Discipline: History
Pick an example of popular or vernacular culture (for example, a song, film, sartorial style, novel, poem, dance, dish, meme, etc.) and explain it in relation to the histories of colonialism. How does your chosen example represent, contest, reflect, or otherwise respond to some specific aspect of colonialism?

Across the Indian subcontinent, the name Mirza Ghalib is instantaneously recognisable. A prodigal poet and pioneer of Indian prose, Ghalib has garnered widespread acclaim for his *ghazals*. Their themes of love and loss, religion and sin, so eloquently expressed in his wordly yet conversational tone, have captured the ears and hearts of millions. His works have inspired songs and Bollywood movies alike, ensuring that he lives on as an integral part of Indian popular culture despite having died 155 years ago. But what is perhaps lesser known about Ghalib is that he was born on the deathbed of the Mughal Empire, the once-mighty dynasty that had ruled the Indian subcontinent since 1526. Throughout the eighteenth century, the British East India Company expanded its power and established itself as territorial ruler over much of the subcontinent. What began as a trading venture in 1608 was now a ruler in disguise, carefully pulling the strings of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah II (Asher, 2018, p. 189). Ghalib witnessed firsthand one of the most significant periods of transition in the history of India; from the ashes of the Mughal Empire rose what would eventually become the British Raj. This overarching shift was accompanied by various changes within Indian society and much of Ghalib's work reflects this, with three themes standing out as having been particularly important to him: language, religion and rebellion. Therefore, through a study of Ghalib a great deal can be revealed about the social changes that occurred during the transition from late Mughal India to British colonial rule, as well as the ways in which Orientalism and Occidentalism collided head-on and the impact this had on the Indian people.

Ghalib wrote in both Urdu and Persian. He is more famous for the former but preferred the latter, imploring his readers to "see my Persian so that you may see colourful pictures…Pass over my Urdu collection; it's only a sketch" (Alam, 2007, p. 168). Ghalib's fondness for Persian stemmed from his ancestry; he came from an aristocratic family of Seljuq Turks and his grandfather was descended from the fifth sultan of the Turko-Persian Seljuk Empire (Faruqi, 1997, p. 13). Given that the Mughals were also of Turkic descent, Persian culture flourished under their rule, to Ghalib's delight. Akbar, the third Mughal emperor, honoured Persian poets in his court through the esteemed position of *malik al-shu'arā'* (poet laureate), a title that Ghalib himself would hold some 250 years later under the last Mughal emperor (Alam, 2007, p. 161). Persian became the language of the court, symbolising status and refinement, but it was also an invaluable political tool (Muhammad, Kaleemullah and Sadia, 2015, p. 1). The Mughal policy of *ṣulḥ-i kull* (peace with all), which aimed to govern the subcontinent in a holistic manner inclusive of all cultural identities and religious beliefs, was facilitated by the Indian dialect of Persian. Referred to as *sabk-i*

Hindī (meaning 'everyone's language'), it was widely understood and used at all levels of administration. Furthermore, it had a largely secular character, enabling the Mughals to govern without favouring any religious groups (Asher, 2018, p. 174). The use of Persian in pre-colonial India was an early example of globalisation; its assimilation into the vernacular of the Indian subcontinent signified cultural exchange, tolerance and diversity. As Ghalib exemplified, people of all backgrounds were welcomed and woven into the subcontinent's rich ethnic and cultural tapestry indiscriminately. However, during Ghalib's lifetime, Persian was steadily declining. He was painfully aware of this, lamenting that "whilst all…must come to an end…there never is time enough" (Zaidi, 2020, p. 135). The decline of Persian reflected the Mughal Empire's own decline; as the subcontinent fell under the control of the British, they sought to substitute Persian, the official language of its predecessor, with English. In 1835, Thomas Macaulay asserted in his famous "Minute on Education" that "To teach [the Indians] Persian, would be to set up a rival…to the English language" (Alam, 2007, p. 189). Cultural collaboration became viewed as competition, and the subsequent passing of the 1835 English Education Act replaced the teaching of Persian with English as part of the country's new westernised education system. The British genuinely believed that white European culture was superior to that of the East, and it was with a mixture of altruism, ignorance and perhaps arrogance that they began to enforce their beliefs (Carr, 2005). A way of life practised since the early medieval period was engulfed by the inexorable advance of the British Empire. In its place came a new language, religion, governance and technology. The simultaneous rise in nationalist ideology that accompanied this growing British control meant that, despite being spoken on the subcontinent for centuries, by the mid-1800s many regarded Persian as an alien tongue from West Asia and began rejecting it in favour of the 'more Indian' Urdu (Alam, 2007, p. 189). During this period of intense anglicisation, Urdu became a symbol of India's identity. At the insistence of his patrons, upon whom he relied for income, Ghalib increasingly found himself under pressure to write in Urdu ("Day in and day out…they tell me what I should and should not do") (Zaidi, 2020, p. 131), though he continued to insist that it was but a secondary language. This mounting Indian nationalism formed part of a larger global movement. Intellectual discourse during the Age of Enlightenment emphasised the need for national identity and authentic cultural expression, which the French Revolution later cemented. The philosophers who influenced this revolution were themselves influenced by earlier liberation movements (a notable example being the American Revolution), indicating that the change in attitude occurring on the subcontinent was not an isolated incident but part of a wider ideological transformation (Stapleton, 2008). The displacement of Persian by Urdu, an issue close to Ghalib's heart, thereby embodied the conflict between globalisation and nationalism occurring on the subcontinent that accompanied British colonial rule.

