

The Critical Study of Goethe's Muhammad Drama for Exploring Its Spark of Creation and The Reasons of Incompletion

Indonesian Journal of Religion and Society,
2025, Vol. 7 (2), 106 - 118

© The Journal, 2025

DOI : 10.36256/ijrs.v7i2.551

www.journal.lasigo.org/index.php/LJRS

 LASIGO
Journal

Article History

Received : August 2nd, 2025

Revised : Sept 29th and Dec 28th, 2025

Accepted : December 29th, 2025

Ali Shahryar

Department of World Literature and Comparative Literature, Chinese Literature, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

farhadjan1402@gmail.com

Nguyen Thi Hang

Department of Linguistic and Applied Linguistics, Liberal Arts, Southwest University, Chongqing, China.

hanganna.hn7@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Goethe, through orientalism, became familiar with the character of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), then in 1773 he decided to write a Drama with the title of "Muhammad Drama." After the completion of a few parts, he left it incomplete. Therefore, the present research has been conducted based on a mixed research framework of intellectual-historical and genetic criticism to critically study the remaining fragments of drama and discover the inspiration for creation and the reasons for the incompletion of the mentioned work. The close study of the mentioned topic suggests that the optimal character of the prophet, whose eager soul long been searching, inspired him to initiate this work, yet, due to his teacher's advice and other crucial societal considerations, he left it incomplete. The literary metaphors in remained fragments for prophet companions and the influence of the character of prophet Muhammad as a role model in other works of Goethe need to be explored.

Keyword: Muhammad Drama; Islamic Tradition; Motives for Creation, Reasons for Incompletion; Critical Study.

ABSTRAK

Goethe, melalui orientalisme, mengenal karakter Nabi Muhammad (SAW), kemudian pada tahun 1773 memutuskan untuk menulis sebuah drama dengan judul "Drama Muhammad." Setelah menyelesaikan beberapa bagian, ia meninggalkannya. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini dilakukan berdasarkan kerangka penelitian campuran kritik intelektual-historis dan genetik untuk secara kritis mempelajari fragmen-fragmen drama yang tersisa dan menemukan inspirasi penciptaan serta alasan ketidaklengkapan karya tersebut. Studi mendalam tentang topik tersebut menunjukkan bahwa karakter Nabi yang optimal, yang jiwanya telah lama mencari, menginspirasi untuk memulai karya ini, namun, karena nasihat gurunya dan pertimbangan sosial penting lainnya, ia meninggalkannya. Metafora sastra dalam fragmen yang tersisa untuk para sahabat Nabi dan pengaruh karakter Nabi Muhammad sebagai panutan dalam karya-karya Goethe lainnya perlu dieksplorasi.

Keyword: Drama Nami Muhammad SAW; Tradisi Islam; Motif Penciptaan, Alasan Ketidaklengkapan; Studi Kritis

Corresponding Author

Name : Ali Sahryar

Email : farhadjan1402@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The long-term interaction of religion and literature throughout history has become one of the most significant fields of interdisciplinary studies. Sometimes poets turn to religious figures, ideas, and texts and provide understanding and artistic depiction from them. In this vein, in the early modern age, some of the European Romantic poets applied literature as a medium for cross-cultural studies and interacted with oriental religious and spiritual contexts for shaping their literary inspiration and reviving their poetic creativity. Among them, Goethe (1749-1832) was one of those who, through orientalism interested in Islam and the character of the Prophet Muhammad, after long-term engagement, started to create a drama with the name of Muhammad Drama, the remaining fragments have been overlook along the history.

The present research has been conducted to critically study the remaining fragments and explore the inspirations which had led Goethe to initiate Goethe's Muhammad drama and the reasons why it remained incomplete. It asks how Goethe's evolving religious outlook, aesthetic priorities, and engagement with Islamic conceptions of prophecy shaped both the ambition and the limits of this dramatic endeavor.

The methodology that can properly address the problem is critical analysis based on the theoretical framework of mixed historical-intellectual and genetic criticism. The method that can discuss the drama in the long discourse of history, in the line that can reflect the evolution of Goethe's thoughts and interests through his remaining fragments.

The present study firstly studies the biography of Goethe, then his interaction with Islamic tradition, extended to the study of his dramatic writing talent, and ends with the main part of a comprehensive and critical analysis of Goethe's fragmentary work. This research, on the one hand, reveals the fair and unbiased celebration of a great thinker from the Prophet Muhammad's character, which can amazingly contribute to the true introduction of the Prophet Muhammad to other nations. On the other hand, the research suggests that how world literature figures draw upon other nations' traditions for shaping their literary inspiration. And the most important point is that the how important the social reception and rejection are for shaping poets' inspiration for artistic creation.

2. Theoretical Review

Limited research has been done due to Goethe's unfinished literary work titled "Muhammad Drama", with less research addressing the sources of inspiration and the reasons for its incompleteness. While extensive studies have been done on various facets of Goethe's literary contributions, including his biography, poetry, and intellectual legacy, as well as his engagement with Islam, works such as Adolph Martin Benson's *The Fragments of Goethe's Drama of Muhammad* (Benson, 1919), Mohammad Song: A commentary on Goethe's dramatic poem about the Prophet Mohammad by Mohammad Akhgari, focusing on the explanation of surviving segments of the mentioned drama. Additionally, Robert (2020) reviewed Western perceptions of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, which are tangentially related to the topic, but none of these studies particularly address the key questions.

The complexity of the questions necessitates deep research, as Goethe's early exposure to Islamic culture significantly influenced his spiritual development. While the majority of his works reflect the interplay of Western culture and literature, Islamic tradition is also notably present. Among Goethe's works, the *Muhammad* play stands out as the only piece he clearly intended to write about Islam. Had this work been completed and published, it would have provided valuable insights into Goethe's relationship with Islam. Unfortunately, this project remained incomplete for reasons Goethe did not obviously mention. Therefore, to understand Goethe's engagement with Islam, it is essential to explore the reasons for the play's incompleteness and identify the inspirations behind its creation. Researching these issues requires a review of Goethe's biography, an examination of the features of his plays, an analysis of the sources that inspired him, and an inquiry into the factors contributing to the play's unfinished state.

