

## Ecology of the Soul: The Voice of Nature in Agha Shahid Ali and Allama Iqbal's Poetry

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### Abstract

The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and Allama Iqbal presents a profound engagement with nature, reflecting a deep eco-philosophical vision that intertwines the natural world with human emotion and identity. Both the poets, while belonging to different cultural and literary backgrounds, exhibit a profound connection to the natural world in their works. Shahid equated the loss of human lives with the loss of the environment, as he said, "a time to think of everything the earth / and I had lost, of all / that I would lose, / of all that I was losing (the Veiled Suite 168)." And "Life is not about mere existence; it is about courage. / For the flame of passion must be ignited from the earth" (Iqbal), this couplet expresses the heart of Iqbal's philosophy, emphasizing the greater meaning of life beyond mere existence. It emphasizes the value of following one's passions and drawing inspiration from the natural environment. By examining how these poets engage these ecological elements, not just as frames or landscapes or backdrops but as central to their existential investigations, this comparative study seeks to show how they arrive at the conclusion that their work is more than a mere depiction of nature, rather, their work is a charge to ourselves to reject the work of disconnection that has crept into our lives, and to re-embrace the painting of our beloved nature as an integral part of our existence.

### Key Words

Ecology, Eco-spirituality, soul, voice of Nature, oneness with nature, affinity, Shahid, Iqbal.

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## **Introduction**

The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and Allama Iqbal presents a profound engagement with nature, reflecting a deep eco-philosophical vision that intertwines the natural world with human emotion and identity. Despite coming from diverse literary and cultural backgrounds, both poets share a strong affinity for the natural environment in their writing. Shahid connected the depletion of the environment with the loss of human life, as he said, “a time to think of everything the earth / and I had lost, of all / that I would lose, / of all that I was losing (the Veiled Suite 168).” On the other side, “Life is not about mere existence; it is about courage. / For the flame of passion must be ignited from the earth” (Iqbal). The central idea of Iqbal’s philosophy is encapsulated in this couplet, which highlights life’s purpose beyond simple existence. It emphasizes how vital it is to follow one’s passions and look to nature for inspiration.

The interaction between humans and nature is intricate and multidimensional. Humans have engaged with the natural world in many different ways, from creating cultural and spiritual connections with the environment to depending on natural resources for survival. Ecology is the scientific study of the interactions between living things and their natural surroundings.

Humans are seekers at all times, and the word “spirituality” refers to the pursuit of personal development, purpose, and a sense of belonging in relation to something more than oneself. Spirituality can involve many different pursuits and perspectives, ranging from religious rituals to secular humanistic ideas. Spirituality frequently addresses morality, altruism, humanism, and the quest for inner peace and comprehension.

Eco-spirituality could be simply defined as a merger or association of ecology and spirituality. However, “Eco-Spirituality is a manifestation of the spiritual connection between human beings and the environment. It incorporates an intuitive and embodied awareness of all life and engages a relational view of the person to the planet, inner to outer landscape, and soul to soil” (Lincoln, 2000), which is a more comprehensive definition of eco-spirituality. In his search for peace, human always comes closer to the nature. As Iqbal stated:

What sweet delight, dear Lord, to live, to be?  
Each atom’s heart pulses with radiant glee,  
The rosebud, bursting through the rose’s stem,

Glows with the smile of living ecstasy. (PM, 21)

#### Top of Form

Iqbal has always held the view that the life of nature is one filled with delight. There is elation in nature despite the struggle for survival. Known by most as Allama Iqbal, Muhammad Iqbal was a politician, poet, and philosopher who is recognized as one of the most significant personalities in Persian and Urdu literature. On November 9, 1877, Iqbal was born in Punjab's Sialkot. Kashmir is the ancestral home of Iqbal. Approximately two hundred years prior to Iqbal's birth, the family moved from Kashmir to the Punjabi border town of Sialkot. Iqbal said he was proud of his Kashmiri ancestral lineage: "*Tanam Gulai Zi Khayanban-e-janat-e-Kashmir,*" or, in English, "My body comes from the earthly paradise of Kashmir." He is thought to be among the 20th century's most notable and influential individuals. Iqbal wrote for most of his life, usually in poetry but also in prose at times. His debut collection of poetry was published in Persian, in 1915, *Asrar-e-Khudi* (Secrets of the Self), other books of poetry include *Rumuz-i-Bekhudi* (Hints of Selflessness), *Bal-e-Jibril* (Wings of Gabriel), *Javed Nama* (Book of Javed), and *Aramghan-e-Hijaz* (The Gift of Hijaz) etc. nature is one of the widely celebrated themes in the works of Iqbal.

