

## Islamic Attitude towards Environmental Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Some of the major environmental disorders such as water, air, sound, and soil pollution are taking place in Muslim as well as non-Muslim countries. Over the last couple of decades, academics from numerous disciplines have questioned whether religion, particularly Monotheism, is actually to blame for our environmental crisis. Unfortunately, Islam has received little attention in this debate. Surveying relevant literature, this study shows that Islam can play an important role in reducing the existing environmental pollution. This research elucidates that Islamic environmental teachings and eco-friendly moral precepts are viable agents for environmental sustainability. It concludes that Islam is an environmentally-friendly religion that forbids all irresponsible use of natural resources.

**Keywords:** Environment; Islam; Religion; Monotheism; Pollution

### 1. Introduction

An environmental catastrophe is a phenomenal fact caused by humans' irresponsible environmental behavior and their erroneous beliefs that they are lords of the world. While monotheistic religions are criticized for believing that the earth is ours to do with as we please, Islam, the third Abrahamic religion after Judaism and Christianity, takes the opposite stance on environmental sustainability. Islam claims to be a pro-environmental religion that instructs on maintaining a responsible and harmonious relationship between humanity and all living and non-living elements of nature to ensure a sustainable environment. As followers of Islam believe that Allah (swt)<sup>1</sup> created the whole natural world with perfect wisdom (*hikmah*) and appropriate environmental balance, the environment and natural ecosystems are considered a fundamental part of faith in Islam (Ozdemir, 2002). Approximately 500 verses of the holy book discuss nature and instruct on how humanity should handle environmental matters (Vasi,2010). Islam teaches humanity to use natural resources wisely to maintain the environmental equilibrium set by God. It states that Allah (swt) created the environment in a harmonious and well-balanced manner where there is no imperfection. Islam clarifies that The Creator manufactured all things, and ordered them in due proportions (Qur'an, 25:2), and no imperfect will ever be detected in God's manufacturing of the whole creatures (Qur'an, 67:4). Furthermore, Muslims judge Allah (swt) sets up a an order in nature that cannot be violated. The performance of every part of it is par excellence. Islam explains that the Almighty Creator merges the two bodies of fresh and saltwater, yet between them is a barrier they never cross (Qur'an, 55:19-20).

According to Islam, a healthy environment is designed to serve a higher purpose. Allah (swt) created humans with distinct cognitive abilities and freedom of choice so that they could carry out their duties and responsibilities as His representatives on Earth. They have a duty to themselves, their families, others, and all of God's creatures. Humanity can choose to be virtuous or wicked, or go against the teachings of the Qur'an. The Creator instructed that He has already shown them the way to judge whether they are grateful or not (Qur'an, 76:3). In addition, He teaches the humanity that they are blessed with two eyes, a tongue, and two lips, as well as the knowledge of right and wrong (Qur'an, 90:8-10). It is all about balance and modest living on the earth.

According to Muslims' belief (Sharif, 2016), they are Allah's representatives on the earth; it has been given to them in trust. As Allah's vicegerents and trustees, their duty is to respect the trust and preserve it carefully, never wasting its natural resources when using or consuming them. Environmental concerns are becoming more apparent as a result of human mistreatment of nature. Greed, the negative effects of industrialized economic activity, the widespread use of technology and science, the lack of a religious lifestyle, and other factors are all taking their toll on the environment. Man has abused his trusteeship in God's world. He has employed his scientific knowledge to exploit nature rather than to use it wisely following God's will (Yarnold, 1959). However, the environmental catastrophe has become a serious issue in the mid-twentieth century. Environmental pollution, depletion of natural resources, extinction of various species, and over-exploitation of the environment for the sake of rapid development activities have all taken their toll. While the development has been impressive and laudable, it has not been without adverse impact on the natural environment (Sani, Hadi, and Jahi, 1993). A crisis in ecological balance emerged from aggressive development.