For examining Goethe's Muhammad drama mixed Intellectual-Historical and Genetic Criticism Framework is applied. because the intellectual historical deal with religious, philosophical, historical, and cultural contexts which form the writer's thoughts. Goethe's inclination toward Islam and the character of the Prophet Muhammad is the result of his interaction with great thinkers and his deep and long-term oriental studies. Therefore, this theory with genetic criticism can properly address the present research problem, because the genetic criticism provides a theoretical foundation for exploring the genre of fragmentary works, plans, drafts, and incomplete works, and unraveling the work's aspirations. As will be explained

in the following, just a few fragments from the Muhammad drama remained; this combined theoretical framework can fully address the problem.

3. Method

The present research is an interdisciplinary study of literature and religion. To accomplish this study, a qualitative method-provisionally termed the literary-historical text analysis, has been applied. In comparative literary text analysis, we believe that the essential reality can be extracted from the text and that the fundamental aim of every method is the understanding of the text (Lacity & Janson, 1994). As is evident, the discourse of influence and impression constitutes a branch of comparative literature. In one part of the research, an effort has been made to explain the impact of Islamic tradition through textual analysis and its outcomes. The study seeks to select texts from a broader historical context and subject them to analysis. Ultimately, by means of textual examination and consideration of the societal conditions of Goethe's era, the research aims to explore the problem in question. For this purpose, relevant papers and books were collected from libraries as well as reputable academic journals, after which all materials were contextualized. In general, the present interdisciplinary study offers a perspective from literature on religion.

4. Results

4.1. Concise Overview of Goethe's Biography

Familiarization with Goethe contributes to the significance of the present research. However, an insurmountable connection exists between a writer and his works; the study of a writer's biography can help readers gain a better understanding of his works, just as a review of Goethe's life can help us better understand the fragment of Muhammad's drama.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, born in Frankfurt on August 28, 1749, and who died at the height of his reputation in 1832, was a polymath of immense talent (Shahryar & Yingzhi, 2024). He was a poet, critic, politician, scientist, and social activist; this extraordinary range enabled him to create masterpieces such as *Faust* and *The Sorrows of Werther*. The creation of these remarkable works introduced him as one of the greatest figures of his time, which is why an entire period is referred to as "the Age of Goethe." These factors led to the assertion that "he is widely considered to be the most canonical and influential writer in the history of German literature" (Kheyri, 2021, p. 12).

Throughout his life, Goethe held prominent social, political, and official positions and interacted with renowned literary and political figures such as Hegel, Beethoven, and Napoleon (Uberoi, 1984). This unique environment, combined with his exceptional innate talent, led him to be regarded as a cosmopolitan figure. Every nation has its extraordinary literary representatives: Shakespeare for England, Confucius for China, Rumi for Khurasan, Tagore for India, Homer for Greece, Dante for Italy, Cervantes for Spain, Molière for France, and Pushkin for Russia. For Germany, that figure is Goethe. These thinkers deeply understood their cultures and expressed their views in different ways. However, Goethe possesses characteristics that distinguish him from his counterparts (Adler, 2020, p. 160). The present research shows that he is more widely recognized than many others and is regarded as one of the great artists across the ages, alongside figures such as Michelangelo and Mozart. Another point that distinguishes him is that he was an extraordinarily prolific scholar.

Previous scholarship has confirmed that these thinkers redefined human identity; it has been suggested that while Shakespeare discovered the essence of humanity, each national writer invented a noble path toward becoming an ideal human. The significance of the aforementioned thinkers is also affirmed by other influential scholars. Marcel Proust (1844-1922) praised Goethe as "the greatest intelligence that ever existed," while Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) described him as representing "entire culture" (Adler, 2020, p. 70).

In Goethe's life, a kind of cultural rebellious spirit can be observed; he was one of the groundbreaking thinkers who, without hesitation, courageously delved into other cultures, with no concern for contamination, and incorporated numerous elements of different traditions into European society. This tendency is evident in his political life, indicating that his cross-cultural courage was closely connected to his political daring.

Goethe's political views are notable, and many German politicians have regarded his ideas as influential. His personality and political beliefs became ideals for the republic, and scholars such as Wolfgang Frommel (1902-1986), Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956), and Thomas Mann employed Goethe's thought in their opposition to Nazism. After World War II, prominent figures such as the philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), the classicist Wolfgang Schadewaldt (1900-

1974), and the politician Carl Schmid (1896-1974) rejected the misappropriation of Goethe's ideas and returned to his foundational concepts.

Goethe sought to draw upon ideas of freedom, self-cultivation, patience, and social responsibility to counter the ideology of the Third Reich. The evaluation of previous scholarship reflects that a spirit of cultural and political freedom permeated his life.

The following arguments indicate that Goethe's cultural pluralism and global perspective emerged from his engagement with other great thinkers. Goethe devoted much of his time to discussing various subjects with notable poets, politicians, and philosophers. He was deeply inspired by the Iliad and the Odyssey, which led him to create his epic poem Hermann and Dorothea (1797). Latin love poets inspired his Roman Elegies (1795), while his West-Eastern Divan (1819) drew inspiration from the Persian poet Hafiz (Reed, 1893). Plotinus influenced Goethe's understanding of perception, and other intellectuals such as Spinoza, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, particularly the Sistine Chapel, also left a mark on his work. From this, it can be inferred that the initial spark of his incomplete fragment Muhammad drama is also rooted in his intense intellectual exchanges with other thinkers and his extensive Oriental studies. It has been suggested that Goethe's interactions with other scholars played a significant role in his inclination toward Orientalism.

One of the writers who had a significant impact on Goethe was Shakespeare, whose works accompanied him from his teenage years into old age. Goethe emerged as a cosmopolitan literary figure, later innovating the concept of "world literature." Possessing a multidimensional personality, he engaged with various national cultures and literatures, including a profound interest in Islamic culture (Safranski, 2017). This evidence clearly highlights the role of Shakespeare in Goethe's fascination with the East.

