

Exploring the Thematic Connection of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* with Persian Literature

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Abstract

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's early intellectual engagement with Islamic culture and Persian literature is well-documented. His library houses work by renowned Persian poets like Hafiz, Sadi, Rumi, and Khayyam. The influence of Persian literary tradition is discernible throughout *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Although numerous studies have probed the impact of Persian poets on Goethe's writings, the thematic relationship between *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Persian literature has yet to be explored. To fill this gap, the present research utilizes the comparative method as an analytical framework. This allows for the identification and in-depth exploration of the connections between Goethe's epistolary novel and several celebrated literary works. The results indicate that Goethe's profound engagement with Persian literature led to a set of conspicuous thematic associations, along with some verbal correspondences. Nevertheless, the theological themes within *The Sorrows of Young Werther* demand further examination, especially regarding Persian mysticism.

Keywords: Persian Literature, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Thematic Connection, Persian Mysticism

1. Introduction

The Sorrows of Young Werther is one of the famous works of Goethe, according to DeGuire (2011) argument, "The intertextual characteristics of this novel support an intertextual study" (p. 17). Numerous studies examined various aspects of this epistolary novel through different methods, yielding diverse results. However, no research has yet explored the thematic relationship between this novel and Persian literature. Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* utilizes a network of metaphors to convey the concept of death, which parallels the treatment of Werther's death in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Examining romantic discourse in Rataziaev's texts uncovers motifs and similarities between Russian and German literature. *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was widely acclaimed after its publication, inspiring many writers to imitate the protagonist's mannerism. "In Japan, the Werther model became a blueprint for melancholic analyses of the socio-political rupture" (Inna, 2021, p. 2), the mentioned writer (2021) in his analysis of Wertherian traits added that "This seemingly carefree mood of expression is coupled with dense code illustrates how precise allusions to various vocal sounds conveyed through rhetoric and spoken metaphors,

intertextual references" (p.3). D'Aoust also highlights the mentioned trait of the novel; Werther's intertextual and intermedia code illustrates how precise allusions to various vocal sounds conveyed through rhetoric and spoken metaphors, were intricately interwoven with the fusion of sound and meaning (D'Aoust, 2017). Moreover, Vaget's (2011) explores Werther's interests and failures as both an artist and a lover, investigating Goethe's motivations as a dilettante. Vaget focuses on the most prominent intertextual references in Werther, including Klopstock, Ossian, Homer, Lessing, and the Bible, Leonora Brucaj, through a comparative study of Werther and Jon, a character from a novel by Albanian writer Spasse, employed intertextual theory to identify both similarities and contradictions between the two protagonists.

The present research, which aims to fill the aforementioned gap, employs a comparative methodology to analyse the literary works of two distinct cultural traditions. It undertakes a thematic comparison between Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* from German literature and the works of prominent figures in Persian literary heritage. The selected Persian poets, namely Hafiz, Maulana Rumi, Khayyam, Sadi, Attar, and others are chosen due to their global recognition and esteemed status among Persian-speaking audiences. Their renowned anthologies forms are the core of this study. In addition to exploring the connections between Persian literature and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, this research also reveals the influence of Persian literary traditions on Goethe's work.

This writing is of significant importance as it delves into the fundamental aspects of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, presenting a novel perspective for Persian scholars. Historically, their understanding of Goethe's relationship with Persian literature has predominantly focused on works such as the West-Eastern Divan and the influences in "Faust". This research aims to prompt literary scholars to further investigate the associations between Goethe's wider body of work and Persian literary and cultural traditions. Moreover, the study's ethical and social aspects are highly enriching and transformative. Overall, this article augments readers' thematic understanding of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* while highlighting the magnificence of Persian literature.

2. Goethe's Relationship with Persian Literature

Persian literature, with its two-and-a-half-thousands-year history, stands among the world's oldest and richest. While numerous prehistoric Persian inscriptions have been lost, it remains recognized as one of humanity's greatest literary traditions. Ancient Persian connects to surviving manuscripts of Middle and old Persian, tracing its origins back to 522 BCE. In ancient times, Persian served as the national language of the Persian Empire, encompassing a vast territory that included present-day Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Azerbaijan, as well as parts of Central Asia (Reed, 1893). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, born in Frankfurt on August 28, 1749, died at the pinnacle of his fame in 1832. A polymath of immense talent, Goethe was a poet, critic, politician, scientist, and social activist. His literary legacy includes masterpieces such as Faust and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Goethe was called the genius of his era, a period often referred to as "the age of Goethe". He stands alone as a writer whose works embody the characteristics of both Romanticism and Classicism. Throughout his life, Goethe held prominent social, political, and official positions, and he encountered renowned literary and political figures such as Hegel, Beethoven, and Napoleon (Behjat, 2007).

