Study of Unique Gaps and New Directions in English

(SOUGAND in English)

www.sougandinenglish.ir
ISSN: 3150-4515

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Volume 1, Issue 1, 2026

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Sheikh Ul-Alam: An Ecocritical Perspective of his Translated Poetry of Nature and Environment

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Received	Accepted	First Published
18 August 2026	19 September 2026	15 December 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22034/sugnde.2026.256269

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Abstract

This paper examines the ecocritical dimensions of the poetry of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani, popularly known as Sheikh Ul-Alam, the revered Sufi saint and spiritual luminary of Kashmir. While his poetry has traditionally been studied for its mystical, ethical, and socio-religious significance, the present study foregrounds its ecological consciousness and environmental relevance. Employing an ecocritical framework, the paper explores Sheikh Ul-Alam's profound reverence for nature, his critique of anthropocentric attitudes, and his use of natural imagery to communicate moral and spiritual truths. Through a close reading of selected translated poems, the study identifies recurring themes of ecological interconnectedness, harmony, biodiversity, environmental stewardship, and sustainable living. The analysis reveals that Sheikh Ul-Alam envisions a balanced relationship between humanity and the natural world, emphasizing respect for all forms of life. By highlighting the ecological wisdom embedded in his poetry, the study demonstrates the continuing relevance of his vision to contemporary environmental challenges and environmental humanities scholarship.

Keywords: *Sheikh Ul-Alam, ecocriticism, climate change, Environment, poetry, nature, anthropocentrism.*

Introduction

Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani (1378-1438), widely recognized as Sheikh ul-Alam, is a respected Sufi saint and poet from Kashmir. His verses, known as 'Shurkhs ', have been an essential part of Kashmiri culture and spiritual life for centuries. While much has been written about the spiritual and mystical dimensions of his poetry, this paper aims to explore Sheikh Ul-Alam's work through an ecocritical lens, focusing on his profound relationship with nature. Ecocriticism, a relatively modern approach in literary studies, examines the representation of nature in literature and its intersection with cultural and environmental issues. The valley of Kashmir, renowned for its rich heritage of sufis, saints, scholars, and distinguished figures in art and literature, produced one of its most eminent Sufi poets, Shaikh ul-Alam, towards the end of the fourteenth century. His poetry, famously known as 'Shaikh Shrukh,' is rich with metaphors and vivid imagery that beautifully portray nature and the environment.

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Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism

Literature Review

The growing environmental crisis of the modern world has led literary scholars to revisit texts that foreground the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. Ecocriticism emerged as an important critical approach that examines the representation of nature in literature and explores the ethical, cultural, and ideological dimensions of human interaction with the environment. Scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Greg Garrard have emphasised the need to understand literature as a site where ecological consciousness is articulated, challenged, and transformed. Their works have demonstrated that literary texts not only reflect environmental realities but also shape attitudes towards nature and ecological responsibility.

Within South Asian literary studies, ecocritical approaches have increasingly been employed to examine literary traditions that emphasise harmony between humanity and nature. Such studies reveal how indigenous, mystical, and spiritual traditions often contain ecological insights that remain relevant in the contemporary age of environmental degradation. Sufi literature, in particular, offers rich possibilities for ecocritical inquiry because of its emphasis on interconnectedness, humility, and reverence for creation.

The poetry of Sheikh Noor-ud-Din Noorani, popularly known as Sheikh Ul-Alam or Nund Rishi, has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Researchers have examined his contribution as a spiritual guide, social reformer, mystic poet, and cultural icon of Kashmir. Studies by scholars such as G. R. Malik, Shafi Dar, and others have highlighted the ethical and philosophical dimensions of his poetry, while Manzoor Shah and Javaid Reshi have drawn attention to his concern for biodiversity, environmental conservation, and the preservation of natural resources. These studies demonstrate that nature occupies a significant place in Sheikh Ul-Alam's poetic imagination and spiritual worldview.

However, most of the existing scholarship discusses environmental concerns only as a subsidiary aspect of Sheikh Ul-Alam's broader spiritual teachings. The ecological significance of his translated poetry has rarely been examined through a sustained ecocritical framework. Consequently, there remains a need for a focused study that analyses his poetic treatment of nature, environmental ethics, and ecological interconnectedness through the theoretical lens of ecocriticism.