Due to his prolific output, extensive connections, multidimensional personality, and involvement in numerous occupations, the study of his life has become highly complex. A comprehensive review of all aspects of Goethe's life lies beyond the scope of the present study; it suffices to note that Goethe, after a fruitful life, passed away at the age of eighty-two.

His death signaled the conclusion of an epoch, yet his influence persisted unrivaled in the realms of literature, culture, science, and religious studies. During his lifetime and after his death, Goethe's works continued to raise profound questions and generated extensive discussion across various academic fields (von Goethe, 1849, p. 5).

A review of his life demonstrates that Goethe's relationship with the Islamic tradition was complex. One work that can contribute to explaining his relationship with Islam, particularly with Prophet Muhammad, is his Muhammad drama. It remained incomplete, and this unfinished state further intensified the complexity of his engagement with Islam.

The exploration of the inspiration behind Goethe's initiation of this work and the reasons for its incompleteness, through the study of his dramatic talent, his exposure to Islamic tradition, the evaluation of related literature, and the remaining fragments, can further illuminate his appreciation and understanding of Islam.

4.2. Moral Concern and Social Renewal in Goethe's Dramas

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is considered one of the most significant playwrights in the Western tradition. In addition to playwriting, he was long engaged in leading theatrical institutions. He served as an instructor at the Weimar Theatre, directing numerous plays and training many actors. Furthermore, Goethe and Schiller established the "Wallenstein Lager" royal theatre, which later became a significant center for art and literature in Germany. This canon exhibited many works by both Goethe and Schiller, solidifying its status within the cultural canon (Von Goethe, 2019, p. 4-22). It appears that during Goethe's time, drama writing was one of the principal media through which writers could express emotions and convey their messages to audiences; it played a significant role in establishing a writer's fame.

Goethe's early engagement with drama writing was marked by the play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), which reflects the rebellious spirit of the "Sturm und Drang" movement. This work tells the story of a knight who opposes societal norms and represents the struggle for individual freedom. The play's emotional intensity and focus on personal conflict resonate with the movement's ideals (Hagenbring, 1911). This argument demonstrates that Goethe's early and later dramas mostly dealt with social concerns and ethical themes, indicating that one of his aims in drama writing was the reinforcement of moral foundations in society. This tendency is also evident in his other dramatic works.

His plays reflect a remarkable evolution in style and substance, encompassing the complexities of human emotion, social disorder, and the philosophical questions of his era.

Goethe's works span various literary movements, including "Sturm und Drang" and Classicism, and, according to Wellbery (2010), his works played a pivotal role in laying the groundwork for the emergence of Romanticism. Each of these literary schools influenced his dramatic works. For many years, Goethe, in the majority of his dramas, allowed his characters to speak for themselves rather than imposing his own voice upon them. His dramas reflect the complexities of real life and moral struggle, emerging from an active sense of reality rather than from purely lyrical imagination. None of his works can be classified as strictly heroic, descriptive, or lyrical, reflecting a diverse approach to playwriting (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Drama Analysis – Essay – eNotes.com).

Goethe's magnum opus, *Faust*, is a two-part tragedy that delves deeply into the human experience. Part One (1808) introduces Faust, a disillusioned scholar who makes a pact with Mephistopheles, the devil, in his quest for knowledge and pleasure. This play explores existential themes such as ambition, desire, and the search for meaning, reflecting Goethe's philosophical concerns and his deep engagement with the complexities of human existence.

Part Two of *Faust* (1832), published posthumously, expands the narrative into a grand allegorical journey. In this part, Faust's experiences encompass politics, art, and the relationship between the individual and society. The complexity of characters and interwoven themes makes *Faust* not only a cornerstone of German literature but also a profound commentary on the human condition (Goethe, van Scheltema, Croiset, van der Horst, & van Suchtelen, 1997). The thematic exploration of Goethe's most famous work indicates that he also delved into the complex inner world of human beings, ethics, and human character. By revealing the social layers of human life, *Faust* gained worldwide recognition and established Goethe's name in history as that of a global thinker.

As mentioned previously, one of the scholars with whom Goethe frequently engaged in discussion was Shakespeare; evaluation shows that in drama writing, Shakespeare was one of Goethe's role models and the most influential figure in his literary life. Shakespeare revealed to Goethe both the external and inner worlds of human beings and articulated psychological truths. This notion inspired Goethe's early explorations of drama and influenced his conception of *Faust*, which describes a journey from paradise through the world to hell, a concept inspired by Shakespeare. In his first novel, *Wilhelm Meister*, Shakespeare serves as a significant interlocutor. Goethe's deep admiration for Shakespeare culminated in the remark "Shakespeare Without End" (1813-16), which presents a philosophical reflection on Shakespeare (Boyd, 1962).

Goethe experimented with different types of drama. While *Götz von Berlichingen* is often considered to be influenced by Shakespeare, it does not closely resemble Shakespeare's dramatic style and appears less consistent with Goethe's mature writing tendencies. Similarly, *Egmont* diverges from Goethe's typical historical drama; it surpasses *Götz* by creating a powerful symbol of individual character and the complexities of life (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe Drama Analysis – Essay – eNotes.com).

In *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, Goethe reinterprets the ancient myth of Iphigenia, focusing on themes of duty, sacrifice, and reconciliation. This adaptation reflects his sustained interest in moral dilemmas and the possibility of redemption through compassion and understanding.

Both *Götz von Berlichingen* and *Egmont*, like Goethe's other works, depict the struggle of strong and genuine humanity against inferior values, often showing how this nobility is challenged yet ultimately allowed to prevail. This theme recurs throughout Goethe's dramatic corpus and illustrates his deep exploration of the human spirit in the face of social constraints (Schweissinger, 2024, p. 2).

A detailed thematic critique of Goethe's major dramas demonstrates that through writing and staging his dramatic works, he sought to portray the inner world of human beings and the role of morality in both individual and social life. One of the figures who served as both an instructor and a role model for him was Shakespeare, who also played a crucial role in introducing Goethe to Eastern traditions.

