



The Economics of Pain: A Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of Self-Commercialization in Ghalib's Poetry

Maaz Jamal*

Department of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pannonia, Veszprém, Hungary

*Corresponding author: Department of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pannonia, Veszprém, Hungary, Email: maazjamal959@gmail.com

Abstract

Mirza Ghalib's canonical legacy rests almost exclusively on his Sufi mysticism and existential philosophy. Yet, the profound imprint of his lifelong financial precarity on his poetic framework remains critically under-examined. This study addresses this glaring lacuna in Urdu literary criticism by demonstrating how market rationality and mercantile metaphors fundamentally organize Ghalib's ontology. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's Cognitive Metaphor Theory, we conduct a qualitative content analysis of purposively selected verses from the Diwan-e-Ghalib, tracking specific economic lexical markers such as qarz (debt), sauda (trade/bargain), and daam (price). The analysis reveals that Ghalib constructs a "Transactional Self." Through deliberate cognitive mapping, he conceptualizes human existence not as a manifestation of divine grace, but as a perpetual state of indebtedness, while simultaneously reframing love as a system of transactional reciprocity. Ultimately, this research recasts Ghalib as an economic realist who effectively secularized the classical ghazal tradition. By displacing spiritual agency with financial anxiety, he provides a critical, historically grounded lens to examine the materialism of the self during India's transition into colonial modernity.

Keywords: Poetry, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Mirza Ghalib, Metaphor, Pragmatics

Introduction

Mirza Asadullah Khan Baig, universally celebrated as Mirza Ghalib, remains a monumental figure in Urdu and Persian literature. Standing at the historical crossroads of a disintegrating Mughal Empire and the ascendancy of British colonial modernity, Ghalib did not merely preserve traditional poetic charm; he fundamentally revolutionized the Urdu poetic landscape. Born in 1797 and orphaned in early childhood, his voracious appetite for knowledge drove him to master history, classical literature, theology, and philosophy (Naim, 2003). Ghalib synthesized these diverse intellectual domains to imbue his verses with unprecedented potency. Yet, despite voluminous scholarship interrogating his metaphysical, romantic, and political dimensions, a glaring lacuna persists. The profound imprint of Ghalib's lifelong penury and acute financial anxiety on his poetic framework remains systematically overlooked. Traditional critiques seldom examine his corpus through a mercantile lexical lens. Addressing this omission is paramount to understanding how socio-economic precarity actively structured his philosophical ontology.

Consequently, this study investigates how market rationality organizes Ghalib's conceptual framework. We employ Lakoff and Johnson's Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT), a paradigm positing that human thought and conceptual architecture are inherently metaphorical. Specifically, this paper interrogates Ghalib's appropriation of economic terminologies, focusing



on qarz (debt), sauda (trade/bargain), and daam (price). Through a qualitative content analysis of purposively sampled verses from the *Diwan-e-Ghalib*, we first establish the theoretical operationalization of CMT, subsequently unpack the targeted economic metaphors, and ultimately demonstrate how Ghalib constructs a "Transactional Self." In doing so, this research outlines how Ghalib secularizes the traditional ghazal by displacing spiritual agency with financial anxiety under the shadow of colonial modernity.

The poetic tradition Ghalib inherited was that of *Sabk-e-Hindi* (the Indian style of Persian poetry), characterized by highly imaginative tropes and convoluted syntactic structures. Deviating from this established trajectory, Ghalib carved a distinct niche in literary history by pioneering a unique aesthetics of multi-layered semantic density (Mirza, 2019). His mastery of figurative writing allowed his poetry to bifurcate into divergent thematic strata (Fatihi, 2018). One domain interrogates existential precarity; another probes the metaphysical and the Divine; a third dives deep into the contours of romantic love ('ishq). While his work has been extensively analyzed through the prism of Sufi mysticism as seen in Anwar et al. (2025) regarding his intricate word-imagery his *Diwan* is equally defined by profound philosophical skepticism and existential inquiry. Twentieth-century Urdu literary historians consistently locate Ghalib as the final custodian of the intellectual traditions of Mughal Delhi. Metaphorically described as the "last spring" of the empire before the cataclysmic Revolt of 1857 ushered in the autumn of British colonialism (Naim, 2003), Ghalib belonged to an aristocratic intelligentsia that took fierce pride in ancestral customs despite political subjugation. Although his rare prose offers harrowing accounts of wartime devastation, his poetic compositions served as a primary locus for political articulation, frequently utilizing coded political metaphors (Khan, 2019). This turbulent socio-political milieu directly informed his conceptual mapping, yielding a layered poetic lexicon of paradox and irony that elevates him above his contemporaries (Shah & Mahrukh, 2025).