To identify the reason behind the crises Lynn White Jr. (1967) finds out that theological attitude is responsible for the ecological crisis and claims that present scientific and technological approaches to nature are a result of a Judeo-Christian influence. Arnold Toynbee (1972) blames monotheistic religions for eliminating the traditional veneration of the natural world, which was also common practice in polytheistic and pantheistic religions. In addition, McHarg (1977) referred to the Bible as an environmental-unfriendly text which has encouraged a strong utilitarian and ultimately destructive attitude toward nature (Passmore, 1975). Eco-feminist theologians McFague (1975) also criticized the traditional Christian faith for its anthropocentric and hierarchical position. Likewise, Singer (1981) characterizes it as "human centeredness". Similar criticisms have been made by secular environmental ethicists and activists.

Some scholars, on the other hand, attempted to answer these accusations with specific clarification. As for White and Toynbee, both endorse pantheism for environmental sustainability. However, Toynbee advocates for monotheism to be replaced with pantheism whereas White suggests modifying Christian dogma. Both scholars are criticized for their superficial treatment of religions on the

environmental issue (Moncrief, 1970). In their works, neither White nor Toynbee has attempted to articulate the religious concept of stewardship. As a result, their assessment of monotheistic religions appears one-sided and inadequate. Perhaps the answers to their questions can be found in what they have overlooked in terms of religious stewardship (Sayem, 2019).

Christian scholars clarify that White and his followers misinterpreted the Old Testament passage that read: “Then God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the cattle, all the wild animals on the earth and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth” (DesJardins, 2001). The Biblical word ‘dominion’ is not a strong usage as it was used to refer to rules in general and peaceful ruling in particular. Misuse of the natural order created by the Almighty is considered a sinful activity (Ferguson & Roach, 1995). Since humans have been created in the image of God, they must function as stewards of God.

In this line argument religious academics such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, John B. Cobb, the late Pope John Paul II, and the current Pope Francis, among others, are attempting to portray religion as an influential and helpful agency and power to fight for environmental sustainability in response to such criticisms. Their common response to criticism is that religions did not produce an anthropocentric vision of nature; rather, European Renaissance humanism and secular ideology did, and modern science and technology reinforced it. Religions take a theocentric rather than an anthropocentric approach to life. Humans and other creatures are both considered agents of God; each allocated a specific duty by God Himself, in the theocentric perspective. Humans and nonhuman creatures are fellow creatures of the same God in this way. God is the center of everything. However, God has established a hierarchy: people have some advantages over other animals, but this does not give them the right to devalue and exploit the rest of the world. Religions should not be held responsible for attitudes that are not their own (Sayem, 2019).

For Nasr, any truth found in the religions of the world is derived from the same Absolute Source, whether the Heaven of Taoism, nirguna Brahman of Hinduism, the “primordial monotheism” of the indigenous peoples, the metaphysics of the alchemists, or Western hermeticists, or the Creator God of the Abrahamic faiths (Johnston, 2012). None of these traditions have lost sight of the divine connection that exists between humanity and nature.

The present study aims at exploring the Islamic approach to some basic elements like water, air, sound, land, and soil of the natural environment to examine whether and to what extent this observation can play a significant role in diminishing environmental pollution. For doing so, this study uses the passages, admonitions, and instructions of the Holy Quran and the Hadiths as the primary sources of data. It also uses qualitative data from secondary sources like books and journals to make an in-depth analysis of the issues concerned.

## 2. Environment and Its Implication in Islam

Environment is a comprehensive idea that includes everything in heavens and earth and whatsoever in between. It contains everything external to the identified organism, including the biotic and abiotic (Vasi, 2010). Nasr (2001) views that human's environment is God. God is known as the "All-Encompassing" or *Muhit*, which translates to "environment." He explains that the environmental crisis may in fact be said to have been caused by man's refusal to see God as the real 'Environment' which surrounds man and nourishes his life (Nasr, 2001).

Allah (swt) created the universe for specific and relevant reasons. The Qur'an gives three primary reasons for the creation of the universe. The foremost reason is to serve as signs of God's power and goodness. According to one author nature has no meaning apart from God: without Divine purpose, it simply does not exist (Manzoor, 1984). Nature, as a symbol of God, is meant to guide humanity and also to test their faith and behavior. Creation's second purpose is to serve God. The third purpose of creation is for the use of humans in their quest to serve God. The almighty gives humans the earth as a test to see how well they use it. The environment serves not only the present generation of humankind, but all ages, past, present, and future (Deen, 1996). Similarly, Haq (2001) asserts that the world was created for humanity, but not just one generation. The Qur'an also makes it a point to state that the earth is for the use of all creatures, not just humans (Timm, 1994).