Based on the preceding arguments and the role of Shakespeare in shaping Goethe's literary inspiration, it can be inferred that Prophet Muhammad, as a teacher of morality and a prophet devoted to the dissemination of ethical principles, could serve as an ideal character. On the one hand, such a figure allows for the reflection of moral essence for audiences; on the other, it offers an unbiased presentation of the Prophet as a messenger of truth. Therefore, the moral qualities embodied in the character of Prophet Muhammad played a significant role in inspiring Goethe to conceive his Muhammad drama, as the protagonist he sought to portray could be found in the moral character of the Prophet.

4.3. Goethe's Engagement with Islamic Tradition

During the classical era, Western scholars and researchers sought the origins of their cultural and literary heritage. In the course of their studies, they encountered significant Oriental sources, particularly Sanskrit, which was identified as a foundational element of European culture. In this context, recognizing the richness of Oriental sources and the prevalence of Orientalism in the West, Goethe engaged with this intellectual trend. From a young age, he began studying major Oriental sources and Islamic traditions. This engagement initiated a spiritual journey through the study of numerous Oriental texts (Behjat, 2005, p. 1). Goethe's exposure to Islamic culture led him toward classical Persian literature. Persian literature, as one of the ancient, rich, and refined literatures of the world, exerted a formative influence on him (Rahimieh, 2011). This suggests that Persian literature played a pivotal role in shaping Goethe's later literary style and inspired his cross-cultural studies.

The presence of signs of other cultural traditions, particularly Islam, reflects his extensive engagement with global traditions. In 1783, he translated the seventh poem of the Arabic *Muallaqat* into German, marking an early engagement with Oriental literature. By 1797, his interest had shifted toward religious studies, prompting him to study the Torah (the Five Books of Moses). This engagement deepened his fascination with spiritual themes and led him to explore one of the oldest sources available to him: Johann Gottfried Herder's work on Jewish and Zoroastrian traditions (Gray, 1965).

Goethe's Oriental studies continued into the early 19th century. By 1808, he had expanded his studies to works such as *Yusuf and Zuleika* and *Solayman and the Queen of Sheba* (Behjat, 2005, pp. 1-4). The influence of these Islamic writings as models for dramatic writing is evident throughout Goethe's works, particularly in *The Remains of Muhammad Song* and *West-Eastern Divan* (Von Goethe, 2019). Other scholars assert, "Johann Wolfgang von Goethe also identified closely with Muhammad, a poetic prophet who tapped into universal spiritual truths" (Tolan, 2021, p. 300). This confirms Goethe's close study of Prophet Muhammad's character and other Islamic religious romances, whose protagonists may have played a formative role in Goethe's crafting of his Muhammad drama and related works.

The evaluation of one of Goethe's most famous works, *West-Eastern Divan*, demonstrates the depth and extent of Islamic tradition's impact on his thought and creativity. The influence of Islam on Goethe has led some scholars to claim that the reverence and value Goethe expressed in the *West-Eastern Divan* suggest his deep admiration, and potentially even a spiritual alignment with Islam. Through this work, Goethe transcended the cultural confines of German literature, embracing Islamic tradition and Persian literary values. The *West-Eastern Divan* stands as a testament to Goethe's respect for Islamic culture and serves as a bridge between Western and Eastern intellectual traditions, reflecting his synthesis of these cultural elements.

Heine also emphasizes the depth of Goethe's connection with Islam, praising the extraordinary charm of this collection of poems, stating that Goethe "seemed to be transformed into an Islamist heretic, describing the exoticism of the Oriental world in his poems, warmly welcomed by the Germans" (Tolan, 2021, p. 2). Another argument shows his deeper engagement with the primary sources of Islam.

George Sale's (1734) English translation of the Quran included an extensive preface, in which he provided a detailed account of early Islamic traditions. In this introduction, Sale commended Prophet Muhammad as a reformer who eradicated superstitions, opposed polytheism, and challenged clerical authority. The translation gained significant readership, extending its influence beyond England and receiving widespread acclaim. Among its readers was the German writer Goethe, who engaged deeply with the text. His study of the Quran left a profound influence, and he regarded Prophet Muhammad as an exemplary figure, inspiring his literary and poetic outputs (Çaksen & Mir, 2025). The impact of the Quran on Goethe's thought was such that some scholars have drawn parallels between his ideas and Islamic thought; however, others do not agree with this assessment.

Some writers have claimed that Goethe's religious thought exhibits similarities with Islam, stemming from his independent studies of different religious sources. Muslim scholars specializing in Goethe's works refute the notion that Goethe formulated his religious ideas independently before engaging with Islam. They argue that Goethe's extensive studies led him to face with Islam, where he found validation for his significant ideas, identifying an ideal figure in the character of Muhammad and other elements of Eastern culture. During Goethe's youth, Oriental studies began to emerge in the West, a development described by Annemarie Schimmel in her analysis of Goethe's era (Karić, 2019, p. 102).

The parallels between Goethe's beliefs and Islamic theology, particularly as articulated in the Meccan surahs of the Quran, are striking. Scholars have extensively highlighted the similarities between the Islamic concept of monotheism and Goethe's understanding of God, emphasizing the profound alignment in their perspectives on divine unity and transcendence:

- *the teaching on the oneness of God (die lehre von der Einheit Gottes);*
- *the belief that God reveals himself through nature (die Überzeugung, daß gott sich in der offenbare);*
- *the belief that people learn about the manifestations of God through the prophets (und diese offenbarung durch verschiedene abgesandte der menschheit übermittle);*
- *renunciation of "miracles" (das abweisen von 'sundern'); and*
- *the belief that faith must be proved through good deeds (und die auffassung, daß der glaube sich in wohlthatigem wirken erweisen müsse) (Karić103).*

The aforementioned concepts, along with related themes, led Goethe to refrain from rejecting the notion that he might himself be a Muslim: "lehne den Verdacht nicht ab, dass er selbst ein Muselman sei." Remarkably, Goethe once used the term "Islam" to denote a philosophical aphorism and a guiding principle in a letter to his friends. His friends became familiar with his use of Islamic terminology and gradually became accustomed to this aspect of his intellectual expression.

All the previous arguments suggesting that Goethe profoundly studied the character and morals of Prophet Muhammad and was inclined toward his messages and ethical qualities are further supported by the strong assertion of the famous Goethe specialist Kathrine Mommsen, who stated that "Goethe saw in Prophet Muhammad a figure who achieved something profoundly significant by affirming faith in one God." (Bocca-Aldaqre, 2019, p. 55).

