

OMAR FITZGERALD'S RUBAIYAT; A PANACEA FOR VICTORIAN ERA

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Abstract

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, often called "the single best-selling book of poetry ever to appear in English", was an outlet relief for Victorian era and a source of inspiration for the major Victorian poets as well. Why should this be so? Why should an obscure dilettante's translation of the quatrains of a minor Persian poet have gone more or less straight to the reading public's heart and stayed there for a hundred years or so? This paper is an attempt to analyze the reasons beyond the success of Edward Fitzgerald's The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyamin Victorian era. The researchers are of opinion that the spirit of the Victorian age, universality of Khayyam's themes, Fitzgerald's character and his appropriate background and the transmogrification or English incarnation of The Rubaiyat by Fitzgerald were of the main reasons for the overwhelming success and the extraordinary popularity of this literary work in Europe.

Keywords: The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Victorian Era, Universality, Transmogrification, English Incarnation

I. Introduction:

Omar Khayyam (1050-1132) was a Persian philosopher, astronomer and poet born in Nishapur, in Khorasan. Khayyam's Rubaiyat, written in clear, concise and epigrammatic style and in a meditative vein, reveals his mind concerning the perennial questions of life and the universe. He reflects on the fatality of human existence, the cruelty of fate and the ignorance of man. Finding no solution, he returns to a vivid appreciation of earthly sensuous beauties and preaches 'eat, drink and be merry' known as 'carpe diem' as a panacea. The Rubaiyat is the expression of Omar's own life, the fruits of his own experience which is not written for publication.

Moreover, *The Rubaiyat* is a serene, cheerful and contented document as an elegy on all faiths whatsoever. It states its case with a certain touch of melancholy, but without any cry of

distress. The poet's train of thought covers the course of a single day as it progresses from dawn to nightfall.

In fact, Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* is a collection of 101 (*Rubai*) quatrains (5th Edition, 1889). Fitzgerald's friend, Edward Byles Cowell, discovered *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* in Persian manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford in 1856 and made a transcript for Fitzgerald in 1857. Later on, Cowell subsequently forwarded to him another manuscript of *The Rubaiyat* from Calcutta when Fitzgerald was occupied and sustained by his brief and disastrous marriage. Then, he created his poetic English incarnation of *The Rubaiyat* which influenced almost all Victorian poets and possessed a unique position in English speaking world as well.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam is called the gospel of flesh versus spirit, coming in the midst of that very church-going Victorian age. The masterpiece and its content, one might drink, caused a shock almost as great as *Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species* amongst the people of its own age. However, it is perhaps the most widely known poem in the world which has captured the imagination of millions of people down the centuries.

Regarding the overwhelming success of Fitzgerald's *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, Dick Davis argues that in the 1953 edition of *The Oxford Book of Quotations*, there are 188 excerpts from the *Rubaiyat* (of which 59 are complete quatrains) — this is virtually two-thirds of the total work. Not even Shakespeare or the Authorized Version of the Bible are represented by such massive percentages. Though this may not tell us much about the poem's quality, it is a clear indication of its extraordinary popularity. (Davis, 1989)

II. Discussion:

What reasons laid behind the success of this literary creation and what was *The Rubaiyat* about that made it as an international phenomenon? Many critics and critical papers have analyzed different factors responsible for the great and enormous influence of *The Rubaiyat* on European literature, however each had studied a particular factor. Here, a comprehensive analysis is applied to study different reasons and major factors altogether responsible in achieving such an immense success.

1. The Spirit of the Victorian Age:

Victorian England, named after Queen Victoria who was crowned in 1837, is marked by several social qualities: repressed sexuality, strict morality, an expansion of English imperialism, a focus on human inventiveness, and nascent doubt over man's place in the universe. With the world's rapid changing over the roughly 70 year-period, artists, scholars and scientists created and wrote from a place of unrest.

The Industrial Revolution opened up man's ability to exploit nature for his own gain, while new opportunities for education created new readers and thinkers, and new scientific discoveries - primarily Darwin's theory of evolution - led many to doubt that man was in fact a reflection of a supreme deity. While these advancements certainly improved quality of life, they also brought with them an age of doubt. These doubts led to pessimism, though he did

empathize with such pessimism which was the root of the rise of realism and naturalism schools in Victorian literature.

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Up from Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate
I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,
And many Knots unravel'd by the Road;
But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate.

In fact, Victorian era had been severely affected by two major phenomena:

2. The Industrial Revolution:

England was the first industrialized country in the world. This success was the result of industrial revolution which had ever taken place in Victorian era. Apart from the advancements in knowledge and technology, the rise of large factories, the invention of steam machine and railway industry, the exploitation of human resources was a horrible phenomenon affecting people's life extremely. They had to work in factories for long working hours like robot; dehumanized and encountered with a bitter life. In spite of great advancement in industry, child labor, exploitation, colonization and imperialism threw a dark shadow on this age endangered and affected human life negatively resulting in doubt and pessimism.