The burgeoning trend of Orientalism in the West sparked Goethe's fascination with Eastern cultures, prompting him to delve into their history, literature, religions, and philosophies. He immersed himself in Persian, Chinese, and Arabic literature, as well as the works of India, among others. Goethe's interest in Eastern literature began during his university years and continued throughout his life. As a young man, he studied the Quran, the Vedas, and Sakuntala. His extensive research into Arabic, Chinese, and Persian literature deepened his understanding of their cultures and artistic traditions. In 1775, Goethe read a translated copy of the Song of Solomon (Min, 2000). The works of Goethe and Persian literature share a rich and complex thematic relationship. Scholars have explored these connections, examining the influence of Persian literary works on Goethe's writings and treatises. Research has convincingly demonstrated the impact of Persian literature on Goethe's creative outputs. However, despite the evident intertextual connections between Persian literature and *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, no dedicated research has yet been conducted on this specific topic.

3. The Novel: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

After studying law, Goethe embarked on a legal internship in Wetzlar in September 1772, where he served at the German Supreme Court. During his time there, he deeply loved Charlotte Buff, the fiancée of his friend, Johann Georg Christian Kestner. This love was ultimately unrequited and ended in heartbreak. The emotional turmoil of this experience inspired Goethe's novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

Goethe completed his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in 1774, and its final edition was published in 1778. The novel's epistolary style, employing a series of letters as its narrative structure, made it a significant work of the "Sturm und Drang" movement in German literature. At the young age of 24, Goethe wrote the novel in a remarkable five-and-a-half weeks in March 1774. This masterpiece cemented Goethe's place among the masters of world literature and remains one of his most celebrated works.

The Sorrows of Young Werther blends biographical and autobiographical elements, focusing on a complex love triangle involving Albert, Werther, and Charlotte Buff (who married Albert), as well as the character of Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem. The novel culminates in Werther's tragic suicide, using a pistol borrowed from Albert (Goethe & Maier, 1929).

4. The Thematic Connection between *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Persian Ancient Poets' Poems

Persian literature, with its esteemed tradition rooted in antiquity, has fostered profound and enduring connections with the cultures and literature of various nations. Its affiliation with the expansive Indo-European language family established early links to other literary traditions. Additionally, the richness of its heritage and the timeless works of its great thinkers have captivated readers, scholars, and philosophers worldwide. Among these admirers was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of history's most brilliant minds. Goethe's deep appreciation for Persian, particularly his affinity for Hafiz, Sadi, Maulana Rumi, and Jami, is well-documented. The influence of this admiration is vividly reflected in his works.

Goethe embarked on an imaginative journey to the East, motivated by the social unrest in Europe and the tumultuous state of language and art during his time. The result of this intellectual voyage was his West-Eastern Divan, a work profoundly inspired by Hafiz, to the extent that Goethe adopted the same title as Hafiz's "Divan". In one of his poems, Goethe explicitly references his reason for turning to the homeland of Hafiz, revealing his longing to engage with the spiritual and artistic depth of Persian culture:

"North-south and west are quaking,
Thrones are cracking, empires shaking:
You must flee, the east will right you,
Patriarchs' pure air will delight, singing
There is loving, drinking, singing

Youth from Ciser's well is spring" (Rahimieh, 2011, p.298).

Like Hafiz, Sadi was introduced to Western audiences in the eighteenth century through poets and travelers. Translations of his works were highly regarded, and cherished as invaluable contributions to the understanding of Eastern literature (Galili, 2022, P. 13).

