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Zeeshan Sahil

Introduced and translated by

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Introduction: Ecospheres of Zeeshan Sahil: A Cultural Praxis of Planetary Consciousness

Emergence of radically divergent philosophical orientations and theoretical deconstructions of being and beings, facilitated developments of organic and inorganic reconfigurations in the fields of cultural enquiry and cultural production well before humanity managed to step into 21st century. However, the debates of climate change, the discourses in environmental philosophy and the intuitive enquiries into natural world sustainably proved rigorously persistent in attracting creative curiosities and analytical acumen on an unprecedentedly large scale. Naturally following adoption of similar reconfiguring alignments, Urdu poetry also absorbed unforeseen thematically pragmatic influences and effected philosophical expansions as poets begun responding to attendant challenge to human existence in a paradigmatically plausible language. The likes of Zahid Ahmad Dar², Khaleel Mamoon³, Saleem

¹All the nazms in this section have been translated from *Sārī Nazmeñ* (all poems; Karachi: *Āj kī Kitābēñ*, 2011). The Urdu titles of the nazms have been footnoted along with the page numbers.

²Khaleel ur Rehman (1948), better known by pseudonym ‘Khaleel Mamoon’ was awarded the 2011 Sahitya Akademi Award *Āfāq kī Tarāf* (Towards Horizons).

³A modern Urdu poet, Zahid Dar (1936 – 2021) preferred to write inherently rhythmic prose poems and published two collections *Mohabbat aur Māyūsī kī Nazmeñ* (Poems of Love and Sadness) and *Tanhāī* (Loneliness)

Ahmed⁴ and a whole bunch of other poets recorded poetic responses realigning traditional structures with the emerging modalities. However, Zeeshan Sahil could arguably be considered as Urdu Poetry's ultimate legislator of eco-sensitivity as his mystique delves deep into the vibrations and reverberations of the cosmic energies. His poetry unapologetically launches into affective advocacy of planetary consciousness imagining a new ecosphere of poetic meaning-making beyond conventional schemes of featuring flora and fauna as metaphorical embellishment of human transactions. Zeeshan Sahil's poetic ecosphere carries symptoms of posthuman incorporations of Derridean interpretation of a bio-semiotic dance of life and contemporary theoretical trends of planetary consciousness. (Derrida *The Animal* 89) In an attempt to unravel Zeeshan Sahil's meticulous culmination of an ecosphere that echoes oscillatory connectivity amongst all cosmic entities, it may help to understand both theoretical tendencies that tie the discourse together. In the end, a short demonstrative sample of Zeeshan Sahil's poetry in English translation will be presented to facilitate a crystallized comprehension of an idiosyncratically patterned poetic ecosphere painted with echoes elicited from a biosemiotics medium of articulatory inter-species communication.

Derrida's Environmental Philosophy and Zeeshan Sahil's Ecosphere:

Derrida rigorously asserts that the modality of consistent emission and reception of semiotic codes facilitates all organisms to stay alive for as long as possible. In his view 'the essence of the entire life process is semiosis' (Derrida *The Beast* 87). Derrida copiously referred to the German biologist and bio-semiotician Jakob von Uexkull in *The Animal That Therefore I am* and *The Beast* to take advantage of the biosemiotic vision of communication to deconstruct outdated linguistic models that do not stand up to empirical scrutiny.

In these works, Derrida passionately urges mainstream philosophers, linguists, and semioticians to considerably reflect upon the beyond-

experimented with a poetry where natural world attains centrality over human domination.

⁴ One of the most unconventional Urdu poets, Saleem Ahmad (1927 – 1983) invoked incredible creative vigour in his five poetry collections namely *Bayāz*, *Ikāī Charagē Nīm Shab*, and *Mashriq*.

human realms of semiosis in animal kingdom and in natural world. He emphatically discredited the false claims of the binary logic which confines the faculty of significant articulation merely to human beings. However, the human tendency of engaging more in semiosis comparing with another organism still remains indisputable (Derrida 2011, 142). Therefore, Derrida's criticism addresses the dichotomous anomaly propagating exclusiveness of human beings in endowment of semiotic faculties.

In a lecture from *The Animal That Therefore I am* entitled 'And Say the Animal Responded?', Derrida problematises Lacan's lack of trust in the knowledge developed in various disciplines. He explicitly alludes to the process of discreditation of all theoretical frameworks in the act of waggle dance performed by honey bee. The reason behind the incapacity is complete inattention paid to other-than human semiosis (Derrida 124). He claims the obsessive confinement of semiosis will evaporate into an inclusive expansion if cultural enquiries intelligently incorporate discoveries of the natural world.