The rich traditions of the Orient, particularly Persian and Islamic culture, deeply influenced Goethe and prompted him to engage extensively with Eastern intellectual and cultural traditions (Wellbery, 1996).

The detailed arguments above demonstrate that Goethe extensively studied the primary source of Islam, the Quran. He also read Islamic dramatic-romantic stories, such as Yusuf and Zulieka and Solayman and Bilqis, which played a significant role in shaping the characters of his dramas. Additionally, he deeply studied the life and message of Prophet Muhammad. These religious sources were among the main inspirations for his poetic imagination and creativity throughout his life. The Islamic tradition prompted him to create a drama depicting the true moral qualities of Prophet Muhammad for others, which explains why he began crafting the Muhammad drama. This will become clearer in the following discussion through the study of the remaining fragments of the drama and related literature.

4.4. Introduction of Muhammad Drama

It is useful first to provide an introduction to the Muhammad drama. Introducing this work is challenging, as the remaining fragments are limited and cannot fully explain it. The exact date of its inception, the extent of its completion, the complete contents, the original title, and the initial inspiration remain unclear. Responding based on the surviving fragments is therefore somewhat difficult. Numerous arguments exist regarding the time of its creation; the major ones are reviewed as follows.

Around September 29, 1772, Goethe received a translated version of the Quran by Mergerlin. A year later, he created the Gesang manuscript for the Musenalmanach. Based on available evidence, the song was likely composed in the spring of 1773. Minor argued that the song was unrelated to Goethe's theatrical concept, emphasizing that Goethe mistakenly chose the title Muhammad Song, as Muhammad was not portrayed as a vocalist. However, Sarah criticized this analysis, finding it unlikely that Goethe would overlook his strategic intentions. He suggested that several factors influenced Goethe's decision to change the title of the drama and omit the names of Ali and Fatimah. Sarah contended that these changes negatively impacted the historical connection between Goethe, the Quran, and Muhammad. Another scholar traced the creation of the work through a letter to one of Goethe's friends.

Through an analysis of Goethe's letter to Johann Fahlmer dated October 18, 1773, and his message to Lavater in 1774, Ulrich concludes that Goethe reported nearing the completion of a play, which may have been related to Muhammad. Ulrich further suggests that the emergence of the hymn and prose scene occurred after 1774. He argues that Goethe, influenced by the ideas of Lavater and Basedow, revised his theatrical plans accordingly. F. Stühle attentively

observed that the first draft of the work contained the names of Ali (son-in-law of the Prophet) and Fatimah (daughter of the Prophet Muhammad). This evidence indicates that the initial version, which included Ali and Fatimah, was completed before the fall of 1773. The concept of the Muhammad play was thus already present in Goethe's imagination before 1774 (Benson, 1919, pp. 1–9) Another scholar, through a critical study of a Goethe letter, revealed another aspect of this drama.

H. Duntzler, in his research, separated the recently discovered fragments from their connection to Lavater and Basedow's texts, correctly dating their creation to the spring of 1773. At the same time, he published a literary piece by Goethe from his early residency in Weimar. In this context, Frau von Stein analyzed the poem in 1777. Later, an original poem, likely written for Frau von Stein around 1778, was discovered. This collection includes poetry composed during Goethe's time in Frankfurt and his early stay in Weimar. Each poem begins with the phrase "Seht den Felsenquell." In these works, Goethe deliberately changed the title of Mahomet Gesang and deleted the names of Ali and Fatimah. From this evidence, it can be understood that the first draft of Goethe's work about Muhammad was titled Mahomet Gesang, which included the names of Fatimah and Ali. Later, he changed the title to Muhammad Drama and removed the names of Fatimah and Ali, a change confirmed by Goethe in a subsequently published work.

The third edition of Goethe's Poetry and Truth, published in 1814, offers significant insights into the Muhammad drama and its content. In this edition, Goethe omitted the remaining sections of the drama, as the initial song he intended to begin was lost. Moreover, the significant gap between the first and second drafts reflects the time elapsed between Goethe's initial work and his later attempts to resume it. This interruption resulted in notable shifts in Goethe's perspective. Scholars have also observed that Goethe often struggled to maintain focus on a single topic for an extended period (Benson, 1919).

According to Mohammad Akhgari's account in Muhammad's Song, Goethe initially intended to depict the life of Prophet Muhammad in five acts, spanning from his infancy to his death. However, only a few fragments were completed, including the first part, the Prophet's monologue beneath the starry night, his dialogue with his wet nurse (Halimah), and the piece known as Muhammad's Song (p. 33).

The play's second surviving fragment captures a dialogue between Prophet Muhammad and Halimah, his wet nurse during infancy, who later recognizes him during adulthood while he is preaching. In this scene, the Prophet invites Halimah to accept the monotheistic faith. Muhammad is depicted preaching to his followers with the Quran in hand, yet his followers fail to grasp the spiritual significance of his message. When Goethe described this scene to Eckermann, he stated: "I believed in God, in nature, and the victory of good over evil; but for the devout, this was insufficient. They demanded that I also profess that three are one, and one is three, which was in discord with my soul's sense of truth" (Bocca-Aldaqre, 2019, pp. 514–515).

The last surviving fragment of the play, considered the most significant, is a dialogue between Ali and Fatimah. After revisions, Goethe published this section under the title Mahomet Gesang. This part has attracted significant attention from critics due to its unique metaphor of a river symbolizing the Prophet Muhammad. In the dialogue, Ali and Fatimah celebrate the Prophet's success. Goethe candidly portrays the essence of Muhammad's prophecy, countering dismissive interpretations by some Western-biased writers. He emphasized that Muhammad's mission was to guide humanity toward God, challenging earlier misrepresentations.

