

Revisiting the Unani Concept of Hawā-e-Muheet through the Lens of Modern Ecotherapy

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ABSTRACT

Ecotherapy, a nature-based therapeutic approach, has gained increasing recognition in contemporary healthcare because of its beneficial effects on mental health. The conceptual foundations of ecotherapy closely resemble the principles described in Unani medicine, particularly the doctrine of *hawā-e-muheet* (environment air). This paper explores role of balanced environmental air in maintenance of mental health through the frameworks of *mizaj* (temperament) *ruh* (pneuma) and *maskan* (dwelling places) in terms of ecotherapy. Classical Unani physicians emphasized the importance of clean and balanced air, greenery, healthy dwelling places, and other environmental conditions in preservation of health and prevention of disease. These concepts closely parallel modern ecotherapeutic approaches that highlight the positive psychological effects of exposure to natural environments. Contemporary scientific evidence also supports the role of nature exposure in stress reduction, emotional regulation, and cognitive restoration. This study demonstrates that ecotherapy represents a contemporary reflection of classical Unani principles and

offers a holistic model for mental health promotion.

Keywords: Ecotherapy, Unani Medicine, *Hawa, Ruh*, Mental Health, *Infelat-e-Nafsan*iyah.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of mental disorders is increasing worldwide and contributes significantly to the global burden of disease and disability. Recent global analyses have further shown a substantial rise in depression and anxiety disorders following the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasizing the urgent need for preventive and holistic approaches toward mental health care [1]. Although conventional therapeutic approaches are effective, they often overlook environmental and lifestyle-related determinants of health. Ecotherapy, which involves structured interaction with nature through green exposure, gardening, and forest bathing, has emerged as a complementary approach for improving psychological well-being [2,3,4,5]. Recent evidence also suggests that even short-term exposure to natural environments significantly reduces stress, improves mood, and enhances overall mental well-being [6]. According to Unani philosophy, health

depends upon the equilibrium of *mizaj*, which is maintained through moderation of *asbāb-e-sitta zarooriya* (six essential factors), namely *hawā-e-muheet* (environment air), *makulat wa mashroobat* (food and drink), *harkat wa sukūn-e-badani* (physical activity and rest), *harkat wa sukūn-e-nafsani* (mental activity and peace), *nawm wa yaqza* (sleep and wakefulness), and *istefragh wa ihtibas* (evacuation and retention).[7,8]. Among these factors, *hawā-e-muheet* is considered particularly important because of its direct influence on *ruh*, which governs vital, emotional, and cognitive functions of the body [7,9]. Disturbance in *hawā-e-muheet* may alter *ruh* thereby affecting mental and emotional well-being [9,10]. Classical Unani physicians emphasized environmental harmony, cleanliness, and healthy surroundings as essential components for preservation of health and maintenance of equilibrium of *mizaj* [7,8,9,10]. These concepts closely parallel modern ecotherapy approaches, where interaction with natural environments promotes emotional stability, cognitive restoration, and stress reduction [11,12,13].

Ecotherapy

Ecotherapy is a nature-based approach that utilizes interaction with natural environments to promote physical and psychological well-being [11,14]. Ecotherapy includes interventions such as forest bathing, horticultural therapy, and nature walks. The Biophilia hypothesis proposed by Edward O. Wilson suggests that humans possess an innate affinity toward nature [15]. Similarly, the Stress Recovery Theory proposed by Roger Ulrich explains that natural environments facilitate physiological recovery from stress [16]. Recent scientific evidence demonstrates that exposure to natural environments reduces cortisol levels, enhances parasympathetic activity, and improves emotional regulation [2,3]. Furthermore, interaction with nature improves mood, reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression and enhances

cognitive performance through attention restoration mechanisms [4,11]. The World Health Organization recognizes environmental determinants as important components of mental health promotion [17]. Population-based studies have demonstrated that exposure to green spaces is associated with lower psychiatric morbidity and improved psychological well-being [5,12].