For Islam, as humanity is God's *Khalifa* (deputy), and human beings are thus global trustees, accountable for their treatment of nature and other creatures; hence mistreatment brings punishment (Al-Faruki, 2021). While the Qur'an makes nature subject to humanity, it does not grant unbridled exploitative powers over it, for it ultimately belongs to God (Attfield, 2018). Human beings are also responsible for other creations including birds, animals, living and non-living things, nature and natural resources, and so on. Mankind should be merciful and compassionate to the creations of Allah (swt). The Prophet (pbuh)<sup>2</sup> said, "He who is not affectionate to Allah's creations, Allah will not be affectionate to him and He is the most favored of Allah from whom the greatest good cometh to His creatures (Suhrawardy, 1990). Islam demonstrates that all living and non-living objects in nature have value, and that humans are accountable for their preservation and all associated costs.

In addition, the earth is only given to humans in order to facilitate their duties toward God. Humans have no right to "subdue" or "dominion" over God's property (Haq, 2001). Despite holding a position of responsibility, humans are still a part of nature. Any injury to the natural world is also an injury to humankind and more importantly is tantamount to a revolt against the Creator (Haq, 2001; Manzoor, 1984). In fact, earth is the place where mankind rectifies himself abstaining from unlawful activities. The Prophet (pbuh) says: "The earth has been made for me purifying and as a mosque" (Sunan Abu Dawud 489, Book 2, Hadith 99). Within the limits set by Islam, humans can partake in the earth's bounty. Humans are encouraged to enjoy the bounties of God's sustenance but do not over indulge (Manzoor, 1984). According to

the Qur'an (7:31): “Consume but do not waste. Surely, Allah despises the wasteful”. Every element of the environment that is interdependent forms an ecosystem that collaborates to achieve a common goal. According to the Qur'an, Allah (swt) is both creator and sustainer of the universe. It is humankind's responsibility to participate in sustaining and caring for God's creation (Engineer, 2001). Humanity must serve the needs of the earth; beautify it and keep it clean. (Akhtar and Gul-e-Jannat, 1995).

Since natural environment is created as the reservoir of organism, the relation between mankind and the rest of the elements of the environment is just like community. The Sustainer of the creatures guided that all living beings roaming the earth and winged birds soaring in the sky are communities like you (Qur'an, 6:38). The universe and all its elements are sacred because they were created by God. Nature is a means through which God Almighty communicates with humanity (Haq, 2001). Every element of the environment is imbued with value. Nobody can harm them because Allah counts them. According to the Quran, neither the weight of an atom nor anything smaller or larger than that is hidden from humans' Lord on earth, but is written in a perfect record (Qur'an, 10:61). Then The Prophet (pbuh) stated that first of all, He created the heavens and the earth and wrote everything in the Book (in the heaven) (al-Bukhari 3191, vol. 4, Book 59, Hadith no. 2). Islam points out that everything has value since it is documented and serves a certain purpose. While conducting activities on Earth, humans should remember that they are responsible agents of God and they should not make decisions based on selfish desires. Each human will be called to account for their behavior on the Day of Judgment (Ateshin, 1989). According to Nasr (1968), “nature is a universally lawful organism. It is a cosmos, not chaos...” It is a vital source of life. The Quran mentions, “Have we not made the earth a receptacle” (Qur'an, 77:25) and “He laid out the earth for all beings” (Qur'an, 55:10-12).

### **3. Islamic Attitude towards Some Basic Elements of Nature**

The attitude that Islam shows to some of the fundamental elements of nature like water, air, sound, land, and soil is as follows:

#### **3.1 Water**

Water is mentioned in numerous verses of the Qur'an as the source of life. The Qur'an places a high value on the water as an important aspect of the ecosystem, as Allah (swt) declares in the Quran that every living thing is made of water (Qur'an, 21:30). All living beings need water to live their life. In another verse the Qur'an indicated that the all-powerful pours down water from the sky and by it brings the dead earth back to life (Qur'an, 16: 65). The merciful reminded the human being that His blessing pouring down from sky that grows plant and trees in the garden and planted grains are reaped by His grace (Qur'an, 50:9). Islam warns mankind to ensure the proper utilization of water so that it remains pure and fresh. The sustainer of the universe prohibits irresponsible and mischievous tasks on earth. The omnipotent wished that the humankind should eat and drink of the sustenance provided by Him, and do no evil or mischief on the earth (Qur'an, 2: 60).