Several decades before Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall (1774-1856) translated Hafiz's "Divan", Adam Olearius (1603–1671), an ambassador of Schleswig-Holstein to Isfahan during the Safavid era became the first to directly translate a Persian work into German. His translation of Sadi's Gulistan (The Rose Garden) was published in 1654, following the release of his travelogue in 1651. Both works were highly acclaimed in Germany, reflecting the growing fascination with Persian literature. It is well-documented that Goethe was familiar with Olearius's translation of The Rose Garden, as library records in Weimar indicate that he borrowed the book. Goethe even provided his reflections on Sadi Shirazi, underscoring his appreciation of the Persian poet:

[Sadi] was born in Shiraz, continued studying in Baghdad, during his youth because of failure in love, selected Dervish uncomfortable lifestyle. Fifteen times he went in Hadj, during the longtime trips he went in India and ancient Asia, even during the trip he was arrested by crusader soldiers besides he continued his trip up to western land. Saadi experienced many amazing events during the trip, through the trip he gathered a lot of information about human, and their homelands. After 30 years trip he returned to his motherland selected seclusion and started writing his books. The scope of Saad's experiences, life, and stories is very extensive. His works are full of graces which are adorned with proses and verses, his main purpose was the educating of readers. (Goethe, 1386, p. 255)

The evidence presented, including the aforementioned stanza and supporting documents, demonstrates that Goethe was significantly influenced by Sadi, particularly in the West-Eastern Divan and other works. While traces of Persian literary influence can be identified across many of Goethe's oeuvres, the impact of Hafiz and Sadi is especially pronounced and extensive. In some instances, the verbal parallels between their writings and Goethe's are strikingly evident. The thematic and stylistic influence of Sadi's Gulistan (The Rose Garden) and Bustan (The Orchard) is particularly prominent in the West-Eastern Divan.

Goethe's enduring and profound engagement with Persian literature allowed him to immerse himself in its rich traditions. By incorporating Persian sources into his works, he established strong thematic connections with the writings of esteemed Persian literary figures such as Hafiz, Maulana Rumi, Jami, Attar, and Khayyam. This integration not only enriched Goethe's literary creations but also cemented a lasting relationship between his oeuvre and the heritage of Persian literature.

This analysis aims to assess the depth of the relationship between the central themes of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and the works of renowned Persian poets through a comparative approach. The study seeks to identify whether the connection is primarily thematic, verbal, or both. If such a relationship is established, the research will further evaluate its depth and scope, offering insights into the extent of Persian literary influence on Goethe's work.

4.1. The World-Weariness

World-weariness often stems from asceticism, a philosophy that encourages detachment from worldly pleasures. Ascetics view worldly attachments as the source of moral corruption and envision a utopian society based on their austere way of life (Chasli&Neamati, 2021).

4.1.1. The World-Weariness in Goethe's Point of View

World-weariness is a central motif in Persian literature, with many renowned Persian poets reflecting this theme in their works. Goethe's view on this matter closely aligns with the prevalent thought in Persian mysticism.

Goethe criticizes the world and worldly concerns in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, stating:

"For I have learned, by my own experience, that all extraordinary men, who have accomplished great and astonishing actions, have ever been decried by the world as drunken or insane. And in private life, too, is it not

intolerable that no one can undertake the execution of a noble or generous deed without giving rise to the exclamation that the doer is intoxicated or mad? Shame upon you, ye sages.” (Goethe, 1737, p. 19)

The concept Goethe conveys here, along with the tone of his expression, closely aligns with themes found in Persian literature. Persian poets likewise argue that attachment to the material world impedes human elevation and obstructs the realization of true humanity.

4.1.2. The World-Weariness in Hafiz’s Perspective

Ascetic poets in Persian literature frequently explore the theme of worldly detachment. They believe that attachment to material possessions, and worldly pleasures leads humans astray, diverting them from the divine. Persian poets such as Hafiz, Rumi, Nasir Khusraw, Sadi, and Jami have all explored the theme of worldly detachment in their works. Hafiz, in particular, expresses a profound disdain for the material world, viewing it as insignificant and denouncing its possessions:

“The world and its affairs are all nothing for naught

A thousand times I have inquired about this trend” (Hafiz, 2007, p. 45)

4.1.3. World-weariness in Attar’s Poems

“Attar Nishaburi is one of the towering figures in Persian mystical literature, and his works have significantly enriched Persian literary tradition.” (Nozhat & Hosseini, 2018, p. 17)

Attar paints a rather bleak and disheartening picture of the world:

“This ruined cloister (world) is like a scorching oven

no unburnt bread comes out of it

the world does not mourn for anyone’s sadness

Without misery do not have a solution

There is no solution for someone other than helplessness” (Mohammed, 1392, p.12)

The preceding evidences indicate that the thematic relationship between Hafiz, Attar, and section of Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is too similar, these correspondences signify that Goethe before the creation of his epistolary work studied the works of precedents Persian poets.

