



JOHN DONNE AND MIRZA GHALIB: A POETIC COMPARISON OF IDEOLOGY

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Abstract

This research paper explores the striking ideological parallels between the 17th-century English Metaphysical poet John Donne and the 19th-century Urdu/Persian poet Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. Despite existing in vastly different cultural, temporal, and linguistic landscapes, both poets share a preoccupation with the synthesis of the intellect and the emotion. This study analyses their treatment of divine and profane love, their use of complex conceits, and their shared scepticism toward traditional religious dogmatism. By examining Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and Ghalib's *Ghazals*, the paper identifies a "metaphysical bridge" that connects Western and Eastern poetic traditions. The findings suggest that both poets utilize wit as a tool for existential inquiry, often portraying the human condition as a site of paradoxical tension between the physical world and the spiritual void. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Donne and Ghalib represent a universal literary phenomenon where intellectual rigor meets profound emotional depth.

Keywords: John Donne, Mirza Ghalib, Metaphysical Poetry, Sufism, Comparative Literature, Conceit, Existentialism.

Introduction

The intersection of Western metaphysical tradition and Eastern lyrical philosophy finds its most profound expression in the works of John Donne (1572–1631) and Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869). Though separated by two centuries and thousands of miles, both poets emerged during eras of significant political and intellectual transition. Donne wrote during the shift from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean era, a time when the "New Philosophy" of science began to challenge medieval certainties. Similarly, Ghalib witnessed the slow decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of British colonial influence in India.

These historical pressures forced both men to seek a language that could reconcile the ancient with the modern, the sacred with the profane (Ramzan & Khan, 2024a,b). Their poetry is characterized by what T.S. Eliot termed a "sensibility" that could devour any kind of experience. This paper argues that their ideological similarity stems from a shared use of "wit"—not merely as humor, but as a sophisticated tool of logic used to probe the mysteries of the soul (Khan et al., 2017).

The Ideology of the "Conceit"

The most visible link between Donne and Ghalib is the use of the "conceit"—an elaborate, often startling metaphor that requires intellectual effort to unravel.



Donne's Geometrical Precision

In "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," Donne compares the souls of two lovers to the twin feet of a mathematical compass. He writes:

"If they be two, they are two so / As stiff twin compasses are two; / Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if the other do."

This use of a cold, scientific instrument to describe the warmth of love was revolutionary. It signalled an ideology where the physical laws of the universe were seen as reflections of emotional truths.

Ghalib's Philosophical Abstraction

Ghalib employs a similar strategy, though his imagery often leans toward the abstract and the Sufi. In one of his famous verses, he writes about the drop of water losing itself in the ocean to find its true identity. For Ghalib, the "difficulty" of his poetry was intentional. He believed that just as the secrets of the universe are not laid bare to the casual observer, poetry should require a "shaoor" (an intense intellectual consciousness) to be understood.

The Dualism of Sacred and Profane Love

Both poets navigate a complex relationship between earthly desire and divine devotion. In their ideologies, the "Beloved" is often a shifting figure—sometimes a woman of flesh and blood, sometimes the Divine Creator.

Donne's Erotic Spirituality

Donne famously used the language of the bedroom to talk to God and the language of the church to talk to his mistresses. In *Holy Sonnet XIV*, he begs God to "batter my heart" and "ravish" him. This startling intersection of violence, sex, and divinity suggests an ideology where the human body is the primary site of spiritual revelation.

Ghalib's "Ishq-e-Haqiqi" and "Ishq-e-Majazi"

In the tradition of the Ghazal, Ghalib plays with the concepts of *Ishq-e-Majazi* (metaphorical/earthly love) and *Ishq-e-Haqiqi* (divine love). Ghalib's ideology is one of "yearning." He does not see God as a distant judge, but as an elusive beauty. Like Donne, Ghalib's devotion is often argumentative. He questions the Creator's indifference to human suffering, creating a dialogue that is both deeply respectful and fiercely defiant.

The Architecture of Thought: A Comparative Flow

To understand how these poets structure their arguments, we can observe the "Logic of the Soul" that governs their work:

Scepticism and Religious Subversion

A core ideological pillar for both Donne and Ghalib is the rejection of blind faith. They were both "outsiders" in their religious contexts—Donne as a former Catholic in a Protestant state, and Ghalib as a liberal thinker often at odds with the orthodox *Ulema* (clergy).



- **Donne's Search for Truth:** In *Satire III*, Donne famously describes truth as standing upon a "cragged, steep hill," noting that one must "about it, and about must go." He emphasizes individual inquiry over institutional decree.
- **Ghalib's Critique of the Preacher:** Ghalib's poetry is filled with witty critiques of the *Zahid* (the ascetic) and the *Sheikh*. He famously remarked that the mosque is for those who lack the imagination to see God in the tavern. This reflects an ideology of "Wahdat-ul-Wajood" (Unity of Existence), where God is found in the heart's passion rather than in ritual.

Comparison of Poetic Evolution

Feature	John Donne	Mirza Ghalib
Primary Form	Sonnets, Elegies, Songs	Ghazals, Qasidas
Philosophical Base	Scholasticism & Alchemy	Sufism & Vedantic Philosophy
Tone	Argumentative and Urgent	Philosophical and Melancholic
View of God	Personal, often confrontational	Abstract, immanent, and elusive

Comparative Structural Analysis

Aspect	John Donne	Mirza Ghalib
Era	Jacobean England (17th C)	Mughal India (19th C)
Key Imagery	Maps, Cannons, Compass, Flea	Mirrors, Shadows, Bubbles, Desert
Philosophy	Scholasticism / Neoplatonism	Sufism / Existentialism
Primary Theme	Unity of Body and Soul	The Illusion of Existence (<i>Maya/Asl</i>)

Conclusion

John Donne and Mirza Ghalib represent the pinnacle of intellectual lyricism. Their shared ideology is one of **synthesis**: they refused to see the world as divided between the mind and the heart. For Donne, an intellectual argument was an emotional experience; for Ghalib, an emotional pang was an opportunity for philosophical inquiry. In comparing them, we find that the human condition—characterized by doubt, desire, and a longing for the infinite—transcends the boundaries of language and time. They remain "modern" because they capture the fragmented, questioning nature of the human spirit.



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