Crucially, Ghalib's socio-political displacement coexisted with severe financial destabilization. Navigating an era that bridged the fractured Mughal past with the nascent British administrative state, Ghalib faced a pragmatic imperative to compose panegyrics for the new colonial rulers. This rhetorical shift, while framing him as a harbinger of the 'modern' era, invited fierce contemporary criticism; detractors labeled him a *namak-haram* (traitorous or disloyal) for endorsing the British takeover. Driven by financial desperation, Ghalib became a pensioner of the East India Company, even compiling an entire prose diary in praise of British rule to secure his stipend. However, obtaining and stabilizing this pension required protracted, often humiliating struggles (Raja, 2009). This intimate exposure to monetary precarity profoundly affected his creative output. As Chandra (2022) observes, a writer's immediate material environment fundamentally conditions their cognitive processes, dictating lexical and metaphorical selection. This intersection aligns with developments in cognitive philology; for instance, Freeman (1997) demonstrated that human cognition schematizes abstract states into bounded containers motivated by lived experience. Therefore, re-examining Ghalib's poetry through the lens of his financial metaphors is essential to understanding how his lifelong economic struggles reshaped his aesthetic psyche.

Historically, Ghalib scholarship has operated under a strict bifurcation of life and art. Biographers such as Russell and Islam focus predominantly on his lived hardships (Digby, 1972; Russell & Islam, 1969), whereas commentators like Shamsur Rahman Faruqi and Gopi Chand Narang prioritize the formalist aesthetics of his verses. This bifurcation has obscured how the material reality of monetary debt and economic liability directly injected itself into his poetic metaphors. The current study bridges this research gap by applying a cognitive semantic framework to his corpus.

This research is significant on multiple fronts. First, it challenges the hegemony of the mystical-Sufi reading of Ghalib by recovering his economic realism, thereby liberating his work from reductive thematic categorization. Second, it advances the application of contemporary linguistic theories to pre-modern, non-Western texts, offering a methodological template for future literary analyses. To address this gap, we pose two central research questions: RQ1: To what extent does Mirza Ghalib deploy financial lexicons within the *Diwan-e-Ghalib*? RQ2: How are the source domains of economics mapped onto abstract target domains within his verses? Based on the socio-historic record, we hypothesize (H1) that Ghalib's work reflects a systematic

construction of a "Transactional Self," wherein human relationships and existential bonds are conceptualized not through a spiritual covenant, but through a matrix of transactional reciprocity.

The primary data source is Ghalib's Urdu Diwan, cross-referenced with digital archives via Rekhta and the authoritative Nuskha-e-Hamidiya (1921) to ensure textual integrity. The scope is strictly delimited to his Urdu ghazals. Utilizing a purposive sampling strategy, we scanned the corpus not for mathematical frequency, but for qualitative density regarding mercantile, financial, and transactional domains. Qualitative content analysis was then deployed to identify mercantile terms, isolate their contextual co-texts, and apply Cognitive Metaphor Theory to delineate how the logic of the economic source domain is projected onto abstract target domains like life, love, and human suffering.

This theoretical anchor derives from cognitive semantics, specifically George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1980) Cognitive Metaphor Theory, which redefines metaphor from a decorative rhetorical trope into a fundamental human cognitive mechanism (Gulfam et al., 2022; Romero & Soria, 2005). In this framework, conceptual mappings occur between two distinct domains: the Source Domain (the concrete, experiential domain that lends its structural logic) and the Target Domain (the abstract concept being understood). In this study, mercantile and economic concepts constitute the Source Domain, while Life, Love, and Suffering serve as the Target Domains.

Theoretical Framework

This section delineates the theoretical paradigm and literary scholarship underwriting the study, establishing a robust foundation for the current inquiry. The investigation is situated within the framework of Cognitive Metaphor Theory (CMT), which challenges the conventional view of metaphor as a mere rhetorical ornament and repositioning it as a fundamental mechanism of human cognition. Furthermore, this chapter reviews contemporary literature to contextualize the current study and delineate its distinct contribution to the field.