It could also be argued that once human collectives consider the possibility of semiosis beyond human realms, the doors into establishing inter-species communication are thrown wide ajar. Therefore, the phenomenon of enfranchisement of the multitudinous interspecies agents in literary and non-literary studies have paved path for a plethora of theoretical expansions in the field of eco-sensitive and eco-curious explorations.

Similar philosophical echoes of a firm belief in communicative and comprehensive capacity of non-human entities in the realms of nature are traceable in the poetic process of Zeeshan Sahil too. In the poetic production of Urdu language, not many other poets can claim to have engaged with the same as intensively as Zeeshan Sahil, who consciously allocated a significantly large amount of his poetic energy to the world of nature. Therefore, it could conveniently be argued that no other Urdu poet might have dedicated over two hundred and fifty poems to the exploration of the animal kingdom, the natural world, the celestial bodies, the botanical marvels and the elemental alignments, the unnatural disruptions, the enormous carbon foot-prints clouding the entire earth in an ominously frightening shadow, and a path to recovery. His consistent engagement with animals reflects uncanny sense of incorporation of Derrida's

unpacking of articulatory communication where semiosis is surprisingly seen thriving beyond human realms. However, Zeeshan Sahil's long-standing experimentation with this sort of semiosis culminates into a meditative energy calling for an idiosyncratically intricate networking between all beings bringing it closer to a few conceptualities recently flourished in the theory of Planetary Consciousness. Even the titles of collections of poems like *Chidiyoñ kā Shor* (The Bird's Chatter), *Kohr-Ālūd Asmān kē Sitāre* (Stars of a Cloudy Sky), and *Shabnāmā* (Nocturnal Tales) bear lucid testimony to the persistent hankering of Zeeshan Sahil towards accessing the portal of ecospheric transformation. Therefore, it could be argued that philosophical acknowledgement of this semiosis offers a natural entry point into embracing what theoretically presents itself as Planetary Consciousness.

Culmination into Planetary Consciousness:

Planetary consciousness refers to a philosophical and spiritual perspective that emphasizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life on Earth as a recognition that we are part of a larger whole, an awareness that transcends individual and national boundaries and encompasses the well-being of the entire planet. Planetary consciousness promotes a shift in values, attitudes, and behaviours towards sustainability, unity, and the preservation of the Earth's ecosystems. With studying five important sets of significant theoretical trends that paved the way for the praxis of planetary consciousness to evolve significantly, a subsequent incorporation of same in analysing Zeeshan Sahil poetic process as an attempt at visualizing an ecosphere where cosmic spirituality finds its most eloquent vocalization.

One of the primary pioneers in the field is Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest, philosopher and palaeontologist, who proposed the concept of the noosphere, a global network of human thought and consciousness. He believed that humanity is evolving towards a higher level of consciousness, which he called the Omega Point, where individual minds converge and unite in a collective consciousness (de Chardin 175). Another major-league theorist in this interdisciplinary praxis is James Lovelock, an independent scientist, who developed the Gaia hypothesis to suggest that the Earth functions as a self-regulating, self-correctional, and a self-preserving system. According to this hypothesis, the planet and its living organisms are interconnected in a way that maintains conditions suitable for life viably negotiating entry of new life forms and respectfully

offering a rite of passage for the exit to the forms that have finally exhausted their time and space in the cosmic here and now. Lovelock's work highlights the importance of recognizing the Earth as a living entity and nurturing a sense of responsibility towards its well-being. Another important set of ideas were later theorized under the nomenclature of The Great Turning by an environmental activist and scholar Joanna Macy who contributed significantly to the field of deep ecology. The Great Turning involves a shift from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization. Macy emphasizes the need for acknowledging the interconnectedness of all beings and cultivating a sense of compassion and active engagement to address the ecological crisis (Lovelock 283). Next comes Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and theologian, who advocates what he terms as an ecological spirituality that recognizes the sacredness of the Earth. He emphasizes the importance of reconnecting with the natural world and developing a mutually enhancing relationship with it. Berry's work inspires individuals to develop a deep sense of wonder, reverence, and responsibility towards the planet. And finally, the list concludes with David Bohm, a theoretical physicist and philosopher, who explored the concept of the "implicate order" and proposes a holistic worldview that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things (Berry 173). He argues that our perception of separateness is an illusion and that a deeper level of reality, the implicate order, underlies the manifest world. Bohm's ideas inspire a shift in consciousness that recognizes the fundamental unity of existence. All five concepts find fulfilling application in the poetry of Zeeshan Sahil as he sets out his diurnal echoes and nocturnal whispers to achieve cosmological intimacy with all things that he experiences not only with all sensory perceptions but also through deep premonitory instinct of sensing the ailments festering in the heart of life force itself.