4.5. A Piece of Muhammad Drama

The great eastern thinker celebrated that song too much and translated it into Persian: "The translation was a free one, and no poem could come close to expressing the dynamic power of the prophet more beautifully than Goethe's words. However, neither Iqbal nor Goethe could predict a rather interesting twist, namely the fact that the metaphor of the prophet as a river had already been used in the 10th century by the Islamic theologian Kulini. Once again, Goethe's intuition led him to write something that Muslims found agreeable" (Karić, 2019, pp. 115–116)

The amazing poem of "Muhammad song" has seventy verses, some of which are presented as follows:

"Mahmet's Song"
See the rock-born stream
Bright gleam,
Like the stars that shine!

*Kindly spirits
Nourished him while youthful
Over cloudbanks
Mid the crag in undergrowth.*

*Young and fresh
From a cloud, he dances
Down upon the cliffs of marble,
Then toward heaven
Leaps exulting.*

*Through the channeled summits
He pursues the colored stones,
With a youthful leader's pace
Sweeps along his brother-freshets
In his course.*

*In the valley down below,
Underfoot, the flowers flourish.*

*And the meadow
Lives but from his breath*

*His no shadowed vale can hold,
Nor can flower,
Which, around his knees, are twining?
Flattering him with eyes of passion.
At the plain his course is aimed,
Serpent-winding.*

*Brooks comes nestling
As companions. Now he enters
On the plain in silvery splendor (Goethe
& Zeydel, 1957, p. 28)*

In *The Song of Muhammad*, Goethe uses the metaphor of a “mountain spring” to praise the Prophet Muhammad and symbolize the expansion of Islam as a river. This metaphor aptly reflects the fast and widespread dissemination of Islam. Muhammad’s foundational role in unifying the fragmented Arab tribes on the Arabian Peninsula within 23 years transformed them into a cohesive and powerful nation. His leadership not only revitalized Arab society but also established the foundation for the emergence of numerous states. Goethe captures this transformative process in the line, “in the endless song of triumph, it flows endlessly,” evoking the idea of rivers merging and expanding to encompass the world.

In his work *Aesthetics*, Hegel analyzes Goethe’s poem, noting that it describes a spring flowing out of an overhanging rock, cascading from the rock’s summit into a deep pool, rushing into the plain as it converges with other streams, and receiving additional rivers along its course. Along the way, many places are named, and numerous cities lie at its feet, all contributing to the grandeur of this majestic scene... The river metaphor in the poem symbolizes the birth and rapid expansion of the Prophet Muhammad’s influence. The swift flow of the river represents the spread of his moral teachings, while its unifying course reflects his ultimate goal of uniting all followers under a single faith (Min, 1999).

Based on Karic’s research, Goethe composed “Muhammad Gesang” in 1773, where he celebrated the character of Muhammad, portraying him as a figure guided by a clear heart, running toward God. The metaphor of a river, used by Goethe to describe Muhammad’s journey, had a profound impact on many scholars and thinkers, including Iqbal.

5. The Inspiration for Creation and The Reasons for The Incompletion of The Divan

5.1. Inspiration for The Creation of Drama

When Herder and Goethe met in Strasbourg in 1770–1771, they began discussions on a wide range of topics. Herder’s ideas about the Prophet Muhammad inspired Goethe to conduct further research into his life and teachings. Herder played a significant role in the development of the Muhammad fragments, and Goethe also drew upon various other sources to draft this play (Karić, 2019, p. 98). An examination of Goethe’s life shows that Herder was one of the most influential figures in his intellectual development; he played a key role in Goethe’s interest in other nations’ traditions, particularly Persian. Building on this argument, one can state that Herder, along with other factors, was among the sources of inspiration for the initiation of the Muhammad drama.

Muhammad Akhgari, in his book *Muhammad Song*, cited a translated remark from Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth* regarding the creation of the Muhammad play. Goethe confessed that he engaged extensively in the study of the Prophet Muhammad’s biography, stating: “I could never conceive of him as a deceitful person. This conviction became the inspiration for beginning the composition of the Muhammad drama and depicting the pleasant and insightful way in which I experienced it. Through my reading of the Prophet’s life, the entire structure of the drama took shape in my mind, fully formed and awaiting expression” (p. 42). Another explanation, discussed in some scholarship, has generated both agreement and disagreement.

In *Poetry and Truth*, Goethe provides a brief account of the Muhammad drama. In the summer of 1774, he traveled from Ems to the Rhine with two companions, Basedow and Lavater. During this journey, Goethe observed that his companions employed spiritual methods for earthly matters, enabling them to achieve ideal results. While Lavater had a noble objective,

Basedow often resorted to political means to attain his goals. Ultimately, these goals required sanctification. From this observation, Goethe concluded that for human efforts to transcend themselves and impact the world, superior individuals must establish themselves on equal footing with the earthly realm while relinquishing the celestial aspect. He recognized this as a reminder of Muhammad, which inspired his decision to create a drama elaborating on this philosophy. However, there may be inaccuracies regarding the events and circumstances surrounding the creation of the Muhammad drama.

Building on previous discussions of Goethe's biography, the main contents of his drama, and his interaction with Islamic tradition, it is evident that religious and moral themes form the core of his drama, and spiritual and religious motives played crucial roles in shaping his literary inspiration. However, some critics have refuted this reasoning.

Currently, the surviving fragments of the Muhammad drama do not fully align with Goethe's assertion in *Poetry and Truth*. Furthermore, this notion did not solely stem from the observations of Basedow and Lavater. Before these observations, Goethe had already recognized Muhammad's exceptional and noble character. Minor argued that Muhammad did not resemble Lavater in Goethe's eyes; rather, it was Muhammad who seemed to embody Lavater's qualities, especially after Goethe became familiar with him, a feat difficult to achieve before 1793. The author speculates that Goethe may have informed Lavater about the plot of his play (Benson, 1919, pp. 1–19).

Mommsen, in her research on Goethe and Islam, explains that Goethe dedicated considerable time to discussing Muhammad with his theologian friends during the creation of the Muhammad tragedy. His views on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad were shared in the presence of scholars, elites, and private circles. Goethe sought to portray Muhammad as a private figure, speaking under the bright sky. Through this positive portrayal, he distinguished himself from other Western perspectives. A critical review and comparison of the aforementioned arguments suggests that the main contents of Goethe's drama and major works, morality, spirituality, and the human inner world, reflect his concern that societal problems stemmed from a weakness of morality. Through his works, he sought to depict the impact of morals on individual and social life. He recognized Muhammad as a personality in whom all moral perfection was gathered, making him the ideal central figure for Goethe's literary work. Additionally, the influence of Shakespeare, Herder, and discussions with other great thinkers about Eastern culture further intensified his inspiration for the creation of this work.