5. Past is Past Seizing the Present

Psychology calls it rumination, “defined [rumination] as a repetitive thinking about negative information” (Whitmer & Gotlib, 2013, p. 8), “we provide evidence that such experiences are influenced by individual differences in temporal and affective biases in cognitive style.” it leads to misconduct for the human, “has been found to lead to serious multiadaptive consequences, including longer and more severe episodes of major depression” (Beatty & Schacter, 2019, p. 6).

5.1. Retrospective Rumination in the Eyes of Goethe

Goethe, like many psychologists, grappled with the issue of dwelling on the past in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. He believed that obsessing over the past hinders progress, urging readers to embrace the present for happiness and fulfillment. In a letter to Leonora dated May 4th, he advises against dwelling on the past, which cannot be changed, and instead focuses on the importance of living in the moment. “My dear friend, I promise I will improve. I will no longer, as has been my habit, continue to ruminate on every petty vexation that fortune may dispense: I will enjoy the present, and the past shall be the past” (Goethe, 1737, p. 1).

5.2. Brood Rumination in the Speeches of Khayyam

Khayyam, known as the sage of Nishapur, was one of the most significant mathematicians, poets, and scholars of ancient Iran and the world. He lived during the 12th century AD (Kalati, 2018), and more than other Persian poets focused on the theme of retrospective rumination. He observed that dwelling on the past and future hinders individuals from appreciating the joys and humor of the present moment. This sentiment finds a parallel in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*:

First:

“The yesterday that’s gone

you must forget what it was

For tomorrow not come

do not flitter and fuss” (Mahbod, 2008, p.5)

Second:

“One moment in annihilation’s waste

one moment, of the well of life to taste

The stars are setting, and Caravn

starts for dawn of nothing-oh, make haste” (Khayyam, 2024, p. 4)

Third:

“Ah, but my computations people say

Reduced the year to better reckoning? nay,

Tw’as only striking from the calendar

Unborn tomorrow and dead yesterday” (Goethe, 2013, p. 27)

5.3. Focused on Retrospective Rumination in Sadi’s Speeches

Abu-Muhammad Muslih Al-Din Abdullah Shirazi was one of the outstanding Persian poets of the Middle Ages. He was born in 1184 and passed away in 1283/1291 in Shiraz, Iran (Zarrintan&Ranjbar, 2015).

Sadi advises readers to avoid dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. He encourages them to seize the present moment, as it holds the greatest potential for prosperity:

First:
 “Why should the fortunate and lucky
 concern themselves with fear of hardship?
 Go, be merry, compassionate friend
 one should not worry today about tomorrow” (Sadi, SH¹ .1342, p.133)

The aforementioned pieces indicate that all three writings addressed a single theme, furthermore, the ways of expression, tones, and speeches’ atmospheres look similar to each other. These examples once again underscored the thematic connection of epistolary novel with Persian literature.

6. Hypocrisy

Persian mystics presented multivarious interpretations of hypocrisy. Nasir al-Din al-Tusi defined it as a form of deception, characterized by a discrepancy between words and actions. Izz al-Din al-Kashani, on the other hand, defines hypocrisy as a pursuit of external validation, a desperate attempt to gain praise from others by any means necessary (Marja Zadeh, SH.1396).

6.1. Hypocrisy in the Eyes of Goethe

Hypocrisy is a subject that Goethe talks about in some parts of the novel. In particular, he denounces hypocrisy and expresses gratitude to God for not being afflicted with this trait. “The extravagant; you pass by, like the Levite, and thank God, like the pharisee, that you are not like one of them. I have been more than once intoxicated; my passions have always bordered on extravagance: I am not ashamed to confess it” (Goethe, 2013, p. 18).