Evolving Praxis of Planetary Consciousness:

Zeeshan Sahil's poetry abundantly incorporates metaphors of birds, animals and objects from the world of nature to demonstrate a rich variety of semantic and semiotic reconfigurations. "Titlī", a short poem for example, constitutes images of a butterfly "Kissing giraffe's eyes" and "Sliding down tusker's teeth" and "dipping down the rhino's horn" which can alternatively be interpreted as metaphorical expressions of planetary consciousness as they highlight the interconnectedness and harmony between human beings and the natural world (Sahil, 203). The imagery of

engaging with various animals, such as a giraffe, tusker, rhino, and deer, represents a deep connection and reverence for nature. The butterfly symbolically merges with these animals, illustrating a sense of unity and oneness with the animal kingdom. This union signifies a recognition of our shared existence and interdependence with other living beings on the planet.

The poem further emphasizes the peacefulness and contentment that can be found in this state of connection. The reference to the person sitting on a bench, watching a butterfly and waiting for it to settle, suggests a moment of stillness and observation, allowing the speaker to be fully present in nature. This attentiveness demonstrates an awareness and appreciation of the delicate balance and beauty of the natural world.

In the last lines, the poem pronounces a murderous intention of a species hell bent on domination of the Earth. Interestingly, the choice of plastic as the murder weapon echoes with all discursive standpoints that criticize mindless hazarding of the environment by a conscious choice to choke the natural habitat with exceedingly disastrous excess of plastic use/waste. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes muses over the increasing use of plastic in modern life elaborately engaging with its predictably disastrous consequences as echoed in other contemporary discourse over the environmental hazards. Roland Barthes strikes a clear demarcation between this synthetically devised artificial material and the sublime authenticity of natural resources. He categorises plastic as “a disgraced material lost between the effusiveness of rubber and the flat hardness of metal” (245) embodying none of the genuine produce of the mineral world. Despite launching into a scathing critical flurry of plastic, he ends with a confession that we are officially ushered into an era of plastic. In this poem, the mention of the empty plastic bag symbolizes the need to reduce our consumption and waste, ultimately leading to a healthier environment for all living creatures. The intention to fill the bag with a butterfly implies a desire to preserve and protect the delicate beauty of nature, recognizing that our actions have consequences for the planet and its inhabitants.

Overall, this and other similar poems underscore the urgency of critical consideration of intermediary networks for representational purposes to propagate a praxis of planetary consciousness by urging mindfulness, and advocating for responsible stewardship of the Earth.

Despite displaying unwavering optimism in communicative energy, his poetry also acknowledges failure of reconciliatory reception in human beings.

Intersectional Implementation of Planetary Consciousness Theories:

From Teilhard de Chardin's perspective, Zeeshan Sahil's poetry almost explicitly constitutes an expression of the evolving collective consciousness. His engagement with various animals and elemental nature clearly offers an awareness of the interconnectedness of all life forms. The merging of human and animal elements into a cycle of poly-linguistic assimilates so far unacknowledged semiotic networks functioning as a convergence of all vitalities to create of a higher level of consciousness, where boundaries dissolve, and unity is recognized.

His poetic processes harmoniously agree with Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which proposes that the Earth functions as a self-regulating, self-correctional, and a self-preserving organism. The joy and happiness derived from engaging with nature signify a sense of harmony and recognition of the Earth as a living entity. One of his poems titled "Nazm" offers a definitive map of primary curiosity that ultimately paves way for his poetic intelligence to hanker into most radical of universal beyond, is the 'incompleteness of life' itself leading conscience towards loving all imperfections. It also harmoniously aligns with Joanna Macy's concept of "The Great Turning" by focussing attention to the dangerously threatening ecological crisis at hand and the need for compassionately active and sustainable engagement (Macy 67). The metaphor of the empty plastic bag in previously discussed poem and the intention to convert into a body bag for butterflies conveys an awareness of the impact of asphyxiating human behaviour on the planet.