Interactions of Hawa, Ruh and Mizaj

In Unani medicine, *hawā-e-muheet* is regarded as one of the most important factors influencing human health because it continuously interacts with the body through respiration and environmental exposure. Ibn Sina described in *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* that the quality (hotness, coldness etc.) and essence of air directly affect *ruh*, which is responsible for sustaining vital and mental functions of the body [7]. According to him, pure, balanced, and open air helps in preservation of health and maintenance of equilibrium of *mizaj*, whereas very hot or cold, impure and stagnant air predisposes the body to disease [7].

Ibn Sina emphasized that *hawa* is essential because it plays a fundamental role in the formation and maintenance of *ruh* [7]. He explained that external air performs *tarveeh* (cooling) and *tanqiya* (purification) of *ruh*. *Tarveeh* refers to the cooling and moderation of *ruh*, preventing excessive heat generation within the body, while *tanqiya* refers to purification of *ruh* by removing its harmful impurities [7]. Thus, clean and balanced air helps preserve the proper quality, quantity, and consistency of *ruh*, all of which are necessary for optimal bodily and mental functioning. Since *ruh* originates in the heart, any disturbance in it may alter the *mizaj* of the heart and impair *infialat-e-nafsaniya* (psychic reactions) such as anger, grief, fear, and happiness. [7] All psychic movements are followed or accompanied by either peripheral or central movements of *ruh* which may either be sudden or gradual. Ibn Sina explained the

movements of ruh towards periphery and central, gradually and rapidly.[7]

Table 1. Relationship between *Infialat-e-Nafsaniyah* and Movement of *Ruh*. [18]

<i>Infialat-e-Nafsaniyah</i>	Movement of <i>Ruh</i>
Anger, Boldness	<i>Ruh</i> moves towards periphery rapidly resulting in increased temperature of the body.
Joy, Love	<i>Ruh</i> moves towards periphery slowly resulting in increased surface temperature of the body.
Fear, Cowardice.	<i>Ruh</i> moves inward rapidly, resulting in decreased temperature of the body.
Sorrow, Grief	In which <i>ruh</i> moves inward slowly resulting in decreased surface temperature of the body.
Shame	<i>Ruh</i> moves outward as well as inward.

The part of *ruh* that goes to brain and transform into *ruh-e-nafsania* (psychic pneuma) plays a role in execution of *afal nafsaniya* (psychic functions) e.g., cognition and memory etc. Therefore, any imbalance of *ruh* in terms of quantity, quality and consistency may impair both emotional and cognitive functions and predispose individuals to various disorders [7].

This concept closely correlates with modern ecotherapy, which recognizes that exposure to natural and well-ventilated environments exerts beneficial effects on both physical and mental health [2,11,14]. Ecotherapy interventions such as forest bathing, nature exposure, and interaction with green spaces are based on the understanding that environmental quality directly influences psychological well-being and physiological balance [2,11,14]. Modern scientific studies have demonstrated that natural environments reduce stress and improve mood. They also help regulate cortisol levels and enhance cognitive functioning [2,3,13]. These findings conceptually parallel the Unani understanding that balanced *hawa* maintains the equilibrium of *ruh* and supports optimal execution of emotional and cognitive functions.

Factors Responsible for Corruption of Air-

In Unani medicine, air (*hawa*) is understood in terms of its quality (*kaifiyat*) and essence (*jawhar*), both of which are essential for preservation of health. Any alteration in the quality or essence of air affects its interaction with the body and consequently

influences the formation and maintenance of *ruh* [7]. Therefore, Ibn Sina emphasized that air should remain pure, balanced, and free from environmental impurities.

According to Ibn Sina, air undergoes corruption when it passes through or remains in contact with environmental sources of contamination. Air flowing over stagnant water is believed to become laden with excessive moisture and *fasid bukharat*, thereby deteriorating its quality [7]. Similarly, decaying organic substances, garbage, marshy land, and foul-smelling materials release *fasid bukharat* that mix with air and deteriorate its quality. Air present in low-lying, enclosed, congested, and poorly ventilated places lacks proper circulation and purification, allowing these harmful vapours to accumulate and adversely affect health [7].

