

**BAJABER Khadija**

## **Nature and Consciousness**

The Persian philosopher and poet Afḍal al-Dīn Kāshānī linked existence with awareness. He says, “The seed of existence is awareness, and its fruit is also awareness.”

I love thunderstorms very much. Don’t you feel as though the hand of God was hovering over our heads? That sounds frightening. But it does not frighten. How wonderful—that loud sound.

Even the absence of rain feels significant. At night the air is so hot and still, the trees break off their own arms – the dried palm fronds breaking, those heavy hands tearing themselves like a woman cuts off her own hair.

Writing nature is often about setting the atmosphere or mood. Menacing atmosphere can be invoked by writing a cold wind a certain way. The attribution of human feelings and responses to inanimate things or animals, or essentially what is not recognized as human in the first place is the device known as pathetic fallacy.

It is very natural that a sea should be conscious, or that crows speak to one-another. I consider it pitiable to imagine that a mountain is not as conscious of me as I am of it.

We personify nature in writing, but a rational society does not accept that a mountain truly has a soul beyond poetic expression. My own identity and culture affect my philosophies and my writing. A distinct Muslim spirituality must be part of any conversation around my work, or at least around *The House of Rust*. Nature and knowledge go hand in hand in the themes of my work. When I write and talk about nature, I write about existence, consciousness, and ultimately, self-knowledge.

Nature is not dead matter. It is objective, it is conscious – every grain of sand, every green thing, all phenomenon exist to worship God. Every big or small thing in nature, observable and hidden to the eye, has full knowledge that it is a creation by a creator.

When Aisha finds the unlucky sailboat, she pats its side and says that they will make their own fortune together. I think that even though nature and the inanimate cannot often speak back to us, we care for them as conscious and thus living beings. It is the Islamic belief that one day these things will have tongues to speak and will testify on our good deeds and misdeeds, and will bear witness for or against us, for the ways in which we treated them and this earth. They are united on the level of them being subjects of God, of knowledge of the Creator. So Aisha’s dealings with all she owns, have in them a sort of care and consciousness, a sense of duty, and a sense of unity. She does not ask anything of the sailboat, she merely states an intention to honor it as much as she can.

Speaking to that—nature points toward God and is the phenomenon through which we recognize and deepen our understanding of God as it indicates that the creation is proof of the creator. Nature is the “signifier” rather than the “incidental.” The preservation of nature, study of it, and appreciation of its symbols, the preservation of nature are acts of worship.

Writing nature with works like *The House of Rust*, which has such a deep Muslim identity; the depictions of nature are not simply an exercise of imagination but an exercise of faith.

Mohammed Raston, a professor of Islamic thought at Carleton University, puts it best in his article about the great chain of consciousness, “Do all things possess awareness?”—published by *Renovatio*, the journal of Zaytouna College.

The fundamental insights to be drawn from the great chain of consciousness can help us solve a number of pressing contemporary problems. For example, we can engage the environmental crisis and go beyond the usual legal, economic, and social spheres; we can understand people as conscious beings who are encouraged to protect other conscious beings placed in their trust. If, for example, we believe a tree has consciousness, not just biological life, and that it participates in the same awareness, being, life, and consciousness as humans, we would likely feel more responsible about our custodianship over it.

For a long time, the idea of consciousness and the inanimate having awareness of God and me—terrified me.

But what this understanding of nature meant was that I could not think of my actions as insignificant or hopeless.

Nature’s consciousness reaffirms all of existence—roots me to myself. No matter how heavy the weight of this self was, nature neither formed, nor held me. It did not show me who I was, it did not forgive me, it did not extend to me opinions or arguments, nor did I expect it to.

The knowledge we have is so minimal, and there is so much we must accept that we cannot understand. We have to understand what we can of ourselves. That the thunderstorm, the duty of care, the enormity of God, these things that can sound frightening need not always frighten. That in fact, they encourage in the heart great love. Here, the reminder of several existences, and the knowledge of my existence, and thus the knowledge of my purpose.

The seed of existence is awareness, and its fruit is also awareness.