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Why, all the Saints and Sages who discuss'd
Of the Two Worlds so learnedly, are thrust
Like foolish Prophets forth; their Works to Scorn
Are scatter'd, and their Mouths are stopt with Dust.

3. The Publication of Darwin's the Origin of Species and Doubts in Religion:

One of the historical and most important advancements of science and knowledge particularly biology mainly was the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Darwin scientifically proved that God cannot create human being directly and human being cannot be created by a hand of dust through his experiments on the discovered fossils. This created an extreme doubt in religion and people's faith in Christianity leading to pessimism and determinism reflected in almost all naturalistic works in this era.

Thus, the age provided a bitter and pessimistic condition for British people living a life of doubt without a ray of hope. Consequently, pessimism and naturalism affected their life horribly. As Dick Davis (1989) argues, "*The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* appeared in 1859, by coincidence the year in which *Charles Darwin's The Origin of Species* also appeared, and the two works together can be said to have largely defined the intellectual climate of late Victorian Britain. They were the most obvious symptoms of, and profoundly ministered to, that crisis of Christian faith that so obsessed middle-class Victorian England, and which marked virtually all its intellectual and artistic manifestations — from aggressive atheism to the nostalgic flight to imaginary ages of faith, or to even more imaginary Eastern paradises of voluptuous aestheticism." In such a condition, *The Rubaiyat* was an outlet relief for them

suggesting to forget the past and future and just snatch the fleeting time since past is history and future is mystery.

4. Universality of Khayyam's Rubaiyat :

It would be difficult to name any single poem written during last hundred years which has taken hold of the thought of a succeeding generation, not necessarily for agreement, but for recognition. The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam deals with major universal themes including the nature of life, death, reincarnation of soul, carpe diem and wine. These are some major issues every human being may be encountered with in every corner of the world.

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Ah, fill the Cup:--what boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn **To-morrow**, and dead **Yesterday**,
Why fret about them if To-day be sweet!

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam can be considered as bitter-sweet verses about the consolations of wine, death, companionship, and the fleetingness of time. Some have argued he was a Sufi and the wine and drunkenness symbolized mystical insight. Cowell wanted to believe the view, though Fitzgerald didn't. Mostly we read translations for the ideas of the translator. Here the mind of the translator is what matters — and there is nothing whatsoever mystical about Fitzgerald's Khayyam.

Khayyam's train of thought covers the course of a single day as it progresses from dawn to nightfall; "A progression," as he put it, "tracing in vague outline a soul's history."

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Wake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultán's Turret in a Noose of Light.

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And when Thyself with shining Foot shall pass
Among the Guests Star-scatter'd on the Grass,
And in your joyous Errand reach the Spot
Where I made one--turn down an empty Glass!

The whole poem is an evocation of agnosticism and Epicureanism, the philosophy which seeks happiness through friendships and the avoidance of pain. It is about the brevity of life and the absence of an after one.

The stanzas are perfectly designed for transferring a message. Technically the English ones are iambic pentameter quatrains rhyming aaxa. The power of the verse — now known as the Rubaiyat stanza — lies in the tension between the two couplets. In well over half they are separated by a colon, semi-colon, exclamation or question mark. Fitzgerald's Victorian

biographer, A. C. Benson, likens them to epigrams or mini-sonnets, each dealing with a single thought. The first couplet sets out a thought, the second — like a joke's punch line — veers off at an unexpected angle, adding to the strength of both. That last rhyming line, on the other hand, always closes the argument with unarguable finality like a door slamming shut.

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There was the Door to which I found no Key:
There was the Veil through which I could not see:
Some little Talk awhile of **Me** and **Thee**
There seemed--and then no more of **Thee** and **Me**.

It has seldom been out of print in the 150 years since the first edition, the large number of different editions and reprints worldwide is unique for one short poem, and the book has been the focus of a very high level of fine bindings and editions, and collector interest among bibliophiles.

5. Fitzgerald's Character and Appropriate Background to Meet Khayyam:

Khayyam and FitzGerald seem to share enough similarities of taste and temperament for the Victorian Englishman to have imagined a real meeting of minds with the medieval Persian.

Much of the secret lies in the remarkable congruence — or apparent congruence — between the character of the translator and that of the poet he is translating. Is the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam Fitzgerald's poem or Khayyam's? We don't know; it seems to be the work of a poet hovering somewhere between the two, so that it is both familiar and distant; Victorian and English but at the same time medieval and Persian.