Iqbal has left us with a wealth of poetry that captures the splendor of diverse natural settings and facets of the natural world. He exhibits such a deep love for the natural world that we have to include him among the greatest natural poets. All one needs to do is look to his poem *Saqi Namah*, which was composed in Nishat Bagh, Kashmir, and in which each word is dripping with enchantment and each line is filled with ethereal brilliance. There is a great deal of poetry in both Persian and Urdu that describes nature sights, and most of it is excellent. Sadly, though, poets rarely really try to capture natural scenes accurately. This truth tends to make such poetry seem surreal and robs it of much of its attractiveness. On the other hand, precise observations are what define Iqbal's poetry. The following quatrain captures Iqbal's love of nature:

Sweet newborn bud, why art thou so forlorn?  
What seekest thou within this garden fair?  
For here is dew, a river, song at morn,  
Birds in the grass, red roses, summer air. (PM, 44)

The poet, who is being addressed in the preceding lines as a growing flower, is actually urging himself to be content with all the grandeur and beauty that nature

offers, rather than yearning for joys that are incomparable to these. He states in another quatrain:

My talk is with the songsters of the glade;  
The tongue of tongueless rosebuds I was made;  
When I am dead, O cast my dust on air-  
Attending roses is my only trade. (PM, 45)

He not only has a deep love for Nature, but he also gives her a personality, and everything in Nature reacts to his love:

The self-sown tulip's temper I know well,  
Within the stem the rose's scent I smell,  
The meadow songster loves me as a friend,  
The tone wherein he carols I can tell. (PM, 68)

It was only fitting that a poet with such a deep and abiding love for nature would leave us with some exquisite poems that captured the beauty of the natural world. Iqbal also claimed that poetry that captured natural settings was among the best.

American poet Agha Shahid Ali was of Indian descent. He was born on February 4, 1949, in New Delhi. Along with his parents, he traveled to the United States in 1976 and attended a Muncie, Indiana, school for three years. He was awarded a PhD degree in English from Pennsylvania State University in 1984 and an M.F.A. from the University of Arizona in 1985. His works are noted for their beautiful presentation of nature and blending of cultural influences. Since he began writing poetry in his early years, it has been documented. In 1972 he published his debut collection *Bone Sculpture*. His collections of poetry which are published in his lifetime: *Bone Sculpture* (1972), *In Memory Of Begum Akhter And Other Poems* (1979), *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages* (1987), *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), *A Nostalgist's Map of America* (1991), *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992), *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001). His last book *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* posthumously published in 2003 is a collection of English ghazals. He was translator of the poems of Urdu poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz under the title *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems* (1992) and editor for the Middle East and Central Asia segment of Jeffery Paine's *Poetry of Our World*. He compiled the volume *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000). For this reason, he is recognized for having introduced and popularised the Ghazal form in American poetry.

His portrayal of nature, which shows a close relationship between natural phenomena and human function, is a recurring theme in his pieces of writing. One of Shahid's earliest poems, "Postcard from Kashmir," which can be found in the collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, describes a postcard that he received from his native Kashmir while living in America. He draws comparisons between it and his home region of Kashmir and addresses this postcard as his "mailbox" (29) and "my home a neat four by six inches" (29). Using descriptions and comparisons between his hometown and the well-known Himalayan mountain range in Kashmir, he illustrates his connection to nature in this poem. He also writes about how, upon his return to Kashmir, he will witness the Jhelum River's sacredness and purity being lost. Shahid writes:

I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.  
This is home. And this is the closest  
I'll never be to home. When I return,  
the colors won't be so brilliant,  
the Jhelum's waters so clean,  
so ultramarine. (VS 29)

Shahid uses natural images to convey the image of his homeland fairly clearly in this poem. When he thinks about his hometown, its aesthetic attractiveness is what immediately springs to mind. In this specific poem, the poet employs references to rivers and mountains as language devices to develop an effect of expression by illustrating a sense of connection with the natural world. The poet's perception of nature and its purity in the past is so ingrained in his memory that it permeates his encounters with natural creatures. Therefore, on a clear day, a clear sky transports him to his own history. He writes thus at the very outset of the poem, "So when I look at the sky, I see the past?"/ "Yes, yes," he said. "Especially on a clear day." (VS 164)