Research Gap

Despite the growing body of scholarship on Sheikh Ul-Alam, a significant gap remains in the field of ecocritical studies. Existing research has predominantly focused on his spiritual philosophy, social reformist ideas, and contribution to Kashmiri culture and literature. Although a few scholars have acknowledged the environmental dimensions of his thought, these discussions are generally descriptive and do not engage systematically with contemporary ecocritical theory.

Furthermore, the translated poetry of Sheikh Ul-Alam has not received adequate attention from environmental humanities scholars. Issues such as ecological consciousness, critique of anthropocentrism, environmental stewardship, biodiversity, and sustainable living have not been comprehensively explored within his poetic corpus. This gap becomes particularly significant in the context of contemporary ecological crises, where literary texts that advocate harmony with nature acquire renewed relevance.

The present study seeks to address this lacuna by offering an ecocritical reading of selected translated poems of Sheikh Ul-Alam. It investigates how his poetry constructs a vision of environmental ethics, challenges human-centred attitudes towards nature, and promotes a sustainable relationship between humanity and the natural world. In doing so, the study contributes to both scholarship on Sheikh Ul-Alam and the broader field of environmental humanities.

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Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on textual and thematic analysis. The primary source of data comprises selected translated poems of Sheikh Ul-Alam, particularly those collected in Gleanings from Shaikhu'l-Alam: A Selection of Ninety-Nine Shruks translated by Mohammad Amin. The poems have been selected on the basis of their engagement with themes such as nature, forests, agriculture, biodiversity, environmental ethics, and human interaction with the natural world.

The study employs ecocriticism as its principal theoretical framework. Drawing upon the foundational ideas of ecocritical scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Greg Garrard, the analysis explores how Sheikh Ul-Alam represents nature and articulates ecological values through poetic discourse. The analysis pays particular attention to recurring themes of environmental stewardship, interconnectedness, sustainability, simplicity, and the sacredness of the natural world.

Close reading is used as the primary analytical method. Through detailed textual examination, the study investigates the symbolic and metaphorical use of natural imagery and evaluates how such representations challenge anthropocentric assumptions while promoting a harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment. The objective is to demonstrate that Sheikh Ul-Alam's poetic vision contains a profound ecological consciousness that remains highly relevant to contemporary environmental concerns.

Ecocriticism emerged as a literary and cultural theory in the late 20th century, responding to growing environmental concerns. It seeks to understand how literature reflects, influences, and challenges human interactions with the natural world. Key themes in ecocritical studies include the depiction of landscapes, the representation of non-human entities, environmental justice, and the critique of anthropocentrism. M H Abrams's in his book titled A Glossary of Literary Terms (2015) defines ecocriticism: ""Ecocriticism was a term coined in the late 1970s by combining 'criticism' with a shortened form of 'ecology'—the science that investigates the interrelations of all forms of plant and animal life with each other and with their physical habitats. Ecocriticism (or by alternative names, environmental criticism and green studies) designates the critical writings that explore the relation between literature and biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on the environment by human activities" (Abrams, 2015, p. 98). This theoretical framework offers a valuable perspective. Through which to examine Sheikh Ul-Alam's poetry, revealing his deep ecological consciousness and his vision for harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

According to Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism is defined as "the study of the relationship between nature and environment just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii).

It is a term synonymous with green studies, both of which signify a critical approach that gained prominence in the USA in the late 1990s and in the UK in the early 1990s. However, the roots of ecocriticism can be traced back to the 1970s, specifically at a meeting of the Western Literature Association (WLA), an organisation focused on the literature of the American West. Michael P. Branch, in his introduction to a series of brief position papers titled 'What is Ecocriticism?', attributes the coinage of the term "ecocriticism" to William Rueckert's 1978 essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' (Branch, 1994).

In literature, numerous works embody the principles of ecocriticism. Prominent figures such as William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) have explored and celebrated the intricate bond between humans and the natural world. Despite these literary contributions, modern society has increasingly become consumed by materialism, leading to a profound disconnection from nature. This alienation underscores the urgent need for ecocritical perspectives to remind contemporary individuals of the intrinsic value of living in harmony with the environment.