6.2. Hypocrisy in the Eyes of Hafiz

Hafiz, a renowned Persian poet who lived from approximately 1320 to 1392, is celebrated worldwide for his breathtaking and masterful ghazals (Rahimieh, 2011), Persian literature is deeply rooted in morality and love and often condemns unethical behavior. Countless Persian poets, including Rumi (Maulana), Sadi, Sanaie, and Hafiz, have passionately denounced hypocrisy. Hafiz, in particular, is known for his scathing critiques of hypocrisy and those who practice it. His words, often chosen as examples of this condemnation, vividly expose the flaws of hypocrisy and those who embody it:

First:
 “Give tiding to the alley of wine sellers
 Which Hafiz repented from asceticism and hypocrisy” (Hafiz, 2007, Ghazal²130)
 Second:
 “a drunker who has no hypocrisy
 is better than an ascetic who does hypocrisy” (Hafiz, 2007, Ghazal 20)
 Third:
 “Hypocrites ruin their creed and nest
 Hafiz leaves without his dervish’s vest” (Hafiz, 2007, Ghazal 407)

A striking parallel emerges between Goethe’s and Hafiz’s perspectives on hypocrisy. Both writers express a profound aversion to this character flaw.

7. Love courier

7.1. Love Courier in the Eyes of Goethe

The central theme of Goethe’s novel is the tragic and unrequited love between the protagonist Werther and Charlotte. Beyond the depiction of this love, Goethe also incorporates insightful observations about the nature of love itself. An amazing part of his novel is the part where Goethe provides a definition of love; Werther, in a letter on July 18 asks Wilhelm: “What is the world to our hearts without love? What is a magic lantern without light?” if you have light, you might ignite it, because in the shining of your light can gloat at mistress countenance, Goethe believes that during life if you see a small sparkle of love, it can make your life merry.

Goethe’s portrayal of love is intensely passionate and ardent. Werther, consumed by his love for Charlotte, declares that he would become utterly restless if he was unable to see her for even a single day. He ships off his servant to inquire about Charlotte’s well-being, wistfully awaiting his return. Goethe’s servant, like a polished stone in the sun, reflects the image of his beloved, captivating Werther with his very presence. Werther finds the servant’s clothes, eyes, and cheeks endearing, as they mirror the features of his beloved Charlotte (Goethe, 2013).

7.2. Love Courier in the Eyes of Hafiz

There are remarkable similarities between this poem by Hafiz and Goethe’s work. In a similar manner to how Hafiz perceives the features and beauties of his beloved in the face of the love courier, Werther also likes the Love Courier because he can see the cheeks and eyes of Charlotte reflected in the face of his servant:

“The messenger who arrived from the land of my friend

Brought a charm, fragrant, and in the hand of my friend
 Wonderfully display her beauty and her glory
 With the tales of a noble and regal stand of my friend” (Hafiz, 2007, Ghazal 55)

The similarities between these two terms indicate that Goethe might have studied this Ghazal of Hafiz, as the way Goethe addresses the subject and the content aligns closely. Based on comparative theory, these types of connections or similarities cannot be spontaneous and accidental. Accordingly, these terms prove that Goethe might have studied this poem of Hafiz.

8. Social Acceptance and Rejection

Social acceptance means being welcomed into a group’s circle of friendship, while social rejection indicates that others are less interested in including you in their social circle (DeWall & Bushman, 2011).

8.1. Social Acceptance and Rejection from Goethe’s Point of View

Social acceptance is an issue that Goethe considered in his novel. He stated that to gain the acceptance of others, one should not change their manners, nor should they beg for dignity from others. In a letter dated July 20, Werther writes to his friend that with every step of foolishness, some people, because of the desire for others’ acceptance, forget themselves. They are always wandering in pursuit of dignity, wealth, and so on, which he deems as silliness (Goethe, 2013).

8.2. Social Acceptance and Rejection in the Eyes of Sanaie

Hakim Abul Majd Majdud Ibn Adam Sanaie Ghaznawi was born in 1080 and died in 1131 in Ghazani a province of today’s Afghanistan. (Fariba, 2018) .

Sanaei, like Goethe, also focused on the themes of social acceptance and rejection. Sanaei emphasized that for the sake of acceptance, we should not change our manners and behaviors. Sanaei’s notion on this issue is very similar to Goethe’s perspective as expressed in the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

“Do not make stupid yourself because of other acceptance and rejection
 Because the other’s behaviors are nothing but stupidity.” (Sanaei, SH.1388, p.32)

The close connection between these two examples suggests that Goethe might have studied this poem of Sanaie, as such a coincidence seems unlikely. Based on theoretical analysis, the relationship between these two texts shows a close thematic connection.