Human experiences are reflected in nature. It is a repository for all the things that people have done, spoken, and experienced while they have been in the lap of nature. And nature does its share over time, gradually restoring the scenes from the past. It forces people to reflect on the past, which aids in the recovery of the individual's actual identity. Furthermore, nature bears witness to all of our pleasures and sorrows, aches and afflictions, and felt experiences throughout life. It has an

impact on the human psyche in this way. In the same poem, Shahid uses phrases that refer to natural entities to suggest a sense of loss. He seems to be mourning the passing of time and, with it, the departure of what he believed to be his. This lends the tone a definite melancholy quality. His use of imagery from nature reflects his own psychology. To mention such an instance of Eco-psychology in this poem, he writes:

. . . it was, like this turning dark of fog,  
a moment when only a lost see can be heard,  
a time to recollect every shadow,  
everything the earth was losing,  
a time to think of everything the earth and I had lost,  
of all that I would lose,  
of all that I was losing. (VS 167-8)

The above expressions make it quite evident that Shahid is mourning a loss in his life and is making an effort to balance it against a loss in the outside world. In order to show the tattered state of the environment in the current situation, he has frequently employed environmental images in his poetry. Here, Shahid understands the interdependence of nature and humanity and believes that addressing grief and hopelessness regarding environmental action and sustainable lifestyles can be helpful for both. It's an eco-psychological method that integrates the reconnection of psychology and the environment. The speaker goes on to discuss the light from the sun and stars, suggesting that these rays have an effect on the saguaros plants' leaves and branches that transports them back in time—some are referred to as “minutes old” (164), while others are referred to as “millions of years old” (165). This utilization of nature imagery provides a brief glimpse of loss while also illuminating its existence in some way. Shahid writes:

the saguaros have opened themselves, stretched  
out their arms to rays millions of years old,  
in each ray a secret of a planet's  
origin, the rays hurting each cactus... (VS 165)

The detailed overview reveals that Shahid is speaking on behalf of the saguaros plants, who are perplexed and caught between deciding whether they are the lost ones or the survivors; they are in a constant quandary about whether the

origin of the sun's and stars' rays has been lost in time or whether we (the saguaros) are at a remote point in space and history. These words depict an extremely deep link between humans and nature, in which the poet appears to be campaigning for nature rather than simply talking about his experience with that particular natural thing.

In the poem "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror," Shahid emphasizes his oneness with nature and demonstrates how this interaction between man and nature directly and reciprocally has a significant impact on each other. Therefore, he writes:

I see Peru without rain, Brazil  
without forests—and here in Utah a dagger  
of sunlight: it's splitting—it's the summer  
solstice—the quartz center of a spiral.  
Did the Anasazi know the darker  
answer also—given now in crystal  
by the mirrored continent? (VS 162)

Shahid describes a journey as a vision in his rear-view mirror. He envisions a journey across South American history. This is more of a political journey in a postcolonial or neo-colonial era. When the poet thinks about the country's past, he becomes nostalgic. With such yearning, he recalls visions of violence against indigenous peoples and the country's natural nature. He recalls the widespread persecution of innocent civilians as well as the exploitation and devastation of the environment in the form of global warming, deforestation, negligent water management, and the nuclear threat.

### **Contrast and Comparison**

The intertwining of nature and human experience serves as a prominent theme in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali and Allama Iqbal. Although both poets originate from the rich cultural tapestry of the Indian subcontinent, their depiction of nature emerges through distinctly different lenses. Iqbal's work often embodies a philosophy of human potential and transcendence, whereas Shahid's poetry reflects an intimate, nostalgic relationship with a specific geographical and emotional landscape. Analyzing their representations of nature reveals both contrasting approaches and shared sentiments regarding the human experience and environmental connection.

### **Iqbal's Perception of Nature: A Wellspring of Strength and Impulse**

Nature in Iqbal's poetry is converted into a powerful force that transcends conventional beauty. The poet interprets the natural world as a metaphor for the human spirit's quest for self-realization and growth. Nature serves as an instructive force for Iqbal, representing the concepts of struggle and growth. His well-known concept of "Khudi," which embodies selfhood, promotes this notion. He portrays nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active participant in the human experience, navigating difficulties and triumphs. According to Iqbal, conquering nature represents the realization of human potential, a theme that continues through his later works. The images he creates indicate a deep belief in humanity's power to harness the energy of the natural environment, which stimulates readers to aspire toward elevated existence.