Etymologically and conceptually, metaphor involves mapping a familiar, concrete concept onto an abstract domain that is otherwise difficult to comprehend. Historically relegated to the periphery of linguistics as a decorative device reserved for poetic embellishment, metaphor was traditionally viewed as a purely rhetorical phenomenon restricted to words rather than thought or action. However, a major paradigm shift occurred with the publication of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). They posited that human cognitive architecture inherently structures daily experience, meaning that human thought, action, and perception are fundamentally metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a). Consequently, metaphors transcend textual ornamentation, manifesting actively in human cognition and behavioral practices.

Cognitive linguistics explores this very intersection between knowledge representation and linguistic performance, interrogating the reciprocal relationship between language, the mind, and human cognition (Romman, 2025). This discipline operates on the premise that language organizes human conceptual systems, establishing an intrinsic link between linguistic structures and cognitive processes (Cameron, 2007). In their foundational text, *The Metaphorical Structure of the Human Conceptual System*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980b) underscored this connection, labeling metaphor as central to cognitive science. CMT thus provides the indispensable theoretical backbone for this investigation.

While the originators of CMT primarily focused on universal, deeply entrenched conceptual metaphors, subsequent scholars expanded the paradigm to accommodate cultural contingency. Zoltán Kövecses argues that while certain conceptual mappings are universal, a significant corpus of metaphors is deeply culture-specific. The selection and deployment of a source domain are fundamentally contingent upon the cultural, ecological, and socio-historical environment of the speaker. Kövecses thus bifurcates metaphors into universal and variable dimensions (Kövecses, 2014). This theoretical recognition of contextual variation is highly salient to this study, as it rationalizes how Ghalib appropriated transactional and mercantile metaphors within his distinct socio-economic milieu.

Despite his towering status in Urdu literary history, Ghalib endured persistent financial precarity and acute economic distress. His lifelong material hardships heavily conditioned his aesthetic output, a phenomenon that aligns with Kövecses' emphasis on environmental influence. Ghalib's economic displacement compelled him to produce numerous panegyrics dedicated to the newly established British administration, including odes celebrating Queen Victoria, various Governor-Generals, and colonial secretaries. These compositions were explicitly driven by a pragmatic necessity for financial survival. Although officially granted a colonial pension of 750 rupees per annum, Ghalib faced a protracted, agonizing bureaucratic struggle to secure these funds. His stipend remained highly unstable. Following exhaustive litigation, official petitions, and institutional grievances, the pension was maintained at a meager 750 rupees for the remainder of his life (Alam, 2012). This chronic economic instability and the humiliating necessity of pleading before colonial courts left deep psychological scars, which found expression, both conscious and subliminal, within his poetic corpus.

The analytical interrogation of Ghalib's metaphorical architecture is an established domain within Urdu criticism, yet it remains confined to specific thematic parameters. For instance, Khan (2019) investigated metaphors of political disenfranchisement in an article examining the politics of a lover's complaints. Khan demonstrated that because Ghalib navigated a turbulent era marked by the collapse of Mughal authority and the rise of British hegemony, his verses frequently map the historical reality of political loss (the source domain) onto the psychological landscape of personal grief and existential helplessness (the target domain).

While existing scholarship recognizes the permeability of Ghalib's poetry to his historical context, a critical lacuna remains. The existing literature fails to synthesize cognitive semantics with the economic undercurrents of his work. By anchoring this study in CMT and Kövecses' cultural variation theory, this chapter establishes the critical justification for examining Ghalib's mercantile lexicons, demonstrating how financial anxiety systematically organized his poetic ontology.

Methods

This chapter delineates the methodological scaffolding deployed to investigate the operationalization of mercantile and transactional metaphors within the poetry of Mirza Ghalib. Specifically, it operationalizes the research design, clarifies corpus selection parameters, establishes data identification protocols, and outlines the scope and inherent interpretive limitations of the study.