9. The World Is Full of Calamities

The fleeting nature of life and the world’s inherent suffering are themes that resonate with ancient Persian poets. This sentiment, of reproaching the world, is a central element in the works of Persian mystic poets (Qamber, 1988, p. 35). Goethe also grapples with this theme, making his words remarkably similar to those of the Persian poets.

9.1. World Nature in Goethe’s Point of View

In the letter “August 18”, Goethe expressed that nothing in this world is permanent; all existence is fleeting. Nature is rife with hidden dangers. it is capable of unleashing devastation at any moment, like an earthquake that can raze a city or a flood that can engulf a village. Even humans, in their daily lives, are agents of destruction. As Werther observes, our very footsteps crush the nests of countless insects and ants, as he mentioned “I wander on my way with aching heart; and the universe is to me a fearful monster, forever devouring its offspring” (Goethe, 1737, p. 22).

9.2. World in Maulana Point of View

Jalal-Ud-Din Muhammad (1207-1273) was born in the historical city of ancient Khurasan which is located in today Afghanistan, He was an outstanding scholar, jurist, and founder of Malviya Silsila-Tariqah (Qamber, 1988).

Maulana, in numerous poems, explores the transient and cursed nature of the world. He writes the world is baseless, it annoys my soul with its deceiving tricks.

First:
 “The world is baseless and old, Lovers should out and scold
 Magic spells take their hold, this is lovers’ sorrowful route” (Rumi, 1388, p.208)

Second:
 “Earth as a husband sky as a wife, both devour their child like a cat
 I do not know such a wife and such a husband” (Rumi, SH.1388, p. 503)

9.3. Khayyam Reproaching the World

In this passage, Khayyam, like Goethe and Maulana, expresses dissatisfaction with the nature of the world. He likens the world to a monster that devours its children, suggesting that the customs of the world are merely a source of annoyance for humanity:

First:
 “Who is the one who is not humiliated on this earth
 Who is not tied to the chain of senescence, pain, and inability
 Earth is like a mum who eats her child
 Could not get enough of eating all these children” (Khayyam, 2024, p. 27)

Second:

“The heavens do not increase anything other than sorrow
It will not place [something] in its place until it takes [something] away again
If the unborn knew what we endure from the world
They would not come into existence again” (Khayyam, 2024, p. 36)

Khayyam’s perspective on the nature of the world aligns with that of Maulana and Goethe. Like them, he emphasizes the world’s vexing and frustrating nature for humanity. A striking similarity exists among these thinkers in their terminology and metaphors. All three have employed the evocative image of a “baby-eating mother/ baby-eating world/ baby-eating sky” to describe the world’s harsh and unforgiving nature.

A striking similarity exists between the works of Goethe, Maulana, and Khayyam, as their speeches share similarities in both meaning and verbal form. A deep thematic and verbal parallel exists among their speeches.

10. Where Did Human Beings Come From?

Goethe’s work raises profound and enduring questions about the human condition, questions that continue to challenge humanity today. He probes the origins of human existence such as: “Where did human beings come from?”, What is the purpose of our lives “They came for what?”, and the ultimate fate that awaits us “Where do they go?”. These fundamental questions about the origins, meaning, and destiny of human life are central themes not only in Goethe’s work but also in the quatrains and poems of Omar Khayyam. Other prominent Persian poets and thinkers, such as Sadi, Maulana, and Hafiz, have also explored these profound and timeless motifs in their distinctive ways.

Here in this text, Goethe asks the aforementioned questions: “All learned professors and doctors agreed that children do not comprehend the cause of their desires; but that the grown-up should wander about this earth like children, without knowing whence they come? or where they go? influenced as little by fixed motives, but guided like them by biscuits, sugar-plums, and the rod, --this is what nobody is willing to acknowledge, and yet I think it is palpable” (Goethe, 2013, p. 4).

In the last letter of his novel, Goethe has a remark about death, the death which he witnessed from his friends and kins, which based on his observations infer some conceptions; “I saw many human beings die; so strained is our feeble nature, we have no clear conception of the beginning or the end of our existence. At this moment I am me owe—or rather I am thine, thine, my adored” (Goethe, 2013, p. 52).