Nature serves not only as a soothing backdrop in Iqbal's poetry but also as a vital force that interacts closely with humanity's journey of self-discovery and evolution. Iqbal frequently employs nature to symbolize the human spirit's difficulties and achievements. His famous poem "Tulu-e-Islam" (The Dawn of Islam) encapsulates this idea, emphasizing the awakening and rejuvenation that nature may bring about. For instance, Iqbal states:

*Haqiqat Aik Hai Har Shay Ki, Khaki Ho Ke Noori Ho*  
*Lahoo Khurshed Ka Tapake Agar Zarre Ka Dil Cheerain*

(There is one reality for everything, be it of earth or fire;

The blood of the sun will drip, if we split the heart of an atom.) (BD 163)

Iqbal contends that, despite the apparent distinctions between the material and spiritual realms, existence is fundamentally interconnected. This reflects his belief in the interdependence of all parts of existence, which implies that every creature has both material and spiritual qualities that influence its nature.

Iqbal's view of nature as a source of inspiration is also evident in his verses, which reflect on the dynamic interplay between people and the environment. Iqbal's poetry frequently catches the essence of alteration within nature, symbolizing the possibility of personal change. Iqbal states:

*Phir Charagh-E-Lala Se Roshan Huway Koh-O-Daman*  
*Mujh Ko Phir Naghmon Pe Uksane Laga Murg-E-Chaman*

(Hill and Vale once more under the poppy's lamps are bright,

In my heart the nightingale has set new songs alight.) (BJ 27)



The term “*Charagh*” (lamp) represents guidance and enlightenment, but the “*Lala*” (poppy) represents beauty and fleeting happiness. Iqbal depicts an idyllic setting revitalized by the light of these “lamps,” implying a return to life and energy in nature following a time of darkness or slumber. This sense of renewal might be viewed as a metaphor for human existence, with natural phenomena mirroring the cycles of life. Individuals may uncover sparks of creativity and inspiration during periods of brightness, just as the landscape does. The inclusion of “*Koh-O-Daman*” (hill and vale) enhances the imagery by reflecting the duality of life’s unpredictable experiences—highs and lows—both of which chip into the entirety of existence. The following line, “*Mujh Ko Phir Naghmon Pe Uksane Laga Murg-E-Chaman,*” presents the essence of inspiration that is blazing within the poet’s heart. The “*Murg-E-Chaman*” (nightingale) is a well-known literary emblem, frequently associated with beauty, love, and soul expression. By claiming that the nightingale has set “new songs alight,” Iqbal creates the image of a creative force awakened inside him, indicating artistic inspiration coming as a result of nature’s beauty and the symbiotic relationship between the two. The juxtaposition between the brightness of the environment and the nightingale’s creative desire highlights the interconnectedness of nature and human emotion. The poet’s heart discovers new melodies to communicate, just as the natural world grows in the light, implying that inspiration frequently comes from the beauty around us. The interplay between visible beauty and psychological resonance emphasizes Iqbal’s claim that nature acts as a stimulant for human creativity and self-expression.

Iqbal’s poetic language effectively portrays his idea that nature acts as a potent catalyst for human development. It is not merely an external influence; it is an essential component of the search for selfhood. By deeply engaging with natural elements, he urges readers to explore their inner landscapes and unleash the creative energy destined for greatness. In essence, Iqbal portrays nature as both a challenge and a companion, encouraging humanity to develop, evolve, and reach its full potential.

#### **Shahid’s Nature: A Mourning and Association with Place**

Agha Shahid Ali, on the other hand, views nature in a more intimate and melancholy light. His writing frequently invokes feelings of nostalgia, which are strongly entrenched in his experiences in Kashmir, his birthplace. Unlike Iqbal’s ideological and philosophical reflections, Shahid’s imagery is imbued with emotional longing and a strong sense of loss. Nature acts as a haunting theme in his work, symbolizing both the beauty and the sadness of relocation. Shahid’s poetry contains

natural aspects that depict his longing for home in a world marked by loss and isolation. The idea that the environment may be used as a metaphor for personal and community mourning is central to Shahid's investigation of the human condition.

