماڙيءَ سي نه مٿيان،“
(سر ماروي، 683)

It is not customary of my kinsfolk to trade loved ones for gold
I will not do anything paradoxical to the values of my relative.
I will not barter my humble hut dwelling with grandiose royal palaces.

”اول آخر آهه هلڻ منهنجو هوت ڏي،
پور هيو سندن پورهيتن، والي ڪيم وچاءِ،
سو مون ٿورو لاءِ جيئن جيئري ملان جت ڪي“
(سر سسئي آبري، 753)

Now or someday, I have to go to the beloved
My Lord! Undo not, the labourer's labour

Eco-spiritual Mysticism in *Sur Moomal*- a princess of dazzling beauty-a trapper of suitors, a signifier of love and longing-and consequential mental travails of longing. Her enchanting presence captures readers' imagination into the world of magic and mystery designed with deceitful illusions to test the seekers. *Rano* is attracted to her allures and enters into her world. The allures, however, serve as a backdrop and unfold spiritual love which ultimately claims her life. Her persona dressed in a green shawl, applying Sandalwood oil and perfumes reflects her understating of the earth's bounties.

She manifests a deep ecological awareness aligning with an ecocritical perspective. *Moomal* expresses reverence for the Earth as it enshrouds the deceased beloved. For beloved, it is a sacred resting place that highlights the interconnectedness of life and the environment. Thereby, *Moomal* is a genuine proponent of the human-nature relationship.

”جا پون پيرين مون، سا پون مرئي سچڻين،
دڳ لتبا ٿورڙ مه، ابي ڏناسون،
ڏينهن مرئي ڏون اتي لوچ لطيف چئي.“
(سر مومل راتو، 1101)

The Earth beneath my feet enshrouds my beloved
I have witnessed the seekers covered with dust on the way to seeking
Latif argues that life is short-lived, rise and reach destiny.

Moomal's tale is an invitation to a place of love and harmony for all. A place where time comes to a halt. There is peace around. Chapter two of the *Sur* echoes this spirit when four friends exclaim to go to *Kak*. Ecocritically, it reflects the equal distribution of the bounties without any class difference. Veils of duality get removed and everybody becomes one with the beloved.

”هلو، هلو، ڪاڪ تڙين، جتي نينهن اچل،
نه ڪا رات نه ڪو ڏينهن، سپڪو پسي پرينءَ ڪي،“
(سر مومل، 1080)

Let us go to *Kak* where love overflows
And without restriction, all can see the beloved.

Eco-spiritual Mysticism in *Sur Suhni*

Suhni a breaker of society constraint. She goes against the norms of the society and family opposition to meet *Mehar*, her beloved. To meet him clandestinely at night, she has to swim across the river using baked clay. One eventful night, she drowned in the river as she was using the unbaked clay pot, which her sister-in-law had unknowingly replaced. Her story mirrors the declining human condition, familial opposition and societal constraints. More importantly, it reflects the relationship between humans and the natural world as the pitcher becomes her source of survival in the river and reaches her beloved. In this *sur*, baked and unbaked jars are symbolic of a perfect and imperfect guide. *Suhni*, a lover, displays fidelity and adheres to the principle of perpetual struggle in the face of all difficulties of life without complaint.

This verse depicts the condition of today's environmental concerns as the poet talks about the declining sources and the ultimate death of *Sussui*. Speaking broadly, the *sur* and *Suhni* are about the human soul struggling to meet the beloved. It cannot be confined to any geography. It is about us, humans and the use of the bounties given to human beings. If the bounties are used wisely, humans can add to their lives and the lives of the sources of the natural world. The verse suggests that we hear the call to environmentalists but it is after when all resources have vanished.

”گھڙو ڀڳو، منڌ مڙي، وسيلو ويا،
تنهان پوءِ سنا، سهڻيءَ سڌ ميهار جا.“
(سر سهڻي، 1202)

The jar disintegrated, *Suhni* died and lost all that could be of assistance to her
When all was over. After that, you heard and understood the call of *Suhni*.

Ecological Web as a Divine Signifier

The universe is symbolic. It helps gain insights into the workings of divine artistry. It serves as a bridge to understanding the invisible. The sun, the moon, the seas, the rivers, plants, animals and the fixed mountains express. He could see the life and soul in the non-living Barren and deserted places such as deserts, which are signifiers of spiritual barrenness and desolation. Rivers signify life, its flow as time flows. To Shah, humanity and the universe are not separate from each other but interconnected. The concept of God, according to Bhattai, is linked to the

unity of everything in the universe. In *Sur Kalyan*, he beautifully depicts the idea of unity in the universe.

”ايڪُ فِصْرُ دَر لڪ، ڪوڙين ڪٿس ڳڙڪيون،
جيڏاھن ڪيان پرڪ، تيڏانهن صاحب سامهون.“
(سر ڪلياڻ، 49)

The universe is a grand mansion with a million gates and windows
Every gaze catches the sight of Allah wherever eyes look.

In this *bait*, *Sassui* embodies the relationship with the natural world very beautifully. She expresses a profound sense of responsibility in her connection with the natural world. She is comfortable in the wilderness as the mountain serves her as a bed, slab mattress and animal relative. No expression can express this respect and recognition of the human bond with natural objects as this. The verse buoys up the status of non-humans as creatures to kinfolk and relations. It encourages a sense of empathy and respect. It is an indirect urge to protect the environment.