5.2. The Reasons for Incompletion

Substantial research on the cause of the incompletion of the Muhammad drama remains limited; however, the dispersed notions presented in different scholarly works are critically and comparatively evaluated.

During the medieval period, the perception of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in Western lands was shaped by the aftermath of the Crusades. Europeans critically evaluated Muhammad's character through the lens of deep-seated animosity between Eastern and Western cultures. In this atmosphere of conflict and violence, distorted representations of Muhammad spread across Europe. European authors often referenced Islamic sources but combined them with misconceptions and myths about the Prophet. This misrepresentation supported the belief that Islam was the final manifestation of the Antichrist before the Second Coming of Christ, portraying Islam as a significant adversary. Similarly, contemporary figures, such as Geert Wilders of the Dutch far-right political party, have sought to discredit Islam by attacking its Prophet (Ghali, 2004, p. 2).

In the sixteenth century, Christian priests viewed the publication of the Quran as a significant threat, leading to the imprisonment of a publisher who sought to disseminate the Latin translation of the text. Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, advised the Protestant councilors of Basel in 1542 that the most effective strategy for countering the spread of Islam was to display what he considered Muhammad's falsehood to the public (Tolan, 2021, p. 1).

This distorted image and understanding of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad spread throughout Europe, particularly via Spain and Sicily. Following the end of the Crusades, Eastern European scholars engaged more deeply with Islam and Arabic literature, driven by concerns that Eastern influences might erode the cultural identity of Christian youth. In response, some clergy members disparaged Muhammad, leading to the creation of numerous epic poems portraying Islam as a formidable antagonist. The term "Mammetry," used to describe Muhammad, entered English literature, where it came to imply the worship of idols and images, further contributing to negative stereotypes surrounding the Prophet and Islam.

In contrast, George Sale's 1734 English translation of the Quran featured a prologue presenting Muhammad in a positive light, portraying him as a leader who guided the "petrified and ignorant primitive Arabs" toward enlightenment and humanity. This favorable depiction faced significant criticism from contemporaneous critics. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, living in an era influenced by extensive anti-Islamic propaganda, delved into the study of Islam and began drafting a drama about Muhammad. Although he ultimately abandoned the project, he faced difficulties promoting his work within such a hostile cultural and intellectual atmosphere (Samimi, 2010, pp. 1–30). The evaluation of sources suggests that the social situation of Goethe's lifetime was unfavorable to the celebration of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Perhaps Goethe realized that society was not yet ready to accept or celebrate such a work, which may explain why he abandoned the Muhammad drama.

A comprehensive review of primary documents associated with the Muhammad tragedy demonstrates that the sociopolitical and cultural climate of Goethe's era in the West was not conducive to the free expression of ideas, particularly those that challenged dominant narratives or popular prejudices. Western attitudes toward Islam were predominantly shaped by an anti-Islamic discourse, fueled by historical, religious, and political factors. This atmosphere, characterized by widespread negative portrayals of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, was actively disseminated by many intellectuals, clergy, and writers. Clerics and other religious authorities, in particular, resisted the dissemination of ideas presenting Islam in a favorable or neutral light, often seeking to prevent broader public engagement with Islamic thought (Akhgari, 2021, p. 33).

Determining the precise time of composition of the Muhammad drama is difficult due to incomplete records. Goethe did not complete the Muhammad Song in the same manner as *Faust* and *Goetz*. Duntzer suggested that this may have been influenced by Merck's advice in 1773, urging Goethe to abandon the Muhammad drama in favor of completing *Goetz*. This may be one of the reasons Goethe relinquished the completion of the drama (Benson, 1919, pp. 1–19). Nevertheless, evidence from his works suggests that Goethe was deeply fascinated by the character of Muhammad, believing that few historical figures matched the Prophet's fame and greatness.

Given this context, openly praising or critically engaging with Islam in a balanced manner posed significant challenges. Writers and intellectuals who engaged with such topics often faced social and institutional pressures, if not outright hostility. For Goethe, these cultural and ideological constraints likely played a significant role in his decision to abandon the project after completing its initial parts. The evidence suggests that Goethe may have recognized that continuing the work could have negative social and political consequences for himself and his broader intellectual pursuits. This pragmatic consideration, combined with the hostile cultural environment, may explain why Goethe refrained from fully developing the Muhammad tragedy.

Additionally, the sanctity of prophecy and the difficulty of integrating it with poetic expression and portraying the Prophet as a literary or poetic hero posed significant challenges. Crafting the life of the Prophet and conveying the moral qualities of Muhammad for a wide audience may have been daunting for Goethe.

Furthermore, Goethe's unfinished engagement with Muhammad reflects his broader struggle to reconcile his admiration for Islamic philosophy and culture with the constraints of his own social and intellectual environment. His reluctance to complete the drama underscores the complex interplay between his convictions and the limitations imposed by the dominant ideological frameworks of his time.

6. Conclusions

Goethe's incomplete drama about Muhammad sparked considerable scholarly discussion regarding its drafting, title changes, and final abandonment. Throughout his engagement with religious studies and orientalism, he became familiar with the Eastern tradition. The Eastern tradition served as a source of inspiration for him, deeply influencing his worldview, literary style, and creative products. His association with the eminent thinker Johann Gottfried Herder, as well as spiritual figures such as Lavater and Basedow, and Shakespeare, further intensified his interest in Orientalism. Goethe showed a deep interest in Eastern traditions, particularly Persian literature and Islamic culture.

The presence of Eastern texts in German and French translation, alongside his limited knowledge of Arabic and Persian, led Goethe to start studying the Prophet Muhammad's biography. Deeply inspired by Muhammad's mission and character, Goethe decided to write a drama about the Prophet's life. Firstly, he planned to write a drama about Muhammad in

five acts, starting from the Prophet's childhood to his death. However, Goethe completed only a few parts of the work. These include pieces such as the Prophet's monologue under the starry sky, a dialogue with his wet nurse (Halimah), and the poem Muhammad Song.