It contains unmistakable resonance of 'recognition of sacredness' of biodiversity in the natural world articulated through intimate communicational networks in the elements and life forms of the natural ecospheres implying a deep reverential energy and emotion. Zeeshan Sahil often reflects upon the merging of human and animal elements, highlighting the underlying unity of existence aligning and expressing inter-semiotic agreement with Bohm's emphasis on deep listening and perceiving the patterns and processes of life. This merger manifests itself in "Star," wherein a falling star finds a rescue team in an unimaginable

team work of sky, clouds, winds, boats, an embroidered flower on a handkerchief made of butterfly wings and dreams highlighting inevitability of interspecies collaborative coexistence.

The poem “Oxygen” asserts essentiality of oxygen for the sustenance of life and cyclical existence of all life sources with the portrayal of inherent symbiotic relationships between trees, boats, birds and water underscoring the idea of unfathomably intricate functioning and mysterious sustaining of the web of rhizomatic relationships (Sahil 168). It also un-deterministically characterizes human dimension of this posthuman discourse by bringing in impact of human activities on the balance of biospheres ultimately un-didactically encouraging a reflection on the responsible stewardship of cities and the need to harmonize human actions with the core principles of sustainability leading to the praxis of planetary consciousness.

Another poem, *Water* deals with the recognition of a critical life-sustaining resource. It betrays no attempts at multi-layered metaphoric problematization of the representative signalling. Mere juxtaposition of greed-for-hoarding with trading available happiness in exchange of a drop of water decisively underlines the crisis at hand (Sahil 73).

Conclusion

Striking a merger between Derrida’s environmental philosophy of semiosis and the contemporary trends of Planetary Consciousness, Zeeshan Sahil envisages a poetic ecosphere of collaborative coexistence between all energies through articulatory communication to make the wheel of universal routine turn. However, the confession about the presence of transgressive forces erupting out of the same collaborative crowd loom large everywhere on the margins of his ecosphere, all set for a destructively treacherous breach to effect irreparably catastrophic consequences. In his poetry, the swirling scents of these predatory dementors sniffing after the smell of primordial camaraderie reflect the eternal clash between damaging transgression and constructive transcendence. In a nutshell, he prophesies no triumphs, only ascending peaks of transitory struggles.

Translator’s note: After reading Zeeshan Sahil’s omnibus, I found myself startled at how the environment, nature, and animals weave unreal representative patterns reflecting less pantheistic worship with the

universe and more meditative realization of existential interdependence of life organisms. His viewpoint is tremendously informed by a brilliant awareness of the scientific research combined with a deep exposure to environmental philosophy. With the incorporation of environmental philosophy of Derrida, Barthes, Macy, Berry and others, it did not take a long time in arriving at a conclusion that his poetry sets out to formulate an idea of an ecosphere where countless organisms breathe, breed, and eventually transcend spatial boundaries into cosmic spirituality, thus enthusing me with encouragement to translate a few poems that would be positively helpful in making sense of his poetic meaning making.

“Oxygen” and Other Poems by Zeeshan Sahil⁵

Poem⁶

If you were here
Riding a vehicle
We would fly in the sky
To blue stars
Through the clouds
Exploring all
The sails of winds,
Eventually falling asleep
Inside boats
Annihilating ourselves
Into dreams
Dissolving into
A throbbing memory

Poem⁷

When a stranded ray of sunshine
Carved pearls on the buds with dew,
A clueless bird
Hummed some symphony

⁵ All the nazms in this section have been translated from *Sārī Nazmēñ* (all poems; Karachi: *Āj kī Kitābēñ*, 2011. The Urdu titles of the nazms have been footnoted along with the page numbers.

⁶ “Nazm” 806.

⁷ “Nazm” 805

Nestled in leaves
As the breeze blew
Sauntering with schoolgirls
One restless squirrel
Was perhaps busy
Hiding an almond.

The love of days gone by
Immersed in rain
Drenched everything
In our absence
In front of the window
They built a wall

Poem⁸

Occasionally we turn
Into a star fogged by clouds;
Into a planet
That moves through nights,
We wish to become birds
But end up turning into airplanes

Wild Girl⁹

In a house of stone
Never she lived ever alone
Animal's voices
And butterflies hovered up and down
Her talks of rivers always begin from mountains
She knows nothing of sea
Nor of me.

Folks across the bridge, she feels strangers
Nothing exists beyond her mountains.

The flower bushes fill the crevices between boulders

⁸ “Nazm” 270.

⁹ “Juñglī Larkī” 44.

And the wild girl
Goes out after rains
To catch lady birds
Entirely unaware
In such weathers
Serpents roam about
craving soft soles

Butterfly¹⁰

Kissing giraffe's eyes
Sliding down tusker's teeth
Dipping down rhino's horn
Perching on deer's ears
She looks so happy.
She clearly feels the number of flowers
In the garden is larger than ever before.