Research Design

To fulfill the established research objectives and validate the central hypothesis, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive paradigm. Rather than pursuing a quantitative or statistical mapping of lexical frequencies, the inquiry utilizes qualitative content analysis to deconstruct the conceptual projection of abstract target domains onto concrete, economy-related source domains. This qualitative architecture facilitates a granular, context-aware interrogation of Ghalib's verses. By examining how specific economic lexicons structure abstract human experiences like love, existential despair, and mortality, the research uncovers the underlying cognitive mapping that defines Ghalib's poetic ontology.

Corpus and Data Sources

The primary corpus for this investigation comprises the Urdu poetry of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, specifically his canonized Urdu Diwan (Mehmood, 2008). To ensure textual integrity and verify lexical variants, the study cross-references primary source texts with the historical Nuskha-e-Hamidiya manuscript and the digital archives of Rekhta (Rekhta, 2025). From this broader corpus, a focused sample of 10 representative couplets (ash'aar) was purposively selected for close reading. This bounded sample size guarantees an in-depth, micro-analytical engagement with the text, prioritising deep qualitative deconstruction over broad macro-statistical trends.

Data Selection

Data selection was executed through a rigorous purposive sampling strategy. The initial phase involved auditing the broader Diwan to isolate key lexical items and terminologies fundamentally rooted in the financial and mercantile realms. Once these economic keywords were extracted, their immediate poetic environments were audited to confirm that the terms functioned metaphorically rather than literally, thereby isolating verses where financial anxiety directly intersects with existential philosophy.

Identification of Linguistic Data

To mitigate analytical subjectivity, this study operationalizes the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group. MIP offers a systematized, empirical framework for identifying metaphorically used words by contrasting their contextual meaning against their most basic, literal definitions. The identification process follows four precise steps: Step 1: Detailed reading of the specific verse to comprehend the overarching textual unit. Step 2: Isolation of the target lexical items to determine their distinct contextual meaning. Step 3: Determination of the primary, contemporary, and literal meaning of those lexical items outside the poetic context. Step 4: Comparative analysis of the contextual and literal meanings. If a semantic contrast exists yet the contextual meaning is understood through comparison with the literal, the lexical item is formally classified as a metaphor.

Data Translation

Given the linguistic shift from nineteenth-century Urdu to contemporary academic English, translation serves as a critical interpretive node. To preserve the semantic essence and socio-economic nuances of Ghalib's verse, this study employs a literal, philological translation method. This framework avoids overly loose poetic adaptations, ensuring that the precise mercantile mechanisms and financial terminologies embedded within the source text remain clear and uncompromised in the English rendering.

Delimitations

To maintain a cohesive analytical focus, several explicit delimitations were applied. First, this study excludes Ghalib's extensive Persian diwan, focusing exclusively on his Urdu ghazals as they represent the primary site of his vernacular existential critique. Second, the analytical scope is strictly confined to transactional, monetary, and mercantile metaphors. All non-economic metaphorical domains, such as traditional cosmological or horticultural tropes, are excluded to preserve the targeted boundaries of the research.

Research Limitations

Because this study operates within an interpretive qualitative paradigm, certain limitations must be acknowledged, particularly regarding analytical subjectivity. The evaluation of literary nuances and cognitive mappings is inherently tied to the researcher's interpretive lens. However, to ensure rigorous academic validity and counteract arbitrary bias, the study anchors its analysis within established structural frameworks, namely Lakoff and Johnson's Cognitive Metaphor Theory, the Pragglejaz Group's MIP, and formal philological translation protocols.

Findings

This section details the derivation of the qualitative analysis of Diwan-e-Ghalib and its verses by Mirza Ghalib. The analysis of the study detects the plotting of the source domain of Mercantile Economics onto the target domain of Suffering (Gham), Life (Zindagi) and Love (Ishq). The data after analysis reveals that Ghalib's use of financial imagery and metaphors is very structural (Figure 1). The discoveries can be categorized into different sets such as the feeling of suffering presented as capital investment (Daam), love as a mercantile exchange (Sauda) and existence as a financial liability (Qarz).

Existence as a Financial Liability (The Qarz Metaphor)

The analysis of the collected data reveals the use of the metaphor "Life is a Debt" as the most prominent and dominant one. In such use of metaphors, the divine or fate is positioned as a 'creditor' whereas the human or earthly subject is the 'debtor' of the given credit.

The Defaulter or Broke Self

Original Text.

قرض کی پیتے تھے مے لیکن سمجھتے تھے کہ ہاں ... رنگ لاوے گی ہماری فاقہ مستی ایک دن

Transliteration.

