

## THE ROLE OF EASTERN MOTIFS IN GOETHE'S FAUST

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### Abstract

This article presents a scholarly analysis of the role and significance of motifs characteristic of Eastern philosophy and literature in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's tragedy Faust. The study examines Sufi concepts inherent in Eastern thought, including the human aspiration toward spiritual perfection, the struggle against the nafs (ego), and the process of spiritual purification. These ideas are analyzed in correlation with the intellectual heritage of Eastern thinkers such as Jalal ad-Din Rumi, Hafez, and Sa'di. Particular attention is paid to Goethe's profound interest in Eastern literature and philosophy, highlighting the ideological affinity between Faust and his poetic cycle West–Eastern Divan, composed under the influence of Hafez's works. The article argues that Eastern philosophical and mystical elements play a crucial role in shaping the ethical and metaphysical framework of Faust, positioning the tragedy as a literary bridge between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions.

**Keywords:** Faust; Goethe; Eastern motifs; Sufism; spiritual perfection; Hafez; West–Eastern Divan.

### Introduction

According to Goethe, Eastern literature and poetry resemble the “Spring of Khidr,” a source of eternal spiritual freshness. He repeatedly emphasized that the works of great Eastern poets—such as Hafez of Shiraz, Ferdowsi, Sa'di, and Jalal ad-Din Rumi—radiate purity and wisdom. Although Goethe lived and created in Germany, his spiritual and intellectual orientation reveals a deep affinity with Eastern culture. The emotional depth and philosophical essence of his writings are remarkably close to the Eastern worldview, which distinguishes his literary legacy within European literature.

Goethe's admiration for the East is particularly evident in West–Eastern Divan, where his respect for the Islamic world and Eastern intellectual traditions is openly

expressed. He famously stated that all “seven stars” of world poetry belong to Eastern poets, mentioning Hafez, Sa’di, and Alisher Navoi with profound humility, remarking: “I am not worthy even of their shadow.” This statement reflects Goethe’s sincere reverence for Eastern literary authority and spiritual depth.

## **2. Goethe’s Engagement with Eastern Philosophy and Literature**

Goethe’s intellectual universe was not confined to Christian doctrine or Western cultural paradigms. He actively engaged with Eastern philosophy, Islamic teachings, and Sufi thought, integrating these influences into his spiritual worldview. Literary scholars emphasize that West–Eastern Divan was shaped under the influence of the Qur’an, Hadith literature, Sufi teachings, and the poetic traditions of Ferdowsi, Anvari, Nizami, Sa’di, and Jami.

Among Eastern poets, Hafez occupied a particularly significant place in Goethe’s imagination. Goethe not only admired Hafez but also identified with him spiritually and poetically. In the chapter of West–Eastern Divan dedicated to Hafez, Goethe openly expresses his sense of kinship and shared poetic mission, referring to Hafez as his spiritual counterpart. His poetic declaration of likeness underscores his recognition of Hafez as a mentor and guide.

These verses also indicate Goethe’s familiarity not only with Eastern poetry but with the Qur’an itself. In several instances, Goethe calls upon scholars to approach Qur’anic verses with reverence and faith. His works demonstrate that Eastern ideas and Islamic concepts were not superficial borrowings but deeply internalized elements of his intellectual identity.

## **3. Eastern Motifs and Symbolism in Faust**

In addition to philosophical concepts, Goethe actively employed symbolic figures and narrative motifs drawn from Eastern literature. References to Majnun, Vamiq and Uzra, and Yusuf and Zulaykha appear as illustrative examples. However, Goethe’s depiction of Zulaykha diverges from traditional representations. In the poem Hatam and Zulaykha, scholars suggest that the female figure reflects a real historical personality—Marianne—while the character of Hatam symbolically evokes Yusuf. Goethe’s choice of Hatam, renowned in Eastern tradition for wisdom and generosity, reflects a deliberate symbolic transformation aligned with his artistic intentions.

Faust, one of Goethe's most celebrated works, is fundamentally philosophical in nature. Its central theme revolves around the eternal struggle between good and evil, affirmation and negation, humanity and the demonic. Within this framework, Goethe integrates Eastern motifs, ideas, and ethical principles to enrich the metaphysical depth of the tragedy.

#### **4. Ethical and Sufi Dimensions in Faust**

Among the universal values articulated in Faust, particular attention should be paid to the theme of filial obedience. The notion that a child must remain obedient to the father, even in moments of moral conflict, reflects a distinctly Eastern ethical perspective. While such relationships are often treated pragmatically in Western societies, Eastern moral philosophy—supported by Hadith literature and didactic works of classical scholars—places profound emphasis on filial duty.

Despite recognizing his father's medical error during the plague, Faust adheres to the principle that a father's path remains sacred for the child. This idea closely resonates with Alisher Navoi's famous moral injunction: "Consider your father's mistake as righteousness." Such ideological parallels further illustrate the Eastern ethical foundations embedded in the tragedy.

Additionally, Faust reflects Sufi metaphysical ideas, particularly the concept of unity (wahdat al-wujud). When Faust declares, "I am the image of God," this statement echoes the Sufi belief that all existence manifests a single divine essence. Such expressions reveal the proximity of Faust to Eastern mystical philosophy.

#### **5. Scholarly Perspectives and Intercultural Significance**

The presence of Eastern ideas in Goethe's major works has attracted the attention of Western scholars. The German scholar Katharina Mommsen, in her doctoral study *Goethe and Islam*, meticulously analyzes the influence of Eastern philosophy and Islamic thought on Goethe's творчество. She notes Goethe's special reverence for Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, citing evidence that Goethe composed a poetic tribute to the Prophet at the age of twenty-three.

According to Mommsen, Goethe's admiration for Islam extended beyond literary engagement. In correspondence with friends, he frequently quoted Qur'anic verses and demonstrated deep familiarity with Islamic teachings. Goethe sought spiritual perfection not only through art but through personal conduct, embodying patience

and resilience in the face of life's hardships—qualities consistent with Eastern ethical ideals.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Faust can be regarded as a work profoundly imbued with Eastern spiritual and philosophical elements. The imagery, themes, and ideological foundations of the tragedy reflect a worldview deeply influenced by Sufi metaphysics and Eastern ethical traditions. Together with West–Eastern Divan, Faust serves as a unique literary bridge between East and West, fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. These works remain enduring masterpieces of world literature, strengthening intellectual connections and promoting universal values of wisdom, compassion, and spiritual aspiration.

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