In addition to multiculturalism, religious pluralism was a defining characteristic of Mughal India. Money was allocated for the construction of temples and many non-Muslims held prestigious positions in the imperial courts (Muhammad, 2020, p.

4). However, during the nineteenth century attitudes towards religion and its role in society underwent a significant transformation. This was especially true for Islam, Ghalib's own religion. His beliefs and experiences placed him at the forefront of these changes. Ghalib was not a traditional Muslim; he refused to strictly conform to ritualistic practices, instead focusing on spiritualism and his relationship with God. When questioned about his religious beliefs by a colonial officer in 1857, he famously described himself as being "half a Muslim…I drink wine; I don't eat pork" (Ghalib, Cornwall and Pritchett, 2017, p. 3). This may imply that Ghalib's religious divergence was little more than superficial, but his outlook on religion was in fact profoundly progressive and greatly influenced by his observations of a rapidly-modernising world. In November 1826, Ghalib left Delhi, where he had lived for thirteen years, for a short trip to the British East India Company's capital of Kolkata to settle a long-standing financial dispute with the British Bureaucracy. Upon arrival, he observed a city characterised by modernity and new technology, transformed by British influence; gas lamps illuminated the streets, newly constructed public buildings lined the roads and the printing press allowed for the easy dissemination of information. This deeply impacted him, and after returning to Delhi a shift occurred in both his attitude and his poetry. Whilst traditional Islamic beliefs placed an emphasis on idealism, mysticism and introspection, Ghalib began to advocate for religious modernity. Having observed the realities of a rapidly changing world, he sought to equip traditional religious thought with the practicality it needed to remain relevant in the future. Instead of focusing on abstract ideology, Ghalib argued, it was necessary to contextualise Islam within the realities of the external world and focus on corporeal matters (Pue, 2011, pp. 577-579). He expressed this in his writing, highlighting the importance of being "free from the bonds of convention"(Ghalib, Cornwall and Pritchett, 2017, p. 3), and became a role model for rationality and intellectualism. Ghalib is also regarded as the impetus for the Aligarh Movement that came to prominence during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Pue, 2011, p. 579). In line with Ghalib's views, the Aligarh Movement aimed to prevent Muslims in British India from becoming socially backward and disadvantaged by providing them with a modern, Western-style education (Amani, 2016, p. 69). This signified a renaissance for the Muslim populus, which subsequently underwent both a cultural and intellectual revitalisation. Beyond India, others were also questioning the role religion would play in an increasingly modernising society. The nineteenth century saw mass urbanisation, the publishing of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the invention of the phonograph amongst many other extraordinary advancements. In light of this, the global re-evaluation of religion's prominence in society that took place subsequently came as little surprise, and secularism, the desire to separate religion from the running of the state, began to gain traction (Chadwick, 2011, p. 107). In 1881, the German Freethinkers League was formed to challenge the power wielded by Germany's state churches, and revolutionary France resented Catholic influence to such an extent that the religion was briefly replaced altogether by a 'Cult of Reason'. Ghalib's religious beliefs were transformed by the influence of the British East India Company,

which sparked a wider reappraisal of religious attitudes similar to that which was taking place across the globe.