In the poem "Dacca Gauzes" from part one, the grandmother laments the lost craft of Dacca gauzes and the scarcity of such delicate fabric:

my grandmother just says  
how the muslins of today  
seem so coarse and that only  
in autumn, should one wake up  
at dawn to pray, can one  
feel that same texture again.  
One morning, she says, the air  
was dew-starched: she pulled  
it absently through her ring. (VS 32)

The substitution of damp air for fabric may appear useless. However, the closest resemblance to the original is now extinct. The grandmother must rely on her imagination for mediation, even if it means being duped terribly.

The poem "I Dream It Is Afternoon When I Return to Delhi" is another dream within a dream. The narrator fantasizes about returning to Delhi and continuing his former habit of boarding the city bus to see a movie with a friend. Dreams' enticing and slippery nature threatens to betray the narrator's "return" until the fantasy eventually implodes, with the narrator being removed from the cinema hall for possessing a "ten-year-old" ticket. The initial dream, however, does not finish.

Once again my hands are empty.  
I am waiting, along, at Purana Qila.  
Bus after the empty bus is not stopping.  
Suddenly, beggar women with children  
are everywhere, offering  
me money, weeping for me. (VS 63)

Be pitied by beggars and offered money: how impoverished must you be? The poverty here is deeply rooted. To not have seen an old buddy in ten years is sad in and of it, but what makes it tragic is being caught in a circular trap of attempting

to recapture those memories and failing. This melancholy attempt to recreate the richness of the original is an annoying habit, especially for an immigrant. Despite its agonizing futility, the habit is unbreakable. In his poem “Houses,” Shahid expresses the cruelty of such repetitive activity as follows:

The man who buries his house in the sand  
and digs it up again, each evening,  
learns to put it together quickly  
and just as quickly to take it apart.      (VS 68)

Shahid’s poems are a requiem for what is no longer accessible, divided by time and by distance. But that doesn’t prevent the seekers from attempting to reproduce the lost originals by way of a flawed medium rife with inadequacies, artificiality, pastiche, limitations and absurdity.

### **Similar Subjects and Differing Focus**

Despite their divergent perspectives, both poets recognize nature’s importance in molding human identity and experience. For Iqbal, the natural world serves as a canvas for depicting the human quest for self-actualization, whereas for Shahid, it enhances sentiments of nostalgia, loss, and desire. Both poets generate vivid imagery that speaks to their readers, highlighting the intricacies of the human-nature interaction. Iqbal’s nature is full of power and possibility, Shahid’s lends itself to weeping and reflection. Iqbal sees humans as conquerors and architects of their own destinies, formed by the natural forces around them—promoting a dynamic interaction of existence. Shahid, on the other hand, portrays the agony of spiritual and physical relocation, utilizing nature as a powerful reminder of the transcendent beauty that comes with personal and social anguish. Finally, the investigation of nature in their poetry mirrors key aspects of human existence, capturing the dichotomy of victory and tragedy that is at the center of the human experience. By exploring these issues, both poets reveal important insights into the ecology of the soul, paving the path for a more nuanced view of identity within the natural world.

### **Conclusion**

A comparison of Agha Shahid Ali’s and Allama Iqbal’s poetry through the lens of the “Ecology of the Soul” illustrates how both poets use nature to reflect on the human predicament, spiritual awakening, and the search for identity. Allama Iqbal, who is strongly entrenched in philosophy and Sufi theology, sees nature as a manifestation of the Divine, a catalyst for self-actualization, and a mirror for the

individual's road to *Khudi*—realizing one's ultimate potential. Nature in Iqbal's works elevates the soul, linking humanity with its spiritual foundations and providing a pathway to transcendence.

In contrast, Agha Shahid Ali, whose themes include exile, sorrow, and desire, uses the natural world to express the shattered ego and grieve the physical and emotional devastation of landscapes. His depictions of nature frequently reflect nostalgia and the existential concerns of a postcolonial person dealing with dislocation. While Iqbal advocates for harmony between the self and the universe to inspire hope and social action, Shahid emphasizes nature's fragility, which mirrors the vulnerability of the human soul in a world dominated by conflict and estrangement.

Their creative ideas depict a dynamic interplay between the psyche and the environment, linking spiritual, cultural, and existential concerns. While Iqbal sees nature as a spiritual teacher who promotes growth and empowerment, Shahid portrays nature as a witness to loss and impermanence. This interplay demonstrates that the ecosystem of the spirit, as portrayed in their poetry, transcends time and context, prompting readers to reflect on their relationship with nature and themselves in a world that is intricately interwoven.

### **Abbreviations**

PM- Payam-e-Mashriq

BD- Bang-e-Dara

VS- the Veiled Suite

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