11. The Origin of Human Beings in the Speech of Maulana Rumi

Rumi just as Goethe posed fundamental queries about the origins, purpose, and ultimate fate of human beings, Maulana Rumi also delved deeply into these timeless, universal concerns in his acclaimed poetry and writings:

“This is my thought in the day and my speech in the night|
Why am I oblivious to the state of my heart?
Where do I come from and why?
Where am I going? My destination is not clear
I am wondering, why did he create me?
What was the aim of my creation?” (Rumi, SH.1388, p. 234)

11.1 The Origin of Human Beings in the Speech of Khayyam

Omar Khayyam was a renowned Persian philosopher-poet whose central poetic themes revolved around the fundamental questions of human origins, destiny, and the underlying causes of our creation:

First:
“We come and go in a circle
Whose begin and are invisible
No one speaks a sincere word in this world
As where we come from where we are going” (Khayyam, 2024, p. 13)

Second:
“There is no benefit from my coming into the sphere
Nor does my going increase its glory
My ears never heard from anyone
What was the purpose of my coming and going?”

Third:
“And strange to tell, among that earthen Lot
some could articulate, while others not:
and suddenly one more impatient cried-
Who is the potter, pray, and who the pot?” (Khayyam, 2024, p. 17)

Fourth:
“Into this universe, and why not knowing
Nor whence, like water willy-nilly flowing:

And out of it, as went along the waste,
I know not whiter, willy-nilly blowing” (Khayyam, 2024, p. 2)

Fifth:

“The mighty Mahmud, the victorious lord
that all the misbelieving and horde
Of fears and sorrows that infest the soul
scatters and slays with his enchanted sword” (Khayyam, 1893a, p. 10)

These fragments of evidence suggest a close alignment between Goethe’s philosophical queries and the poetry of prominent Persian literary figures like Khayyam and Rumi. Just the forms of these works are different; Goethe’s novel is in prose, while Khayyam’s and Rumi’s works are rhythmic. The themes, tones, and atmospheres of the works are completely corresponding.

12. The Theological and Mystical Connection of Persian Literature with Novel

Theology and the proof of God’s existence are among the core subjects within the Islamic tradition. Religious scholars have generally provided three types of arguments or proofs for demonstrating the presence of God. Among these three proofs, the argument from creation (Dalil al-hadith) is the most relevant to the present topic. The reasoning from creation and creatures explains that one way of proving God’s existence is through the observation of divine attributes, signs, and workings within nature (Monfarid, 2016, p. 162).

The presence of God and the manifestation of His power permeate Goethe’s epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. The portrayal of divine influence and its involvement in Werther’s life and destiny bears notable similarities to Islamic theology. For instance, in the letter dated May 4th, Goethe reflects on fortune and its role in Werther’s life, alongside descriptions of paradise and a deep appreciation for solitude: “Solitude in this terrestrial paradise is a genial balm to my mind...” Such reflections highlight theological undertones that resonate with Persian literary and mystical traditions. Readers familiar with Persian mysticism and theology will readily recognize thematic parallels between the novel and Persian thought, particularly in its contemplations of divine will, the transient nature of earthly life, and the solace found in solitude as a form of spiritual communion. These thematic echoes serve as evidence of a profound connection between Goethe’s narrative and the rich heritage of Persian literature.

In the letter dated May 10th, Goethe describes lying in the grass, contemplating the secrets of nature. He reflects on how, as he lay there, he observed numerous types of plants and a small world teeming with life-buzzing and whistling insects and flies. For Goethe, the existence of these creatures serves as a manifestation of God’s presence. This perspective closely aligns with the central idea in Persian mysticism, particularly the concept of “the unity of existence.” Persian mystics such as Maulana Rumi and Attar espoused the belief that nature is a mirror reflecting the divine presence. Goethe’s meditation on nature as a sign of the divine presence resonates with this mystical worldview. His reflection can be seen as parallel to the famous poetic expressions found in Persian mysticism, where nature and existence are intertwined as manifestations of God’s unity:

“The green leaves of the trees, to the discerning eye,
is like a volume of a book for recognition of God
it is springtime, let’s go sightseeing
age is not reliable till once again comes spring” (Sadi, SH.1342, p.226)

Goethe continues, “...the breath of that universal love which bears and sustains us.” This idea closely mirrors the principles of Persian mysticism, which holds that the spirits of nature and all living beings are sustained and enlivened by the divine presence of God. Goethe’s description of nature reflects the same spiritual conception, where the life force within all things is understood as flowing from God.