By the mid-nineteenth century nearly every aspect of Indian society had been revolutionised, but the Mughal Empire was still standing. On paper, the Mughals still ruled the subcontinent but in reality, they spent much of their time wrangling with the regional aristocracy who had begun to carve the empire into different kingdoms (Asher, 2018, p. 189). The Mughals' remaining grasp on governance was ultimately severed by the Indian Rebellion of 1857, a violent event that shocked India's inhabitants and set a grim tone for British rule. For Ghalib, this was a period of intense suffering and he frequently expressed his anguish at the changes that were taking place in his personal diary, *Dastambu*, stating that "my sorrows are incurable and my wounds will never heal" (Narang, 1972, p. 7). On Saturday 9 May 1857, 85 members of the British sepoy army's Meerut Brigade were imprisoned for refusing to handle cartridges greased with animal fat on religious grounds. Rumours that the British were forcing soldiers to use the cartridges to convert them to Christianity added further fuel to fire. The next day, three sepoy regiments revolted, freed the prisoners and killed the officers that opposed them before marching to Delhi (Wolpert, 2009, p. 241; Kulke and Rothermund, 2016, pp. 205-206). Ghalib emphatically denounced the soldiers' actions, describing them variously as "faithless", "wretched" and "thirsty for the blood of the British" (Narang, 1972, pp. 7-11). Upon arrival, the soldiers pledged their loyalty to the elderly emperor Bahadur Shah II who found himself the rebellion's reluctant leader. This sudden uprising caught the British unawares and the rebels regained control of Delhi during the summer of 1857. However, this victory was short-lived. By as early as 20 September 1857, the British retook the city. The 1857 rebellion marked a complete transformation of India's relationship with Britain. The last Mughal emperor, described by Ghalib as "a waning moon that had eclipsed" (Datta, 2003, p. 1105), was banished to Burma and died shortly after. His sons were rounded up and killed by a Captain Hodson, who claimed that in doing so he had cemented "the total extinction of a dynasty, the most magnificent that the world had ever seen" (Wolpert, 2009, p. 244). Attacks on unarmed Indians became commonplace, and Ghalib's own younger brother was shot dead as he left his home (Mulmule, 2020). Suspected rebels were executed en masse, and the city's Muslims were made into scapegoats and exiled. Ghalib noted that Delhi, once jointly nurtured by Hindus and Muslims together, had become "a slaughter-house" with a "thirst for the blood of Muslims" (Narang, 1972, p. 17). It is estimated that 800,000 Indians died as a result of the rebellion; there were 6000 British casualties (Perry, no date). The East India Company transferred governance of India to the Crown, and in May 1876 Queen Victoria officially became the Empress of India. The 1857 rebellion marked a stark change in British colonial policy, one that took place on the global stage. It prompted a worldwide re-evaluation of colonialism and thus became a matter of international diplomacy. France, a rival power, naturally condemned the harsh British response and expressed sympathy for the Indians. The Spanish, on the other hand, believed

that Britain should have been more severe and done more to inculcate Christianity on the subcontinent. America feared the impact the rebellion could have on its economy if not put down (Thakur, 2020). Prompting a global adaptation of colonialism was not the rebellion's only impact. In Ghalib's inimitable words, "once in India there used to be a city called Delhi" (Narang, 1972, p. 16). For a long time, it had been the brightest city on the subcontinent, a shining example of coexistence and a hub of social and cultural advancement. This version of Delhi had been decimated, its destruction symbolic of the changes to come under British rule. Stuck in limbo between the Delhi of his past and the new Delhi, yet to take shape, Ghalib famously proclaimed himself "the nightingale of a garden that has yet to come into existence" (Zaidi, 2020, p. 135).

In conclusion, a study of the popular Indian poet Ghalib and his works reveals a great deal about the social changes that accompanied the birth of British colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent, illuminating in particular the cultural, ideological and religious shifts that took place but also the evolution of colonialism itself. Ghalib's conflict between writing in the declining Persian or switching to Urdu demonstrates the decline in multiculturalism and increase in nationalism that rose to counter British rule. Moreover, his future-facing approach to Islam, arising from his personal experiences in the British East India Company's capital of Kolkata, illuminates the debate around the changing role of religion in society. Finally, his account of the 1857 Rebellion paves the way for wider discussion about the changing face of colonialism in India and across the globe. The themes highlighted in this essay are still highly relevant today. Many fear that India's increased focus on nationalism has come at the cost of its secularism. Furthermore, the country's struggle to reconcile its colonial past with today's increasingly westernised standards and practices has led to some critics accusing the government of downplaying the brutalities of British rule. Ghalib's life and works serve as a bridge between modern India and its colonial past. So the next time that you come across his name or hear his prose, remember the historical significance of his works. Remember a time before the British Raj. Remember the impact of colonialism on India.