The Prophet (pbuh) of Islam warns his followers to cover up the water pot for maintaining purity of drinking water to keep it safe from contaminated by insects (Jamil and Hajar, 1997). Through these lines, the Prophet called for guarding against pollutants that may be transmitted through the air or against insects that pass on viruses and parasites like crickets, mice, ants, and gnats. Jabir, one of his disciples, reported that the Prophet instructed that no one should urinate in stagnant water and wash from it (Hanaoui, 1995). Furthermore, the Prophet also gave high value of not urinating in running water, not to defecate in water, in shades (where people rest), and in the path and walk way which people use for trafficking. Defecating pollutes water due to parasites, offensive smells, and a decrease in the rate of oxygen in the water. These have a significant impact on aquatic species such as fish and the like. It also spreads water borne diseases like cholera, diarrhea and the others. The messenger was highly cautious about safe drinking water and sensible about every small ingredient of the nature. He also provided instruction on how to deal with the scarcity of drinking water. In addition, Islam inspired the followers community that water shall be shared between them (Qur'an, 54:28) as well as not to be wasted anyway, even in the prayer time ablution. It also suggested them that water is the community property and for that reason no one can prohibit other using water in one need.

Islam discourages excessive use of water for humanitarian ground, even in the time of abundance. The prophet was extremely caring about scarce resources of water and instructed his pupil of proper utilization. Once he found excessive use of water in the case of ablution he then call upon his disciple that even if they were on the bank of a following river should not use more than required (Ibn Majah, 425). Islam reveals that a drink of water is the best charity. Once, in a case of his companion's mother's death, concerned person asked the prophet which charity is the best for his deceased mother's behalf, the prophet replied a drink of water (Al-Nasa'i, 3664).

The learning points of Islam about water as scare resources for humanity can be stated in that way: (1) water is treated as the great clemency and grace of the almighty to the whole creatures including humanity; (2) it is a community resources and for this reason, none can be prohibited in need; (3) to ensure proper and cautious utilization of available water without making any single drop wastage; (4) no filthy things, pollutants, organic or nonorganic litter shall be thrown into the water; (5) excessive use of water, even in the sacred purpose, is prohibited. Summarizing above discussion, the inference can be drawn that Islam fittingly mull over the water as part of environmental issue and motivates and inspires its followers for maximum benefit of the whole creature, not only the advantageous use of human being. These principles denote that Islam robustly advocates for sustainable utilization of water for the wellbeing of entire creature and stand against irresponsible use of this invaluable resource.

### 3.2 Air

For the continuation and preservation of life, the air is simply as vital as water. The majority of terrestrial animals are completely reliant on the air they breathe. Other functions of the air are not less important to man. The Almighty creates air as a vital and essential element of nature for the purpose of nourishing and developing His creations. The sustainer, according to Islam, “sent the fertilizing winds” (Qur’an, 15:22). Furthermore, Muslims believe that Allah, The Bountiful One, sends the winds as heralds of glad tidings, going before His mercy: when they have carried the heavy-laden clouds, He drives them to a land that is dead, makes rain descend thereon, and produces every kind of harvest there with: thus, shall He raise the dead: perhaps you may remember (Qur’an, 7:57). Islam terms the air as Allah’s gift and holy sign, and thus encourages and instructs humanity not to pollute it. The Quran mentions that The merciful sends the winds heralding good news, and that He may make you taste of His mercy, and that the ships may sail by His command, and that you may seek His grace, so that you may be thankful,” (Qur’an, 30:46).

Since multidimensional functions of air including biological and social ones are unique aspects in terms of cherishing God’s creations in the heavens and on the earth and in between them, the conservation of its pure and unpolluted form is inevitable to maintain the congenial atmospheric state of all organisms. Imam Al-Hilaly states that air is the property of Allah the Exalted. Hence, contaminating the air with smoke is an encroachment on nature and a threat to the life of mankind and all other living things (Smith, 2002).