Qarz ki peetay thay mai lekin samajhte thay keh haan ... Rang laayegi hamari faaqa-masti ek din

Literal Translation.

I drank wine on credit/loan, but I understood well that yes ... My starvation-joy/insolvency would bring color one day.

Figurative Translation.

I indulged in the pleasures of life against a borrowed time, knowing full well that my spiritual bankruptcy would eventually lead to a reckoning.

Metaphor Identified.

Life is a Loan.

Analysis.

The central idea or lexical entry in this verse is that of qarz or debt. In the verse, Mirza Ghalib thinks of the idea of worldly pleasures or simply sins as moral failing but as financial defaulting. The entire verse creates a specific target plotting where the financial lexicons of the target domain such as “borrowing money” and “repayment” is targeted onto “Life” and “Death”. The term Faaqa-Masti (joyfulness in poverty) represents the conduct of a loaner who knows he is a defaulter after taking borrowed capital (Mai or Wine). Rang laana, or the bringing of colour represents the consequences of bankruptcy after the eventual audit, which can be symbolized as the representation of death. s

The Relief of Insolvency

Original Text.

نہ لٹا دن کو تو کب رات کو یوں بے خبر سوتا ... رہا کھٹکا نہ چوری کا دعا دیتا ہوں رہزن کو

Transliteration.

Na lut-ta din ko to kab raat ko yun be-khabar sota ... Raha khatka na chori ka, dua deta hoon rahzan ko

Literal Translation.

If I hadn't been robbed during the day, when would I sleep so unknowingly at night? ... No fear of theft remains; I give blessings to the highwayman

Figurative Translation.

If I hadn't lost all my worldly attachments, I would never have found peace. Now that I have nothing, I fear nothing; I thank the force (Death/God) that stripped me of everything.

Metaphor Identified.

Possessions are mere burdens and liabilities.

Analysis.

The way Ghalib uses wealth and economics is antithetical to the general use of the terms. Wealth, in its general use case, is a positive lexical item but in Ghalib's schema, it is a negative term, which brings a lot of negatives with it. Ghalib's verse shows “assets” (life or worldly gains) as burdens that requires protecting and brings anxiety (khatka). Being robbed or bankruptcy, on the other hand, has also been used inversely as compared to its general use case, as for Ghalib it is liberating. Rahzan (highwayman) has been shown as the agent who does the audit and clears the accounts.

Love as a Mercantile Exchange (The Sauda Metaphor)

The second most prominent group of metaphors from the analysis of the lexical data is the metaphor of Love as a Trade. Ghalib, in his verses, rejects the notion of selfless and unconditional love and sticks to the narrative that love is essentially a bidirectional trade, where the primary aim is to fulfil the needs of both the involved stakeholders.

The Expenditure of the Self

Original Text.

جان تم پر نثار کرتا ہوں ... میں نہیں جانتا دعا کیا ہے

Transliteration.

Jaan tum par nisaar karta hoon ... Main nahin jaanta dua kya hai

Literal Translation.

I sacrifice/scatter my life on you ... I do not know what a prayer is.

Figurative Translation.

I am paying for this love with the currency of my own life; I do not believe in the empty verbal currency of prayers.

Metaphor Identified.

Affection is the Expenditure of the Self.

Analysis.

The lexical item “Nisaar” historically means the act of scattering coins and jewels over a king, ruler or a groom. Ghalib, by placing this term in this verse, plots life (Jaan) as “Capital”. On the other hand, he views prayer or dua as something having negligible market value and therefore having no use. This, essentially, metaphorizes the “Relationship as a market transaction” whereby the self (the currency) is spent to buy the attention of the beloved.

The Deal Logic

Original Text.

کہا تم نے کہ کیوں ہو غیر کے ملنے میں رسوائی ... بجا کہتے ہو، سچ کہتے ہو، پھر کہیے کہ ہاں کیوں کر

Transliteration.

... Baja kehte ho, sach kehte ho, phir kahiye ke haan kyunkar

Literal Translation.

... You speak rightly/appropriately, you speak the truth, but then tell me, yes, but how (at what cost/logic)?

Figurative Translation.

You claim there is no shame in meeting strangers? Your logic is sound but explain the mechanism of this social transaction.