Bibliography (alphabetical order)

Alam, M. (1997) 'State building under the Mughals: religion, culture and politics', *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, 3(4), pp. 105-128 [online]. Available at: https://journals.openedition.org/asiecentrale/478 (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Alam, M. (1998) 'The pursuit of Persian: language in Mughal politics', *Modern Asian Studies*, 32(2), pp. 317–349 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/313001?searchText=Persian+culture&searchUri=%2Facti on%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DPersian%2Bculture&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic _search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Ace1a1f16a24d58cb2760a146c bd86993&seq=30 (Accessed: 13 February 2024).

Alam, M. (2007) 'The culture and politics of persian in precolonial Hindustan', in Pollock, S. (ed.) *Literary cultures in history: reconstructions from South Asia*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, pp. 131–198.

Amani, S. (2016) 'A study of Sir Syed's Aligarh Movement: from vision to mission', *International Education and Research Journal*, 2(7), pp. 69-70 [online]. Available at: https://ierj.in/journal/index.php/ierj/article/view/350 (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Asher, C. (2018). 'India: the Mughals' in Masselos, J. (ed.) *The great empires of Asia*. London: Thames & Hudson, pp. 167-191.

Belmekki, B. (2008) 'A wind of change: the new British colonial policy in post-revolt India', *AEDEAN: Asociación Española de Estudios Anglo-Americanos*, 30(2), pp. 111-124 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41055330 (Accessed: 20 February 2024).

Bonnett, A. (2004) *Occidentalism* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/occidentalism (Accessed: 14 February 2024).

Carr, R. (2005) *Concession & repression: British rule in India 1857-1919* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/concession-repression-british-rule-india-1857-1 919 (Accessed: 13 February 2024).

Carter, M. and Bates, C. (2010) 'Empire and locality: a global dimension to the 1857 Indian Uprising' *Journal of Global History*, 5(1), pp. 51-73 [online]. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-global-history/article/abs/empire-a nd-locality-a-global-dimension-to-the-1857-indian-uprising/95B04AF03938B634F3A0 D51D72AFDB02 (Accessed: 20 February 2024).

Chadwick, O. (2011) *The Secularization of the European mind in the nineteenth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Datta, V.N. (2003) 'Ghalib's Delhi', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 64, pp. 1103-1109 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/44145537 (Accessed: 12 February 2024).

Douglas, M. (1982) 'The effects of modernization on religious change', *Daedalus*, 111(1), pp. 1-19 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024766 (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Faruqi, N. A. ed. (1997) غالب کی آپ بیتی [The autobiography of Ghalib]. New Delhi: Ghalib Institute.

Ghalib, M. and Alam, M.S. (2011) 'Ghazals from Ghalib', *Prairie Schooner*, 85(1), pp. 38–39 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23056415 (Accessed: 17 February 2024).

Ghalib, M. A. K., Cornwall, O. T. A. and Pritchett, F. (2017) *Ghalib: selected poems and letters*. [Online]. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Ghosal, S. (2022) *Illuminating forgotten pasts: English translations of Ghalib's Chirag-e-Dair* [online]. Available at: https://www.southasiamonitor.org/medley/illuminating-forgotten-pasts-english-translations-ghalibs-chirag-e-dair#:~:text=Having%20witnessed%20and%20lived%20through%20the%20Revolt%20of,his%20faith%20through%20much%20of%20his%20Urdu%20oeuvre. (Accessed: 13 February 2024).

Haynes, J. (1997) 'Religion, secularisation and politics: a postmodern conspectus', *Third World Quarterly*, 18(4), pp. 709-728 [online]. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01436599714722 (Accessed: 15 February 2024).

Islam, R.u. (2010) ' Religious trends of the Mughal age', *Journal of History and Social Sciences*, 1(1), pp. 1-19 [online]. Available at: https://jhss-uok.com/index.php/JHSS/article/view/2 (Accessed: 17 February 2024).

Kulke, H. and Rothermund, D. (2016) *A history of India*. 6th edn. London: Routledge.

Mataragnon, R.H. (1985) 'Modernization and religion: must they move in opposite directions?', *Philippine Studies*, 33(2), pp. 164-175 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/42632786 (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Muhammad, H.C. (2020) 'Tolerance and coexistence in Muslim India: the religious policy of the Mughal Empire', *CenRaPs Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(1), pp. 1-13 [online]. Available at: https://www.journal.cenraps.org/index.php/cenraps/article/view/6 (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Mulmule, N.M. (2020) 'Mirza Ghalib: a self-actualizing poet with poetry of nihilism', *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 44(5), pp. 504–509 [online]. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0253717620969070 (Accessed: 24 February 2024).