According to Islam, any activity that pollutes the air or impairs its function is an attempt to thwart and obstruct God's wisdom toward His creation. Islam encourages humanity to preserve the quality of air and its authentic character in order to maintain a healthy environment in which all organisms can benefit from God's bounty and flourish.

### 3.3 Sound

Sound has a particular level of standard for the ear to receive and transmit to the nervous system. The natural average of its standard is good for humanity and the environment. But, when the strength of the voice exceeds the normal average, the healthy state of the environment gets upset. This unusual situation results in noise pollution that harms the human body and mind causing headaches, the disorder in the blood cycle, high blood pressure, nervous system diseases, digestion troubles, and some physiological diseases.

Islam prohibits causing noise and fuss and raising voices inside mosques and during the recitation of the Qur’an. Allah, the Almighty states, “Do not recite your prayers too loudly or silently, but seek a way between.” (Qur’an, 17:110). Muslims believe that loud voice washes away any potential compensation for good deeds, while those who speak quietly are forgiven and rewarded greatly. Allah (swt) declares do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak loudly to him as you do to one another, or your deeds will become void while you are unaware” (Qur’an, 49:02).

Islam speaks against noise pollution. It continues that some noise kills. Allah says in the Qur'an that, "The (mighty) blast overtook the wrong doers, and they lay (dead) prostrate in their homes before the morning" (Qur'an, 11:67). The Qur'an satirizes those who speak in loud voices. It states that "their prayer at the House (of God) is nothing but whistling and clapping of hands" (Qur'an, 8: 35). This indicates that loud voices gain nothing positive due to its harmful influence on atmospheric domain. Islam instructs, call upon your Lord humbly and secretly. Surely He does not like the transgressors" (Qur'an, 88:11).

Islam encourages people to speak gently and claims that there is no noise pollution in Paradise. It persuades, "Where they shall hear no (word) of vanity." No frivolity will they hear therein, nor any taint of ill, only the saying, 'peace! Peace (Qur'an, 56: 26). The Prophet was never heard speaking loudly in His meetings. He rejected the use of loudspeakers or drums in calling for prayer but preferred Bilal because he had a melodious voice. The Prophet forbade noise. According to Abu Mussa, one of his companions, while traveling, men began raising their voices in praise of God, to which the Prophet replied, "lower your voices, for you are not addressing a deaf or absent being, but you are addressing Allah, who is nearby and can hear everything" (Al Fakhi, 1993).

Islam is an opponent of noise as it destroys the bounty of good thought and silence and disrupts creative and innovative thinking. Allah says, "Be moderate in your pace, and lower your voice, for the ugliest of all voices, is undoubtedly donkey braying" (Qur'an, 31:19). Noise pollution is strictly prohibited in Islam because it degrades the healthy environment.

### **3.4 Land and Soil**

All living creatures rely on land and soil to survive. The Qur'an mentions that the Creator spread out the earth for (His) creatures" (Qur'an, 55:10). The solid elements of human bodies and those of all living animals and plants are used to create the earth's minerals. Islam presents that the Creator created you from dust; and then, - behold, you are men scattered (far and wide)!" (Qur'an, 30:20). He also made the land the home of human beings and the abode of all terrestrial creatures. The Qur'an mentions that the sustainer produced you from the earth growing (gradually), and in the end, He will return you to the (earth) and raise you forth (again at the Resurrection)?" However, the land has value as open space in addition to being your home: And He made the earth a carpet (spread out) that you may go about therein, in spacious roads" (Qur'an, 71:19-20).

For humans and other living beings, Allah (swt) created the earth as the source of sustenance and livelihood. The omnipotent made the earth rewarding for the growth of the flora that nourishes both human beings and animals. Islam states that mountains are created to capture and store rain and to serve in the stabilization of the earth's crust. Allah (swt) said in the Quran that have we not made the earth (as a place) to draw together, the living and the dead, and made therein mountains standing firm, lofty (in stature); and provided for you water