After the main gate closes,
On the grass beneath the bench,
She will peacefully go to sleep.
To this very moment, the butterfly couldn't spot
You nor me
We who wait
For the popcorn to finish
And her to sit
Once the plastic bag is empty
We will fill it with butterfly

Colour Scheme¹¹

Pain and darkness
Wear a cloak of blackness
While hope and sunshine
Manifest in a splash of colours
Noise and clamour should always be
Captured in red

¹⁰ "Titlī," 69.

¹¹ "Kaler Iskīm," 70

When we talk in whispers
You firmly stay silent
Silence and water are seldom untransparent
Happiness and sky are
Now dark, then light blue.
With the passage of time
The green of spring
Turns into the crushed flowers inside books
And oldness of doors
The melancholy of illuminated bridges
late at night
dissolves in dreams
In pale yellow shades.

Due to the endless solitary journey
The clouds up there
And our hearts right here
Have turned white
For all eternity

Water¹²

Dear sweet water!
Don't I wish to be a hoarder?
With big containers
Or a deed of possession
To a meandering river

If I had happiness
I would happily trade it
With a drop or a lakeful of you

In times of war¹³

In times of war

¹² "Pānī," 60

¹³ "Juñg ke dinōn mēn," 745.

Love comes easier
Life gets tougher
A soldier will take your life
For a pack of cigarettes
In exchange for a fragrant soap bar
You can have the smile and body
Of a pretty, pretty girl

In days of war
People forget
How to discriminate
Between explosion and noise
Between neighbour and spy
The trenches turn into homes
The blackouts are new light
The newspapers write history
And death lives up to her name

Memories¹⁴

Don't break flowers and silence
Otherwise this night full of thoughts
Will come emptied of life
Our mornings reside in that darkness
Do not pry to find them
They resemble crickets
Chirping nocturnally
Undetected when silent
The patch of land I dug
To hide my diamonds
Bore no clouds
If I remember correctly
To that specific moment
All my things were made of ice...

Oxygen¹⁵

¹⁴ “Yādēñ,” 61.

¹⁵ “Oxygen,” 39.

Oxygen is essential to stay alive
And night for dreaming
Day for night, and travelling for day
Road for travelling, and trees for road
Water for trees
Boats for water
Birds to fly over boats
Sky for birds and sea for sky
Shores for sea
Cities for shores and people for cities
Love for people and life for love
Oxygen for life

On Roads¹⁶

A cold night silently steals into the city
Making people hide inside
Diminishing the lights illuminating all
Making various voices vanish
Pushing trees reclining on walls to slumber
Turning distant wayfarers and vacant pavements scary
Merely walking on the road makes you rue life
As it occasionally shines patches of the misty road
We think of our dreams and dear ones
White light and black tar start emitting
The smell of blood.

Star¹⁷

A star whispers to the sky
Hold me tight
I am falling

Sky lifts her up
Atop his palm
Gently perches on eyelashes
No, no. Not here

¹⁶ “Rāste Par,” 311

¹⁷ “Sitārā,” 327-28

Star exclaims
I'll fall down into the clouds
With your tears
When you cry

Sky picks her out
Sits her between the lips
The blowing wind tickles him up
Making star fall
Into a boat
Full of dreams
Dreams come together
To climb the star
Into a bright blossoming flower
Embordered upon a handkerchief
Made out of butterfly wings

Boat sets sail
On the carpet of water
All the way into the blue sky
Dreams pick the star
And finally tuck her
Deep inside the sky's heart

Sky, wind, dream and clouds
Whisper, wonder, whisper, wonder
In all likelihood, this tender spot
May have just opened in here and now

Poem¹⁸

The incompleteness of life
Taught me to love all things
Of this world
Men's relation to dreams?
Never could I tell
Existing from non-existence
The supremacy of love

¹⁸ "Nazm," 443

Invincibly unshackled
With the daybreak, people leave homes
Chasing hope thinking god knows what!
But later, impossible for them to leave
In the darkness of the night

Poem¹⁹

I sent a dream in an envelope
Letting no one on it
Plus a piece of gray cloud
Place upon a paper with red roses
I wonder why
you failed to notice

From the closed window of your room
You see the star
In heavy rains, your eyes see
The ambiguous shores of far-off sea
Beyond all eyes

Just know the birds
Who never return home
Can have a dream?

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¹⁹ "Nazm," 379

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