In another passage, Goethe states that his perception or description of nature, and the impression it leaves on him, “might be the mirror of my soul, as my soul is the mirror of the infinite God.” This idea echoes the Persian mystical belief in the reflection of the divine in both nature and the human soul. In Persian thought, the soul is often seen as a mirror that reflects the infinite God, and nature, too, serves as a mirror of the divine. Goethe’s words thus parallel the mystical understanding in Persian traditions, where both nature and the soul are seen as reflections of the unity and presence of the divine” (p.2).

Goethe’s vivid descriptions of the beauty of flowers, the rushing sound of rivers, the verdant canopy of trees, the movement of clouds, the swarm of insects, and the songs of birds evoke a profound sense of connection to the natural world. He writes, “I felt myself exalted by this overflowing fullness to the perception of the Godhead.” This experience reflects a deeply spiritual perspective, where nature is not just appreciated for its aesthetic beauty, but as a manifestation of the divine. Goethe’s reflection resonates with Islamic theology, which views creation and its creatures as signs of God’s presence and power. According to Islamic thought, everything in the natural world is a reflection of the divine, a concept that aligns with Goethe’s experience of being exalted through nature to a deeper awareness of the Godhead. This connection underscores the parallel between Goethe’s view of nature and the Islamic theological understanding of the universe as a mirror of the divine presence (Goethe, 1773, p. 22).

13. Limited knowledge

It is a major subject among Persian poets. It is said that the first one who proposed this issue and admitted that his knowledge was far too limited to recognize nature fully was Ibn Sina (Avicenna). Subsequently, many poets have repeated this concept in their poems. Similarly, Goethe also brought the same issue as the Persian literary figures into his novel.

Werther confesses that his knowledge of the recognition of nature is far too limited. He confesses that he cannot even recognize a small part of a plant, and his ability is too limited to fully comprehend it (Goethe, 2013).

14. Ibn Sina (Avicenna) Confessed to His Limited Knowledge

Following a quatrain from Ibn Sina, its concept bears an amazing similarity with the content that Goethe explained in his novel, *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, regarding the admission of limited knowledge for the recognition of nature:

“Although my heart made much haste in this desert
It did not know a single hair but took to hair-splitting
In my heart shone a thousand suns
Yet it never discovered completely the nature of single atom” (Aminrazavi, 2013).

15. Conclusion

The thematic relationship between Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Persian literature is a subject that has not yet been researched. Persian and German belong to the same language family (Indo-European). Moreover, the trend of Orientalism in the West prompted Goethe to study the cultures, histories, literature, and religions of the Orient, including Persian, Chinese, Arabic, and Indian literature. Goethe had a fondness for Eastern literature since his university years (Min, 2002). After studying Hafiz’s *Divan*, he composed a work titled *West-Eastern Divan*. These facts demonstrate that Goethe’s works, particularly *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, have a deep and extensive thematic relationship with Persian literature and Islamic culture. Based on previous pieces of evidence, we can conclude that Goethe’s writings possess significant potential for comparative and intertextual studies with Persian literature.

In addition to narrating the central themes of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe includes ethical advice, philosophical reflections, theological insights, and vivid descriptions of nature and love scenes that resonate with themes in Persian literature. Various thematic elements of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* exhibit textual relationships with the works of Khayyam, Maulana Rumi, Hafiz, Sadi, Attar, Sanaie, and Avicenna. Most of these connections are thematic, indicating shared motifs between Goethe’s novel and the works of these renowned Persian literary figures. In some instances, the relationship becomes particularly close, revealing similar literary constructs and terminology. For example, both Werther and Khayyam use the phrase “baby-eating mother” to describe the world. Additionally, when Werther expresses that his understanding is limited in recognizing the world, it closely parallels Avicenna’s sentiments. Similarly, when Werther inquires about the origins of humanity, his phrasing is strikingly similar to that of Maulana and Khayyam. The terminology, wording, and overall flavor of their expressions seem remarkably aligned as if all these voices belonged to a single author.

The pieces of evidence presented indicate that a significant and extensive thematic connection exists between *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Persian literature. This research demonstrates that the nature of this connection is thematic and even verbal, between Goethe’s epistolary novel and Persian literature. Within the categories of relationships, two types of connections have been identified: thematic and verbal. The majority of these relationships are thematic, with only a few instances of verbal connections.

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Notes

¹ SH is the abbreviation of the Solar Hijri calendar.

² The Ghazals of Hafiz can easily be found by their numbers, which is why here are referenced based on their numerical numbers.