Murphy, F. (2001) *Science and religion in the 19th century* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/science-and-religion-19th-century (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Narang, G.C. (1972) 'Ghalib and the rebellion of 1857', *Indian Literature*, 15(1), pp. 5-20 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23329794?searchText=Ghalib+death&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DGhalib%2Bdeath&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A3f64b74af1545ee18685bb0516e0244b&seq=1 (Accessed: 21 February 2024).

Nizami, K.A. and Fārūqī, A. (2021) *Delhi in historical perspectives*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Parthasarathy, R. (2007) 'Writing between the lines: the politics and poetics of translation', *Indian Literature*, 51(1), pp. 168-186 [online]. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23347894?searchText=Ghalib+Ghazal+280&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3DGhalib%2BGhazal%2B280&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3A81b41957b127d0c7a6b1fc6f2fcf7093&seq=17 (Accessed: 13 February 2024).

Pasciuto, G. *The Cult of Reason: the fate of religion in revolutionary France* [online]. Available at: https://www.thecollector.com/fate-of-religion-french-revolution/ (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Perry, B.P. (no date) *How the Indian mutiny forever changed the landscape of the British Empire* [Online]. Available at: https://www.history.co.uk/articles/the-indian-mutiny-the-british-empire (Accessed: 27 February 2024).

Porter, R. (2001) *Matrix of modernity* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/matrix-modernity (Accessed: 13 February 2024).

Pue, A.S. (2011) 'In the mirror of Ghalib: post-colonial reflections on Indo-Muslim selfhood', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 48(4), pp. 571-92 [online]. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/001946461104800404 (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Raja, M.A. (2009) 'The Indian Rebellion of 1857 and Mirza Ghalib's narrative of survival', *Prose Studies*, 31(1), pp. 40–54 [online]. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01440350903157043n (Accessed: 19 February 2024).

Sengoopta, C. (2012) *The Rays of Calcutta* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/rays-calcutta (Accessed: 17 February 2024).

Smith, A. (1983) *Ethnic identity and nationalism* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/ethnic-identity-and-nationalism (Accessed: 14 February 2024).

Stapleton, F.G. (2008) *Making sense of 19th century nationalism* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/making-sense-19th-century-nationalism (Accessed: 13 February 2024).

Taylor, M. (2018) *The last emperor* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/last-emperor (Accessed: 12 February 2024).

Thakur, R.S. (2020) 'The Indian Revolt of 1857: global response', *Centre for Land Warfare Studies* [Preprint]. Available at: https://www.claws.in/publication/the-indian-revolt-of-1857-global-response/ (Accessed: 20 February 2024).

War, T.A. (2020) 'Death poetry of Mirza Ghalib: a critical evaluation', *Contemporary Literary Review India; Pune*, 7(3), pp. 132-164 [online]. Available at: https://www.proquest.com/docview/2757170342?pq-origsite=primo&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals (Accessed: 21 February 2024).

Weir, T.H. (2022) 'Religious politics in the German Revolution: secularism and socialist opposition 1914 to 1923', *Central European History*, 56(1), pp. 46-70. Available at: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/central-european-history/article/religious-politics-in-the-german-revolution-secularism-and-socialist-opposition-1914-to-1923/A5CDB70B0954FCA978AF40BC1BC5D586 (Accessed: 16 February 2024).

Wilson, J. (2017) *India versus the East India Company* [online]. Available at: https://www.historytoday.com/india-versus-east-india-company (Accessed: 13 February 2024).

Wolpert, S.A. (2009) *A new history of India*. 8th edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zaidi, A.S. (2020) 'The Ghalib translations of Daud Kamal: "the nightingale of a garden which is yet to come into existence"', *South Asia Research*, 40(1), pp. 127–136 [online]. Available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0262728019894760 (Accessed: 21 February 2024).

Zaidi, A.S. (2023) 'Ghalib, the heavenly scribe of earthly sorrow', *Theory in Action*, 16(2), pp. 79–83 [online]. Available at: https://www.proquest.com/openview/1e5f6ed9dc2c9b5aa9eca83d4841f6f2/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2006343 (Accessed: 21 February 2024).

Zia-ud-Din, M., Kaleemullah, B. and Sadia (2015) 'Persian language and literature during the reign of Akbar', *Journal of Asian Civilizations*, 38(2), pp. 107-VI [online]. Available at: https://www.proquest.com/openview/13aedcbfc9c8191086f2dd8f3d606fab/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=105703 (Accessed: 14 February 2024).