

INTRODUCTION

After years of research and studying Khayyam's poems and philosophy, I decided to translate some sixty of his quatrains into simple English, which can be easily understood by the readers who are not familiar with poetry and literature, in particular that of Persia. I have translated some selected quatrains into English, while writing about his life and achievement. It is quite appropriately claimed that Khayyam was the poet of destiny. However, it will be very wrong of us to think that he was a fatalist, at least by common understanding and definitions that we have of this world. There are two major schools of thoughts in trying to classify Umar Khayyam's Rubaiyyat. One claims that he was highly influenced by Islamic mysticism, particularly Sufism, and his references to wine and lovers are allegorical representations of mystical wine and divine love. A second school of thought refutes the first completely; claiming that Khayyam understood his mortality and ability to look beyond, and his references to wine and lovers are very literal and sensual. Khayyam himself has given us a clue in one of his Quatrains when he literally says:

Some are lost in deep thought seeking the right faith,

Some are lost, wandering in awe and doubt,

I fear a hidden voice, coming from a lurking place:

“awake, wanderers”! Neither this nor that is the right path.

قومی متفکرند اندر ره دین
قومی متحیرند در شک و یقین
می ترسم از آنکه بانگ آید ز کمین
کای بی خبران راه نه آن است و نه این

In my opinion; however, both the above schools of thoughts are somewhat erroneous, and that the proponents of each, while half understanding the wisdom that Khayyam imparted, are turning and twisting his words to suit their own beliefs. He was a super achieving genius. He was an advisor to the ministers and kings. He was a mathematical genius, presenting solutions to problems that were centuries ahead of his time. One only has to look at Khayyam's life to come to the same conclusion.

Depending on the sources of reference that one chooses, Umar Khayyam is believed to have composed somewhere between two hundred to six hundred Quatrains. Some are known to be authentic and are attributed to him, while others seem to be combinations of corruption of his poetry, and whose origins are more dubious.

The *Rubaiyyat* of Khayyam is among the few masterpieces that have been translated into most languages, including English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic and Urdu. The most famous translation of the *Rubaiyyat* from Persian to English was undertaken in 1895 by Edward J. Fitzgerald. It appears that in many of his translations, he has combined a few of his quatrains to compose one, and sometimes it is difficult to trace or relate the original to the translated version. However, Fitzgerald has tried his utmost to adhere to the spirit of the original poetry.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF KHAYYAM

Ghiyath al-Din Abu'l Fath Umar ibn Ibrahim al-Khayyami, otherwise, known as Umar Khayyam, was not placed among the most celebrated poets, hence sharing the fate of a number of others in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the admiration of whom at home was far less than were their popularity and sway abroad. As this contrast applies only to the effect his work created it must be added by realization of the discrepancy in circumstances, for while the admiration granted already during their lifetimes to Urfi, Sa'ib and Shukat was partial to India and Turkey,¹ the quatrains of Khayyam, mostly owed to the masterly summarized translations of Edward Fitzgerald (1895) awakened, though not instantly, an almost adoring, even snobbish enthusiasm in the West, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries—an attitude that for a long time remained inexplicable to the Persians. In Europe and America he is in fact the most celebrated of oriental poets, with a character that, rightly or wrongly, throws into the gloom the fame of other masters, such as Hafiz, whose praise was sung by Goethe, Firdawsi or Nizami, who gained recognition at home as well as abroad through their jubilee celebrations, and Sa'di who was already long known in the West – not to mention other, lesser poets.²

It was through the Khayyam cult in the West that he gained or retrieved a status as poet in Persia as well. Throughout his lifetime Umar Khayyam was nonetheless utterly recognised in Iran as one of the most shining figures in Persian culture, although solely in the pasture of learning. We hold but few details of his life, nevertheless more is known about him than about other classical poets. This is chiefly owed to his broad standing as a scholar. Only the most significant dates can be quoted here: he was born at earliest in 412/1021-22 at Nishapur and died most likely at the same place in the year 515-6/1122.³ Assuming that the former date is correctly estimated, there may after all be some truth in the myth concerning the friendship between the Seljuq minister, Nizam al-Mulk, the feared, Master Hasan-i Sabbah and Umar Khayyam, who are said to have avowed in their youth to stand by each other no matter what happens; as already stated there is no proof of the accuracy of this statement and it seems more likely that Isma'ili tendencies account for the tale.⁴ Khayyam's comprehensive studies and education in Nishapur provided him with an extensive knowledge in all branches of learning, the humanities as well as the exact sciences.⁵ We even know the names of some of his teachers in astronomy and geometry. On the surface a Sunnite – or he could not have been named 'Umar!' for in Shia'te faith Umar was an

infidel and thus the enemy of the first Imam “‘Ali’. However, of the Shafi‘ite practice, as a philosopher he followed the same path as Avicenna, which bore a powerful similarity to the Isma‘ili tenet and Sufism.⁶ “From the widely-known theologian and grammarian Zamakhshari (d. 538/1143-4) – to whom we owe the earliest data as the result of a personal meeting between the two men – we learn that Khayyam was familiar with the work of the Arab sceptic Abu‘l ‘Ala’ al-Ma‘ari (d. 449/1057).”⁷

A significant turning point in Khayyam’s life was the year 467/1074, when he was selected by Sultan Malik-Shah and his minister (*vazir*) Nizam al-Mulk to lead a council of scholars assigned to improve the existing calendar. The success of the achievement of this work (1079) made him famous throughout all regions of the enormous empire and consequently earned him the permanent admiration of his monarch.