Reviewing Edward Fitzgerald's personal life can make us clearly understand that he had an appropriate background and life experience to come across The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam to get relief and find a philosophical outlet in his bitter life.

Fitzgerald's personal life was a mixture of regret or grief and enthusiasm for nature and death following serious events. Fitzgerald regretted his passed days as a young man without any significant and fruitful success. Later on, he faced a love failure (falling in love with Caroline), daughter of a priest due to their lack of trust in Edward's faith in Christianity mainly. His marriage had failed, the most recent of the young men to whom he had become sentimentally attached, and his only friend to offer him intellectual companionship, Cowell, had left for India.

He married a spinster, Lucy Barton, the daughter of his Quaker friend, Bernard Barton, as a brief and disastrous marriage that resulted in his dissatisfaction and second failure. His increasing illness (his heart problem) was another issue that was followed by his strange satisfaction to welcome his death. He had a double enjoyment in nature all over his life emphasizing on basking in nature not at family graveyard. He recurrently said; "let sun meet me every morning at my grave." At last, he fell asleep at night at his friend's house (Barton) and rest for ever.

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Ah, with the Grape my fading Life provide,
And wash my Body whence the Life has died,
And in a Windingsheet of Vine-leaf wrapt,
So bury me by some sweet Garden-side.

Fitzgerald believed that Khayyam and he were much akin having the similar metaphysical questions and skepticism on the nature of life. He found Khayyam the best friend to share his loneliness, doubts and to ask for an outlet solution as well. He was against the theology of his day and wished a Persian magic carpet to waft him away entirely from his 'suburb grange' to the singing rose garden of Nishapur.

He saw in Khayyam a man who, like himself, lived in a kind of semi-retirement from the world, who had to hide large areas of his true feelings, who had a passionate dislike of ostentation and hypocrisy, who found himself without the consolations of religious faith, whose chief solace appeared to be the cultivation of sentiment and private friendship, and who was preternaturally aware of human physical beauty and of how quickly it fades.

Whether the historical Omar Khayyam was actually any-thing like this is not the point; FitzGerald had found, or created, an alter-ego through whose poems he could express some of his own most deeply held convictions, and he found him just when he felt potentially most bereft of human comfort and sympathy. In Khayyam he had found the 'Friend' he sought, and whom he had spent most of his life seeking. He had found a twin soul in Khayyam.

6. Fitzgerald's Transmogrification or English Incarnation:

Many critics claim, the translation of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* is the best translation in the history after the authorized version of Bible benefited from the smooth and almost perfect diction. Even, R.A. Nicholson argues that Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyatis "the highest and rarest kind of translation" in the world.

Dick Davis is of opinion that "certainly, there is no other translation of Persian poetry into English that gives so much of the elusive flavour and tone of the original."

In the words of a prolific twentieth-century verse translator, C. H. Sisson, FitzGerald's notion of verse translation was that 'It is a homage one pays.' His version of the Rubaiyat is, then, an attempt to reproduce in English what he took to be the essentials of Khayyam's poetry.

Poetic translation is very much difficult and sometimes impossible as Robert Frost believes that a poem will evaporate after translation. However, Fitzgerald made a wonderful English incarnation or a transmogrification out of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. He paraphrased some of the quatrains and mashed together many quatrains. Some of them cannot be traced to any of Khayyam's quatrains at all and not all Khayyam's themes are reflected. In fact, Fitzgerald himself referred to his work as "transmogrification" or a poetic metamorphosis. In particular, Fitzgerald gave the Rubaiyat a distinct atheistic spin. It was through Fitzgerald's translations that he was introduced to the West and became a household name.

The Rubaiyat became popular to the extent that British soldiers took copies of it with them during World Wars I and II, and Khayyam clubs were formed to read and discuss the poetry

of this 11th-century man. Khayyam and FitzGerald as "twin souls," separated by time and place but united in the *Rubáiyát* text.

This splendid translation was a magic found huge number of lovers and was a platform for introducing Khayyam to the world of English readers. He gave English literature something new, beautiful and permanent and an awakening interest which has grown to such proportion that it is now known and quoted wherever English is spoken. In fact, FitzGerald responded to what he saw as an honest and skeptical reaction to key metaphysical questions of Khayyam as he found an echo of his emotions and rejecting pure spirituality identified with the man himself.

III. Conclusion:

The success of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* translated by Edward Fitzgerald in Victorian era can be related to the major reasons including the requirements or the spirit of the Victorian age, universality of Khayyam's themes, Fitzgerald's personal grieves and his appropriate background to meet *The Rubaiyat* and the transmogrification of *Rubaiyat* by Fitzgerald. These four elements prepared a proper platform for this literary work to achieve a historical success in English speaking world particularly in England. Thus, it was a perfect panacea and an outlet relief for those living in church-going Victorian environment.

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