Metaphor Identified.

Social Interaction is a Calculation.

Analysis.

The verse reflects on Ghalib’s general mindset of negating emotional reasonings in favour of more scientific, direct and logical behind interactions of lovers or humans. Ghalib, through the use of phrases like kyunkar (almost interrogating) and baja kehte ho (befittingly or rightly explaining) demands and appreciates worldly logic and calculation.

Suffering as Capital Investment (The Daam Metaphor)

Please provide sufficient detail to allow the work to be reproduced. If the study using a reagent, details of supplier should be provided when appropriate. Methods already published should be indicated by a reference and only relevant modifications should be described. For epidemiology, details of setting, time and place should be provided.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.

The third most prominent group or set of metaphors are the metaphors that describe suffering as either an investment or as a price.

The Cost of Becoming

Original Text.

دام ہر موج میں ہے حلقہ صد کام نہنگ ... دیکھیں کیا گزرے ہے قطرے پہ گہر ہونے تک

Transliteration.

Daam-e-har-mauj mein hai halqa-e-sad-kaam-e-nahang ... Dekhen kya guzre hai qatre pe guhar hone tak

Literal Translation.

In the price/net of every wave is the ring of a hundred crocodile jaws ... Let’s see what passes on the drop until it becomes a pearl.

Figurative Translation.

The value of the wave involves the mortal risk of the crocodile; let us see what price the drop pays to attain the status of a pearl.

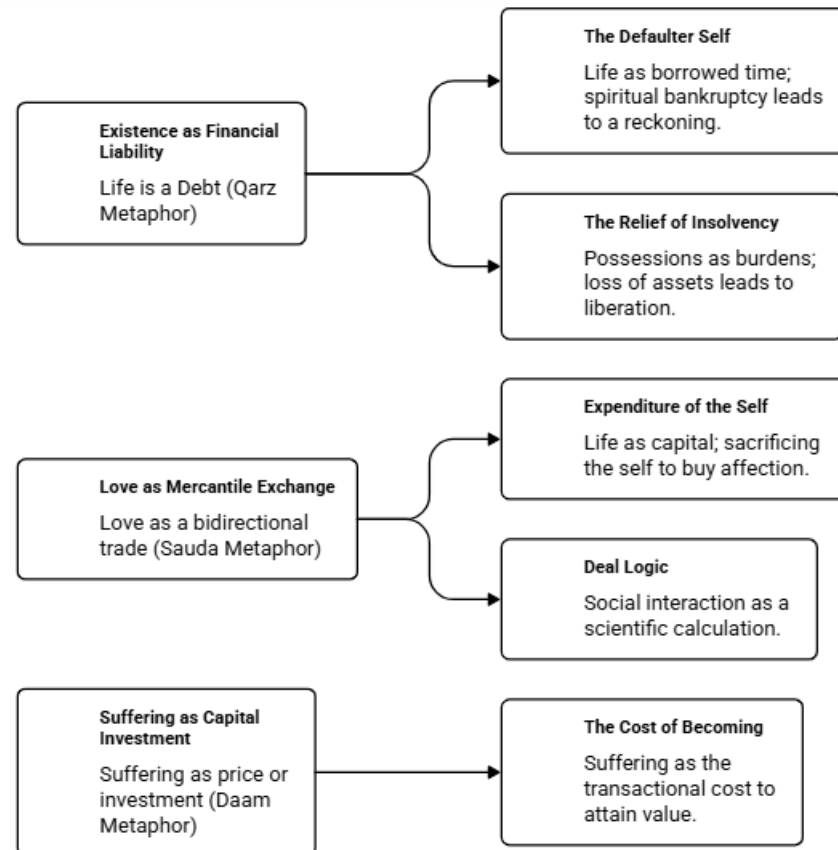
Metaphor Identified.

Value is Cost.

Analysis.

The lexeme “Daam” has multiple meanings and use cases in the Urdu language. Daam is a homonym which means a price as well as a net or a trap that confines someone. Ghalib, in this verse, uses Guhar or Pearl to represent peak market value whereas the Drop or Qatra serves as the natural matter. Suffering (waves, crocodiles) helps transform the raw material into a useful and valuable end product, which becomes the transactional or collateral cost.