The remaining initial poem consists of five stanzas, portraying Muhammad in the nighttime contemplating under a starry sky, searching for God's guidance. In another scene, Muhammad and Ali attempt to spread their beliefs among the tribes; some of them accept them, while others strongly oppose them. The harsh violence of some tribes caused the Prophet to emigrate from there. In a later episode, the Prophet overcame his enemies. The fourth act shows further victories, while the fifth contains the poisoning of Prophet Muhammad. Unfortunately, the work remained incomplete. Had it been finished; it could have clarified Goethe's relationship with the East and Islamic tradition.

Firstly, in 1773, when Goethe started composing the drama, its name was Muhammad Song. He later changed the title and deleted the names of Ali and Fatimah from the text.

A comprehensive review of the primary documents related to the "Muhammad Tragedy" shows that the sociopolitical and cultural situation of Goethe's era in the West was not suitable for the free expression of ideas that challenged dominant narratives or widespread prejudices. During this period, Western understanding of Islam was extensively shaped by a hostile discourse rooted in historical, religious, and political adversary. This situation, manifest by pervasive misrepresentations of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, was actively reinforced by many intellectuals, clergy, and writers. Religious figures, in particular, resisted any spreading of ideas that might show Islam in a favorable or even neutral light, often working to suppress public engagement with Islamic thought.

It was in this situation of widespread anti-Islamic sentiment that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe undertook a study of Islam and began composing a drama about Muhammad. Yet the dominant intellectual and cultural hostilities ultimately led him to abandon the project. Unlike Faust or Gotz von Berlichingen, Goethe never brought Muhammad Song to completion. As Düntzer has pointed out, this decision may have been influenced by the suggestion of Goethe's friend Merck, who in 1773 told him to quit Muhammad drama because of completing Gotz.

7. Acknowledgmnet

We greatly appreciate Professor Li Yingzhi, editor of the journal, and tow reviewers for their valuable suggestions, which helped us improve this article.

8. Funding

This research was self-supported and did not receive any funding from any organization or individual.

9. Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct or publication of the results of this study.

References

- Adler, J. (2020). *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Critical Lives)*. Reaktion Books. London.
- Akhgari, M. (2021). *Mhammad Song: An Interpretation of Goethe's Muhammad Drama* (2ed ed.). Tehran: Shab Qalam.
- Behjat, H. (2005). The Presence of Goethe's Spiritual Travel to Hafez's Territory (West-Östlicher Divan). *The International Journal of Humanities*, 12(1), 1–12.
- Benson, A. M. (1919). *The fragments of Goethe's drama of Mohammed*. Retrieved from <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/52550/bitstreams/151637/data.pdf>
- Bocca-Aldaqr, F. (2019). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: A life With Islām. *Intellectual Discourse*, 27(2), 507–530. <https://doi.org/10.31436/id.v27i2.1431>
- Boyd, J. (1962). Goethe und Shakespeare. In J. Boyd, *Goethe und Shakespeare* (pp. 5–17). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-663-02514-6_1
- Çaksen, H., & Mir, K. H. (2025). George Sale's Pioneering Translation: Unveiling 'The Koran' – A Critical Exploration of Early English Interpretations". *Al-Afkar, Journal for Islamic Studies*, 8(1), 1093–1105. <https://doi.org/10.31943/afkarjournal.v8i1.1205>.
- Ghali, M. M. (2004). *The History of Muhammad: The Prophet and Messenger. Al-Falah Foundation for Translation, Publication and Distribution*.

- Goethe, J. W., van Scheltema, C. A., Croiset, H., van der Horst, H., & van Suchtelen, N. (1997). *Faust I & II*. Kōnemann Colônia.
- Goethe, J. W. von, & Zeydel, E. H. (1957). Poems of Goethe: A sequel to Goethe the lyricist. (No Title). Retrieved from <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130000798169623424>
- Gray, R. (1965). Goethe's "Faust, Part One". *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 1(2), 125–143.
- Hagenbring, P. (1911). *Goethes Götz von Berlichingen: Erläuterung und literarhistorische Würdigung*. (Vol. 9).
- Karić, E. (2019). Goethe, His Era, and Islam. *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 36(1), 95–121. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v36i1.861>
- Kheyri, N. A.-A. (2021). El Diván de oriente y occidente. Goethe como síntesis de dos mundos poéticos. *Conrado*, 17(78), 153–156.
- Min, L. (1999). *The Pipe Playing to the East: Goethe's admiration for Islamic culture from the "Collected Poems of East and West."*
- Rahimieh, N. (2011). Persian incursions: The transnational dynamics of Persian literature. *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, 296–311. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444342789.ch19>
- Reed, E. A. (1893). *Persian literature: Ancient and modern*. SC Griggs and Company.
- Safranski, R. (2017). *Goethe: Life as a work of art*. Liveright Publishing.
- Samimi, M. (2010). Muhammad in Europe. *Baghral Uloom*.
- Schweissinger, M. J. (2024). Goethe's Early Historical Dramas. *Humanities*, 13(3), 67. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13030067>
- Shahryar, A. K., & Yingzhi, L. (2024). Exploring the Thematic Connection of The Sorrows of Young Werther with Persian Literature. *Journal of Critical Studies in Language and Literature*, 5(6), 65–74. <https://doi.org/10.46809/jcsll.v5i6.309>
- Tolan, J. V. (20). Faces of Muhammad: Western Perceptions of the Prophet of Islam from the Middle Ages to Today. *The American Journal of Islam and Society*, 37, 1–2.
- Uberoi, J. S. (1984). *The other mind of Europe: Goethe as a scientist*.
- von Goethe, J. W. (1849). *The Autobiography of Goethe: Truth and Poetry: from My Life* (Vol. 1). J. Wiley.
- Von Goethe, J. W. (2019). *West-Eastern Divan: Complete, annotated new translation (bilingual edition)*. Gingko Library.
- Wellbery, D. E. (1996). *The specular moment: Goethe's early lyric and the beginnings of romanticism*. Stanford University Press.