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Critique of anthropocentrism

Sheikh Ul-Alam often critiques human arrogance and the exploitation of nature. His poetry often critiques human ego and arrogance, which are central to anthropocentric thought. He highlights how these traits lead to the exploitation and degradation of nature. His poetry reflects a deep awareness of the destructive impact of human activities on the environment. His nature poetry not only expresses sorrow over environmental degradation but also call for a reflection on human responsibility and stewardship. By criticizing anthropocentric attitudes, Sheikh ul- Alam promotes a more respectful and sustainable connection with nature. Implicit in Sheikh ul-Alam's critique of anthropocentrism is a call for environmental stewardship. He advocates for a respectful and sustainable relationship with nature, warning of the spiritual and material consequences of failing to do so. His warnings about the consequences of environmental degradation can be seen as an early form of ecological consciousness, urging people to recognize their responsibilities toward the earth and its inhabitants.

Sheikh Ul Alam's poetry provides a profound critique of anthropocentrism, advocating for a worldview that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life and the significance of humility, simplicity, and environmental stewardship. His works encourage readers to see beyond the human-centred perspective and appreciate the intrinsic value and divine essence of the natural world.

Ecocritical dimensions in sheikh ul-alam's poetry

Sheikh Ul-Alam's poetry frequently evokes images of nature, portraying it as a manifestation of divine beauty and wisdom. His reverence for the natural world is evident in verses that celebrate the purity of rivers, the majesty of mountains, and the tranquility of forests. For instance, he writes:

He who looks beyond summer and the rains,

Will enjoy the warm breeze in autumn

He who goes out bare foot in sun and storm,

Will find joy in weeping and wailing.

He whose orchard goes to seed in autumn,

Will be counted among men. (Amin, 2008, p. 56)

This simple yet profound expression highlights the interconnectedness he perceives between himself and the natural world. It underscores a spiritual bond with nature, seeing it as an integral part of his existence rather than a separate or inferior entity. The portrayal of nature in Sheikh Ul Alam's poetry is rich with symbolism and metaphors, serving as a medium to convey spiritual and ethical teachings. He frequently employs natural elements to convey complex spiritual truths and human emotions. The changing seasons, the blooming and withering of flowers and the flow of rivers are often used as metaphors for the cycles of life, death, and rebirth, as well as the transient nature of worldly existence. Trees, rivers, and animals often symbolise virtues such as patience, purity, and compassion. For example, he writes:

A gushing stream I saw sometime,

A footbridge and a gorge, sometime.

A bush in blossom I saw sometime,

A flower and a thorn, I saw sometime. (Amin, 2008, p. 82)

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Here, the tree symbolizes resilience and generosity, qualities that Sheikh Ul-Alam encourages his followers to embody. This use of natural imagery not only enriches the aesthetic appeal of his poetry but also reinforces his ethical and spiritual messages. Moreover, the ecocritical lens reveals how Sheikh Ul-Alam's work challenges anthropocentric views by emphasising interconnectedness. By portraying nature as a living entity deserving of respect and reverence, he invites readers to embrace a more holistic understanding of existence. This perception is crucial in today's context, where environmental crises ask for collective accountability and sustainable practices.

Additionally, a central theme in Sheikh ul-Alam's poetry is the quest for harmony and balance, both within oneself and with the external world. His verses often advocate for a life of simplicity and contentment, in tune with the rhythms of nature. This perspective aligns with ecocritical principles that emphasize the importance of ecological balance and sustainable living. For instance, he writes:

Dew I saw falling sometime,

Frost I saw falling sometime,

The dark fortnight I saw sometime,

And blooming light I saw sometime. (Amin, 2008, p. 83)

This advice reflects a profound ecological wisdom, urging people to minimise their ecological footprint and live in a way that preserves the natural world for coming generations. Through rich imagery and symbolic language, Sheikh Ul-Alam articulates a vision of harmony between humans and nature, urging a symbiotic relationship that acknowledges the spiritual and cultural dimensions of the environment. His poetry not only reflects the beauty of the natural landscape but also addresses the consequences of human actions on ecological balance. This duality highlights the urgency of contemporary ecological concerns, making his messages strikingly relevant today.