Figure 1: Ghalib's Metaphorical Framework: Financial and Mercantile Logic



Discussion

This section interrogates and contextualizes the empirical insights generated through the qualitative content analysis. Moving beyond the baseline identification of linguistic data, this discussion unpacks the broader conceptual, psychological, and socio-historical implications of the uncovered metaphorical mappings.

The central paradigm emerging from the data indicates that Ghalib systematically constructs a "Mercantile" or "Transactional" self within his poetry. This ontological framework stands in stark contrast to the canonical reception of Ghalib as a traditional Sufi mystic. While classical Sufi poetics prescribe fana (the total annihilation of the ego within the Divine), the verses under examination operate on a strictly materialist register. Here, the lyrical protagonist functions as an economic agent actively managing a ledger of existential deficits. This rhetorical shift demonstrates that Ghalib internalized the transactional rationale of the marketplace. Consequently, his poetic worldview manifests not as an unbounded spiritual terrain, but as a bounded economy governed by finite capital that requires calculated expenditure. The recurring deployment of lexical markers such as nisaar (expenditure/sacrifice) and hisaab (calculation/accounting) underscores a persistent compulsion to quantify abstract domains like romantic devotion, existential trauma, and emotional labor.

Among the primary findings, the conceptual metaphor of Debt emerges as the most structurally dominant, semantically resonant, and emotionally charged tool of conceptualization within the corpus, far outpacing the alternative categories of Trade and Price. This structural dominance is directly attributable to the cognitive phenomenon of embodiment. Ghalib's material reality of severe, lifelong indebtedness is thoroughly documented in the socio-historical archive. He spent the matrix of his adult life navigating financial insolvency, evading hostile creditors, and petitioning the British colonial apparatus to reinstate his pension. The inescapable psychological weight of this economic precarity served as the primary experiential container from which his cognitive architecture drew. In accordance with embodiment theory, the systemic insolvency of the poetic protagonist mirrors the literal insolvency of Ghalib's purse, transforming a localized material hardship into a macro-philosophical lens for interpreting the burdens of human existence.

Beyond individual embodiment, the proliferation of these mercantile metaphors must be understood against the backdrop of the cataclysmic systemic transition defining nineteenth-century India. Ghalib lived at the fractured nexus of two competing historical epochs: the collapsing feudal patrimonialism of the Mughal court and the aggressive institutionalization of colonial capitalism by the East India Company. The penetration of market rationality into the cultural and administrative fabric of Delhi fundamentally reconditioned the indigenous psyche. Ghalib's consistent recourse to terms like *hisaab* (account) and *sauda* (bargain/transaction) reflects this epistemic shift. Rather than viewing him merely as a passive witness to colonial expansion, this study positions Ghalib as one of the earliest vernacular intellectuals to map the deep alienation and psychological fracturing inflicted by modern capitalism on the South Asian subject.

Conclusion

This research investigated the under-examined dimension of mercantile and transactional metaphors within the poetry of Mirza Ghalib. By executing a qualitative content analysis of purposively sampled verses from the *Diwan-e-Ghalib* and applying the framework of Cognitive Metaphor Theory, the study decoded how economic lexicons construct distinct ideological and ontological positions.

The empirical results validate the central hypothesis, confirming that Ghalib methodically constructs a "Transactional Self" to navigate his lived reality, interpersonal relationships, and existential identity. Specifically, the analysis uncovered three dominant axes of conceptual projection: Life as Debt (*qarz*), Love as Trade (*sauda*), and Value as Cost (*daam*).

These findings demonstrate that Ghalib functions as an economic realist within a predominantly romantic and mystical literary tradition. On a broader theoretical level, this study proves that material reality transcends the status of a mere biographical footnote; rather, it operates as a profound cognitive force that actively restructures artistic and creative expression. Furthermore, Ghalib's verse encapsulates the volatile cultural, literary, and epistemic shifts of nineteenth-century India, marking a definitive vernacular transition into colonial modernity.

Ultimately, this study addresses a glaring lacuna in Urdu literary criticism. By shifting the analytical focus from conventional metaphysical and Sufi readings to the materialist undercurrents of the text, this research contributes a novel paradigm to cognitive metaphor studies and Ghalib scholarship. While existing literature largely confines Ghalib to the realms of transcendental mysticism and existential philosophy, this study provides a crucial corrective. It demonstrates that Ghalib's mercantile metaphors were not decorative poetic tropes, but deliberate, strategically deployed cognitive instruments designed to rationalize a rapidly transforming socio-economic and cognitive environment.