sweet (and wholesome) (Qur'an, 77:25-27). It continues "He has extended (to a huge scope); He draws out there from its dampness and field, and He has safely set the mountains; For utilize and comfort to you and your creatures" (Qur'an, 79:30-33). In another occasion, He states that "the earth We have spread out (like a carpet); set thereon mountains firm and immovable and produced therein all kinds of things in due balance as well as we have provided therein means of subsistence, - for you and for those for whose sustenance you are not responsible" (Qur'an, 15:19-20). Islam admonishes that Mankind should not harm the mountain in any way in order to maintain a multifunctional role in ecological equilibrium. The most genuine way to express gratitude to the Creator is to keep the land fertile and productive rather than exposing it to destruction. Because undermining God's gift, on which so many forms of life rely, is tantamount to denying God's immeasurable blessings. Any action that destroys or degrades it inevitably leads to the devastation or dilapidation of life on the earth. Such conduct is strictly forbidden in Islam.

In addition, any disorder in a system necessarily affects others. Man alters the natural system as represented by the soil through his systems (cultural, technological, social, and economic). Thus he throws away his solid waste and house garbage, buries his excretions, increases the use of insecticides and pesticides, and abuses chemical fertilizers as well as heavy mineral wastes such as lead, mercury, and cadmium. All these activities cause soil pollution which is in turn transmitted to the human body through food chains. As a result, man suffers from a variety of diseases, including cancer, kidney failure, and nervous disorders. Islam prohibits all sorts of mischief in the land. The compassionate says that if any one slew a person unless it is for murder or for spreading mischief in the land, it would be as if he slew the whole mankind" (Qur'an, 5 :32). Many Islamic experts pointed out that these types of mischief include tree felling and all types of pollution since they cause death. The Prophet forbade causing harm and inflicting harm on others. As for cleanliness, the Prophet says: "Cleanliness is half of belief" (Musnad Ahmad, vol. 5, p. 342). He continues, 'Surely Allah (swt) is clean and loves the clean, so clean your courtyard" (Nahj al-Fasaaha, No. 703). The Prophet (pbuh) continued, "Except for graveyards and *hammam*, the entire earth is a mosque" (IbnMajah 745, Book 4, Hadith 11).

Likewise, the earth is introduced as 'a mother' to humans. The Prophet is quoted as saying "preserve the earth because it is your mother" (Nahj-al-Fasahah, No. 1130). The loyalty of man to the earth and his longing to it is like the longing of the child for its mother. Man was created from the earth, he eats and drinks from its wealth and in its bosom he will be buried. According to Islam, as a place of worship, the earth should be treated with reverence and care, and it should be kept clean and unpolluted.

#### **4. Conclusion**

According to Islamic faith the almighty made the nature with perfect balance and discipline. As signs of God, all objects of nature have been carrying out their assigned duty for certain purpose. The Creator created human beings by providing cognitive faculty and freedom of choice and gave them natural environment as a

text to how well they use it. As a representative of God, human beings are global trustees, accountable for the treatment of nature and other creatures. In this theocentric stance, humans and other creatures are considered as co-creatures of the same God where everything is revolving centering God. While the Qur'an renders natural world subject to humanity, it does not grant unrestricted exploitative powers over it, because it ultimately belongs to God. Human beings are responsible to God. Man's responsibility to Him signifies the responsibility to the God's creations. In order to maintain a healthy environment, Islam teaches humanity to use natural resources in a sustainable manner. The environment serves not only the present generation of mankind but all ages. Men should not harm the God's creation with their thought and deeds. They are prohibited to do any harm on the natural environment. In fact, the earth is a place where mankind rectifies himself by refraining from illegal activities. Islam encourages reverence for all forms of life, including the fair treatment of inanimate natural elements.

In order to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature, humans are encouraged to live a simple life while prohibiting extravagance and luxury. Excessive use of natural resources is regarded as serious deviation in Islam. The religion commands us not to spread corruption on the land. Similarly, Allah forbids waste. Greed and reckless behavior are prohibited in Islam because it envisions humanity as a community on the middle path. As eco-friendly religion, Islam established cosmic discipline and order, including a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Four elements of the environment (Water, Air, Sound, Land, and Soil) are discussed in the study. There are other elements of the environment like trees, mining, mountain, concerning aquatic ecology, etc. are not discussed here. Hence, Islamic attitudes towards them are not explored in the study and are left for further research.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup>. Subhanawtala.

<sup>2</sup>. Peach Be Upon Him.