Ultimately, Sheikh Ul-Alam's poetry is not just a reflection of his time but a timeless call to action. It urges us to cultivate a deeper awareness of our ecological footprint and to foster a culture of stewardship that prioritises the well-being of the earth. Engaging with his work through an ecocritical framework not only enriches our appreciation of his artistic contributions but also empowers us to promote for a more sustainable and equitable relationship with the natural world. Thus, Sheikh Ul-Alam emerges as a significant voice in the discourse on ecology, reminding us of our responsibility to protect and cherish the environment for future generations.

Interconnectedness

Sheikh Ul-Alam's poetry frequently highlights the interconnectedness of all life forms. He perceives a divine unity in the diversity of nature, where every element plays a crucial role in the larger cosmic order. This interconnectedness is a key concept in ecocriticism, which stresses the interdependence of human and non-human life (Gates, 2015, p. 1). In today's world, the conservation of nature has become a pressing concern. Literature plays a pivotal role in redirecting human consciousness towards a profound appreciation of our threatened natural world, a task central to the theory of ecocriticism. Recent natural disasters have starkly reminded humanity that actions against nature are ultimately self-destructive. Although ecocriticism as a formal theory emerged only recently, its elements are present in the works of many earlier writers. Shaikh ul-Alam's poetry and teachings, composed six hundred years ago, stand as enduring testimony to his profound awareness of nature, the environment, and the earth. His work underscores the timeless relevance of ecological consciousness, illustrating that the insights necessary to address today's environmental crises have long been present in our literary heritage.

The contributions of Sheikh Ul-Alam extend beyond his spiritual and poetic endeavours, profoundly shaping our ethical and attitudinal relationship with the earth. His poetry is not merely a collection of conventional attributes; rather, it reflects a deep-seated commitment to environmental conservation, botany, and mysticism. Through his verse, Sheikh Ul-Alam emerges as an early advocate for the preservation of nature, intertwining his spiritual insights

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with a holistic understanding of the natural world. His work serves as a compelling reminder of the intrinsic connection between spiritual well-being and environmental stewardship, urging a reevaluation of our responsibilities towards the earth.

In spring the slugs will play truant

And won't go field-ward at sowing time.

In autumn the corn will dance in the breeze

The stacks will be majestic, the shaves glorious. (Amin, 2008, p. 43)

Sheikh Ul-Alam's poetry encapsulates profound insights into growth, development, and the intrinsic unity between humanity and the universe. His verses reveal the earth's rich biodiversity, governed by a supreme power, and underscore the interconnectedness of all life. A famous Kashmiri aphorism, "Ann poosh teli yeli waunn posh," is translated as "food is subservient to forests" or "so long as the forest lasts, food too will last." This quote is often cited as a slogan for nature and environmental conservation and uses the synecdoche of the "tree" to warn humanity that the care for the environment is directly linked to the sustenance of life.

Sheikh Ul-Alam's foresight into the importance of natural resources and environmental preservation for human survival is remarkable, considering it emerged some six hundred years ago. His poetry addresses the comprehensive environmental context, encompassing both biotic and abiotic factors, and reflects an understanding that humans, as the highest biological creatures, bear the responsibility to control and judiciously utilize nature for righteous purposes. His work serves as an early ecological manifesto, emphasizing the critical role of environmental stewardship in ensuring the continued prosperity and well-being of humanity.

Man was made out of the earth

And his frame was cast in clay

It is all out of the earth, that all bounties grow

It is earth, were man cooks his food

When life goes out, body transfers into the earth

And earth gets mixed with earth for good. (Amin, 2008, p. 8)

While his poetry profoundly concerns nature, it also addresses cultural, moral, social, and religious themes. One could argue that a person who undergoes such comprehensive reformation would inherently refrain from harming any living creature, whether human or environmental. Shaikh-ul-Alam's verses vividly introduce readers to a multitude of plants, animals, and other natural entities, particularly those native to Kashmir.