”چيون چير ڪٿ، پهڻ پٿرائيون پائيان
جتي پويم راتڙي، مرون منهنجا مٺ
ساجن جي سهت، ڏونگر ڏولي مون.“
(سر حسيني، 992)

Sur Sarang is devoted to rain depicted as synonymous with Allah’s mercy for all people, animals, birds and the earth. The Prophet of Islam was sent as a mercy to the world. A similar strain runs through this *Sur*. Ecocritically, rain being a natural phenomenon, has transformative power. It brings life to the earth; sustains life, increases crop product and contributes to biodiversity. The transformative force of the rain has a purifying and cleansing impact on the natural world and everything in it. All the creatures on Earth seem to welcome it. The poet highlights the note of mercy in these words.

اڄ پڻ اتر پار ڏي، ڪڪريون ڪاريون،
وسي ٿو وڏ ڦڙو، ٽهڪن ٿيون ٿاريون،
لٽين لڪ لطيف چئي، ”ڀايون تاساريون“
”چنديون پٿاريون، وري وٿائين اٿيون.“
(سر سارنگ، 372)

The north is covered with dark clouds
And rains it in big drops

The flocking offers deep lessons for thriving: the significance of community and collaborative actions. Through the ecocritical lens, this phenomenon induces a collective and cooperative approach to sustainable living. It discourages individualistic, crooked attitudes. It underscores life in biodiversity and biodiversity in life thereby promoting a sense of harmonious living in the biodiversity of life in this ecological web. On this web, nothing is ineffective or valueless, even a small one.

وگر ڪيو وتن ڀرت نه چنن پاڻ ۾
پسو پڪيڙن مائڻهان مڙي گهڻو.
(سر ڏهر، 277)

The cranes flock together and do not disconnect themselves from each other
Learn from birds the values of living in harmony and social association

Conclusion

This *study* has examined the ecocritical underpinnings articulated in *Shah-Jo-Risalo* by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, unpacking his deep-seated connection between human and non-human entities. Close examination of the various *surs* in Bhittai's poetry reveals constructive and destructive powers are in-built the natural world when examined in the light of an ecocritical lens.

It is discovered that the women characters are representative characters gifted with the qualities of tolerance, sacrifice, humbleness and sincerity. *Sassui* is an icon of struggle, determination and sacrifice. *Nafs lawama* (accusing soul) is symbolic of her character. She comes to realize her lapse of forgetfulness soon after her lover has been abducted by her brother-in-law. Her struggle for unison removes her duality of existence and becomes one with the beloved as she perishes while wandering in the wild to search for her *Punhoon*. Marvi does not compromise her pine for her desert life over mundane offerings of comfort. She longs day and night for simple living. *Suhni* does not compromise her love. As a result, she breaks all familial barriers and becomes one with Mehar. Leela is left in repentance for trading her husband with a woman in exchange of a precious necklace. She reflects *nafs ammara* (soul-commanding worldly desires) preferring worldly things instead of sticking to moral values. After she has realized her

mistake, she amends her folly and becomes an icon of *nafs lawama*. Through these characters, Bhattai educates readers about the tenets of mysticism. The characters underscore harmonious living with nature and ultimately highlight transcendent togetherness emphasizing inwardly search for God and esoteric meaning.

The study further unfolds that Bhattai captures the natural beauty in his verses effectively and powerfully expresses the inherent nectar in nature, reflecting his eco-consciousness and promoting ecological awareness for a harmonious co-existence with the natural world. Human beings and everything in the natural world are interconnected. Non-living entities are personified in the *Risalo* as having human emotions and undergoing transformation. Winds, birds, mountains, wild beasts and even the pains offer human elements company. Nature depicted in the *Risalo* plays the role of a mentor teaching silently and setting examples of sincerity, humility and perseverance.

Moreover, the study highlights the indigenous spiritual dimension within Sindhi culture. Bhattai presents the natural world rooted in Sindh geography offering insights into the natural world and human beings as custodians instead of conquerors. His eco-poetic insights in today's environmental context are relevant and demonstrate reliving with nature discouraging exploitative means for personal gains. Pastures and pastoral life is the longing of Marvi reflecting simple ways of living. Her example suggests humble living over palatial living. Such an approach indicates that the natural world must remain intact. It should not be conquered and used for personal comfort so that other life can inhabit the natural world freely. Modern practices through industrial practices have contaminated nature. But simple ways of life as Marvi displays can have a positive impact on the life in the ecosystem.

It is revealed in the *Risalo* that *Sassui* celebrates the company of birds, animals, celestial objects and even pains. She engages in a dialogue with them. The *Risalo* highlights harmonious living with the natural world as they reflect different colours of the cosmology. Human entities uphold principles of reverence for Mother Nature and pine for the natural landscapes, pets, shrubs and everything. Return to the origin is the mystical underpinning of the *Risalo*. The peacock stands for the positive force and exterminates negative forces. The poet hints at the negative forces gaining power on the earth. It indicates taking prior measures before it is over.

The *Risalo* points to the prophetic role of nature. An intricate tapestry of interactions between humans and non-humans blurs the human-drawn boundaries between the living and the non-living as announced in the text. Unyielding Potter's kiln, unconditional tree shades, life-heralding rain, sweet flowing rivers, fixed mountains, flocking birds, weeds and everything

in the natural world are connected to human activity. In many ways, these inanimate objects are shown to possess attributes like human beings. They have inherent life possessing lasting intrinsic value.

Moreover, this study offers a perspective on the Sindhi ecological narrative highlighting the ubiquity of ecocritical themes in literature articulating interconnectedness with nature. Thereby this *study* contributes significantly and expands the geographical and cultural scope of the field of ecocriticism.

This study also underscores the relevance of the *Risalo* to the current ecological discourse on account of Bhattai's timeless message of inclusivity and reverence for all creation. The *Risalo* highlights the message of inclusivity of all human beings and objects in the natural world. The study suggests that Bhattai's ecological consciousness should be taught in environmental education to help environmentalists gain insights into practical ecological living.

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