In contrast, elevated areas, open plains, hilly regions, flowing water, greenery, and well-ventilated surroundings maintain the purity of air by facilitating continuous circulation and preventing stagnation of harmful vapours. Such environments preserve the natural quality and essence of air and are therefore considered beneficial for maintenance of health [7].

Selection of *Masakin*-

Because of the close relationship between *hawa* and *ruh*, Ibn Sina described specific criteria for the selection of *masakin* (dwelling places). He recommended residences situated on elevated land with good ventilation, adequate sunlight, open surroundings, wide streets, pure water

sources, and free circulation of air [7]. These environmental characteristics facilitate free circulation and purification of air and reduce the accumulation of *fasid bukharat* [7]. Since external air performs *tarveeh* (cooling) and *tanqiya* (purification) of *ruh*, preservation of pure air helps maintain the proper quality, quantity, and consistency of *ruh*, thereby supporting optimal bodily, emotional, and cognitive functions [7].

These classical descriptions closely resemble contemporary ecotherapy principles, which recognize that exposure to clean air, green spaces, natural sunlight, flowing water, and healthy living environments reduces psychological distress, improves emotional regulation, and promotes overall mental well-being [2,5,11,12,14].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This review was carried out through a narrative review of the available literature on ecotherapy from both Unani and modern medical perspectives. Relevant information was collected from electronic databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar etc using keywords including Ecotherapy, Unani Medicine, *Hawa*, *Ruh*, Mental Health, *Infelat-e-Nafsaniyah*.

To understand the classical concepts, standard Unani texts such as *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* by Ibn Sina, *Al-Hawi* by Al-Razi, and *Kamil al-Sana'ah* by Ali ibn al-Abbas al-Majusi etc along with other authentic Unani references, were consulted.

Published original research articles, review articles, and relevant guidelines related to ecotherapy, environmental health, lifestyle interventions, and Unani medicine were considered for inclusion. Duplicate records, conference abstracts without full text, non-English publications, and studies not directly related to the objectives of this review were excluded.

The selected literature was carefully reviewed and synthesized to compare the concepts of ecotherapy described in Unani medicine with current evidence from

modern health sciences. The findings were organized to highlight the role of nature-based interventions in promoting health, preventing disease, and supporting an integrative approach to healthcare.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this review suggest that the basic philosophy of modern ecotherapy shares notable similarities with the classical Unani understanding of *hawa-e-muheet* and *masakin*. Although contemporary research explains the mental health benefits of nature through physiological and neuroendocrine mechanisms, Unani scholars interpreted these effects in terms of preservation of *ruh* and maintenance of *mizaj*.

Ibn Sina considered the surrounding environment to be an essential determinant of health rather than merely the place where an individual lives. Factors such as clean air, proper ventilation, sunlight, open spaces, greenery, and pure water were regarded as necessary for maintaining a healthy environment and supporting normal bodily and mental functions. His recommendations for selecting an appropriate dwelling place therefore reflect a preventive approach that recognizes the close relationship between environmental quality and human well-being [7].

The growing burden of urbanization, pollution, overcrowding, and reduced exposure to natural surroundings has renewed interest in nature-based interventions for mental health. From Unani perspective, these environmental changes may adversely influence *hawa* and consequently disturb the balance of *ruh*. In contrast, natural settings characterized by fresh air, vegetation, and open landscapes create conditions that favor emotional stability and cognitive well-being. This conceptual agreement between classical Unani thought and modern ecotherapy highlights the enduring relevance of traditional environmental principles in contemporary mental health care.

CONCLUSION

The present review demonstrates that the core principles of ecotherapy closely correspond with the Unani concepts of *hawa*, *ruh*, and healthy *masakin*. Ibn Sina's emphasis on pure air, environmental balance, proper ventilation, sunlight, and natural surroundings reflects a comprehensive approach to preserving both physical and mental health.

Current scientific evidence supporting the positive effects of nature exposure on stress reduction, emotional regulation, and cognitive restoration provides contemporary support for these classical ideas. Together, these perspectives indicate that integration of classical Unani environmental principles with modern ecotherapeutic practices may provide a holistic, preventive, and sustainable approach to mental health promotion and overall well-being.

Declaration by Authors

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