During the year 485/1095, when Nizam al-Mulk was assassinated by an Isma‘ili activist belonging to the faction of Hasan-i Sabbah (the Assassin) and – strangely enough Malik-Shah died more or less instantaneously afterwards, the work of Umar Khayyam at the court, where there was neither money for purposes of research nor much consideration for the scholar, was stopped for some time. The slander of his rivals and later on religious disputes in Nishapur (1095) compelled the master to break off his academic activities and – more out of fear for his friends than for Allah – to set out on a pilgrimage to the holy places of the Prophet. On his return he restarted his teaching in Nishapur, resumed his discussions on scientific problems with his equals, among whom Muhammad Ghazali can be named, who even worked again for a time in service of the court (outside Nishapur), where he was highly respected for his gift of predicting future. The records concerning the old age of this noble old man close with details of the last moments of his life.⁸

Khayyam was knowledgeable in other physical sciences such as medicine and chemistry. He was an admired philosopher and teacher. The very fact that he had the instinctive motive and the drive to compose the *Rubaiyyat*, is the very proof of his profound perception, a vision that we are still having difficulty to comprehend. A man has achieved so much in his life is certainly not a mystical fatalist, claiming “whatever will be will be” to the contrary, he saw the foolishness in

being mesmerized by such techniques, which may bring amazing vision of reality, but so long as they remain visions, they are not and cannot be the truth, the reality itself. Furthermore, a man who changed the world of his time and for centuries after, is clearly not one who would say, “since we are all going to die, let us concern ourselves with sensual pleasures only.” He naturally saw that just a mystical momentary passion were merely visions of reality and not the truth; sensual pleasures were also representations of a deeper joy and not the truth either.

Anyone who can clearly pose the question of mortality and temporality of our existence has obviously struggled deeply with life and death and existence. Khayyam understood the meaning of not being in control of life and death, and found the limits of our freedom. He understood what was important in life and through his life, his teaching and his *Rubaiyyat* conveyed that very meaning, though in somewhat of cryptic form; nevertheless, complete and intact to us. Khayyam understood that it was our fate, our destiny, something beyond our control to be born into this world. He also understood that death was an inevitable fate for anyone who was ever born. He understood that our bodies come from dust and clay. He comprehended the fantasy of concerning ourselves with the future, as well as neurosis of staying in our past. He saw that all we have is this ever slipping moment, this now, which itself has a timeless quality. He also perceived that in life what is important is that deeper joy and love for which we have infinite yearning, as well as capacity to both receive and give. His *Rubaiyyat* force us to ask those ultimate existential questions, and lead us down a path that, unless we are lost along the way or are destabilized by the abyss which we must traverse, must inevitably reach the same answer. Those ultimate truths that in life all that matters is love and joy, all else is fantasy and fallacy.

NOTES

- 1- H. Elliot, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, III, 567-573.
- 2- J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. K. Jahn, pp. 189-91.
- 3- A. Halim, *Growth of Urdu Language and Literature during the Sayyid-Lodi Period*, 54, Cf. also M. A. Ghani, *History of Persian Language and Literature at Mughal Court*, I, 65-66.
- 4- J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. K. Jahn, p. 190.
- 5- J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. K. Jahn, p. 190. Cf. G. Garrard, *A Book of Verse: The Biography of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, Stroud, U.K., 2007.
- 6- *Tutinameh*, translated into English by B. Gerrans (London, Printed for the translator, at the Minerva Press; Sold by Mess. Robson, B. Law, and W. Lane, 1792). DESCRIPT xiii, [3], 188 p. (Tales of a parrot / translated into English, from a Persian manuscript, intitled: Tuti nameh, by a teacher of the Persic, Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac, Chaldaic, Greek, Latin, Italian, French and English languages [i.e. B. Gerrans]. [Vol. 1.].
- 7- M. W. Mirza, 'Mutahhari-i Kara, *Oriental College Magazine*, 5 (1935). Shervani, 'Qasa'id-i Mutahhar-i Kara', *Ma'arif*, 8 (1935). Cf. J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. K. Jahn, p. 190.
- 8- J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature*, ed. K. Jahn, p. 191.

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