Arguably, this ecological perspective embedded in his poetry is more than just an appreciation of nature—it's a call to action. By presenting the intricate relationship between humans and nature, his poetry demands that true spiritual and moral reform must include an unwavering commitment to environmental stewardship. This argument posits that understanding and internalising his teachings are essential for fostering a society that respects and protects all forms of life. His poetry is not just a reflection of the natural world but a blueprint for living harmoniously within it. Dr. Manzoor Shah, in his paper "Sheikh-Ul-Alam: The Alamdar of Ecology and Biodiversity," argues that a comprehensive understanding of Shaikh-ul-Alam's poetry necessitates viewing it through the lens of flora and fauna. Shah asserts that Shaikh-ul-Alam's work is not merely a collection of spiritual and moral teachings, but an ecological manifesto. By vividly describing the natural world, Shaikh-ul-Alam compels readers to recognize the intrinsic value of biodiversity and the interdependence between humans and nature. Shah contends that this ecological perspective is crucial, as it

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reveals the poet's profound commitment to environmental stewardship. Understanding Shaikh-ul-Alam's poetry in this light is essential for appreciating its full impact and for fostering a deeper, more ethical relationship with the environment:

To understand flora and fauna of Kashmir, it is incumbent upon all the researchers, scientists, biologists, and environmentalists to carry out serious research on ecological and biological aspects of Sheikh-ul-Alam studies...through his poetry, one comes to know about various plants…vopal-hawk (wild vegetable leaf), sotsal (mallow), hand (chicory)… (Shah, 2009b, pp. 37–50)

Building on this idea it can be argued that the concern for nature in the poetry of Sheikh-ul-Alam is profound and multifaceted. His poetry not only express a deep reverence for the natural world but also act as a call to ethical and spiritual responsibility towards the environment. Through his verses, Shaikh-ul-Alam highlights the significance of preserving harmony with nature and the interdependence of all living things.

Furthermore, his poetry vividly describes the flora and fauna of Kashmir, showcasing his intimate knowledge and appreciation of the region's biodiversity. These descriptions are not merely ornamental; they carry significant moral and spiritual implications. By highlighting the beauty and intricacy of the natural world, Shaikh-Ul-Alam encourages a sense of stewardship and respect for all forms of life. He posits that a reformed individual, who is socially, culturally, and morally enlightened, will inherently respect and protect the natural world. This perspective aligns with contemporary views on sustainability and environmental ethics, underscoring the timeless relevance of his poetry.

In essence, Shaikh-Ul-Alam's poetry is a testament to his belief in the sanctity of nature and its crucial role in the spiritual and moral development of individuals. His poetic oeuvre serves as a powerful reminder that the well-being of humanity is inextricably linked to the health of the environment, advocating for a holistic approach to life that honors and preserves the natural world. Sheikh Ul-Alam’s poetry offers a rich tapestry of ecological insights and spiritual wisdom. Through an ecocritical lens, we can appreciate his deep reverence for nature, his critique of human arrogance, and his vision for a harmonious coexistence between humans and the natural world. His work not only enriches Kashmiri literature but also provides timeless lessons for contemporary environmental thought. By engaging with Sheikh Ul-Alam’s poetry, we are reminded of the sacredness of nature and our responsibility to keep it safe and intact for upcoming generations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ecocritical perspective of Sheikh Ul-Alam’s translated poetry of nature reveals a profound interconnectedness between the human experience and the natural world. Through his vivid imagery and evocative language, Sheikh Ul-Alam not only celebrates the beauty of nature but also critiques the degradation and exploitation that threaten it. His work serves as a reminder of the spiritual and cultural significance of the environment, urging contemporary readers to reconsider their connection to the natural world.

By situating Sheikh Ul-Alam’s poetry within the framework of ecocriticism, we gain valuable insights into the socio-environmental contexts of his time, while also recognizing the timelessness of his messages. The themes of harmony, respect, and reverence for nature resonate deeply in today’s ecological discourse, highlighting the enduring relevance of his work.

As we navigate the complexities of modern environmental challenges, Sheikh Ul-Alam’s poetry inspires a call to action: to foster a sustainable coexistence with nature grounded in the values of empathy and stewardship. Ultimately, engaging with his poetry through an ecocritical lens not only enriches our understanding of his artistic vision but also challenges us to reflect on our own contribution to the conservation of nature. Thus, Sheikh Ul-Alam stands as a beacon of ecological wisdom, urging us to listen to the whispers of nature and to act in ways that honor its intrinsic value.

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