Ethics approval

Not required.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This study received no external funding.

Underlying data

Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

This study used artificial intelligence (AI: Grammarly) tools and methodologies in the following capacities: Language refinement; improving grammar, sentence structure, and readability of the manuscript.

How to cite

Jamal, M. (2026). The Economics of Pain: A Conceptual Metaphor Analysis of Self-Commercialization in Ghalib's Poetry. *Journal of Society Innovation and Development*, 8(1), 351–361. <https://doi.org/10.63924/jsid.v8i1.265>

References

- Alam, M. (2012). Mirza Ghalib and the British legacy. *Journal of Subcontinent Researches*, 4(11), 61–70. <https://doi.org/10.22111/jsr.2012.837>
- Anwar, H., Wahab, Z. U., & Choudhary S. (2025). Poetic emotions in imagery: Illustrations from Dewan-e-Ghalib. *Arts & Humanities Multidisciplinary Research Journal of Pakistan*. <http://shnakhat.com/index.php/shnakhat/article/view/178>
- Cameron, L. (2007). Confrontation or complementarity?: Metaphor in language use and cognitive metaphor theory. *Annual Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, 5, 107–135. <https://doi.org/10.1075/arcl.5.06cam>
- Chandra, P. (2022). Thought's occasion in Ghalib, Wordsworth, and Mallarmé: Comparative poetics after colonization. *Princeton University*. <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01pk02cd957>
- Fatihi, A. R. (2018). Conceptual blending in Ghalib's poetry. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Linguistics*, 11, 29–35.
- Freeman, D. C. (1997). Cognitive metaphor and literary theory: Towards the new philology. *Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium*, 23(1), 19–28.
- Gulfam, G. Q., Hasan, W., & Bhatti, A. M. (2022). Cognitive metaphor theory: A review. *Jahaan e Tehqeeq*, 5(2), 280–287.
- Khan, D. M. A. (2019). The politics of a lover's complaints: Loss of power as a metaphor in Ghalib's Urdu verse. *Journal of Research in Humanities*, 01(55), 63–76.
- Kövecses, Z. (2014). Context-induced variation in metaphor. *Debreceni Egyetemi Kiadó*, 10, 392–402.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980a). *Metaphors we live by* (Vol. 40). <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo3637992.html>
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980b). The metaphorical structure of the human conceptual system. *Cognitive Science*, 4(2), 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15516709cog0402_4
- Mehmood, K. T. (2008). *Diwan-e-Ghalib selections*. Star Publications. <https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=cFLvs5qOZwwC>

- Mirza, S. M. (2019). 150 years of Mirza Ghalib: How his genius took the ghazal to new heights and depths. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/books/150-years-of-mirza-ghalib-genius-ghazal>
- Mulmule, N. M. (2022). Mirza Ghalib: A self-actualizing poet with poetry of nihilism. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 44(5), 504–509. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0253717620969070>
- Naim, C. M. (2003). Ghalib's Delhi a shamelessly revisionist look at two popular metaphors. *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, 18. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/18315>
- Raja, M. A. (2009). The Indian rebellion of 1857 and Mirza Ghalib's narrative of survival. *Prose Studies*, 31(1), 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440350903157043>
- Rekhta. (2025). Urdu poetry, urdu shayari of famous poets. *Rekhta*. <https://www.rekhta.org>
- Romero, E., & Soria, B. (2005). Cognitive metaphor theory revisited. *Jlse*, 34(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jlse.2005.34.1.1>
- Romman, O. A. (2025). The theory of conceptual metaphor in cognitive linguistics. *Jordan Journal of Applied Science-Humanities Series*, 43(2). <https://doi.org/10.35192/jjoas-h.v43i2.1182>
- Russell, R., & Islam, K. (1969). *Ghalib, 1797-1869 Volume I: Life and letters*. https://books.google.com/books/about/Ghalib_1797_1869_Life_and_letters.html?id=68xjAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Shah, M. I. & Mahrukh. (2025). Metaphysical dimensions of Mirza Ghalib's poetry: A philosophical evaluation. *Advance Social Science Archive Journal*, 4(1), 48–63. <https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.4.1.042>