

*The Victorian Poetry and Rubaiyat of Omar
Al-Khayyam: A Comparative Study*

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تاريخ القبول: 2009/10/28

تاريخ التقديم: 2009/9/24

Introduction

The literature of the Victorian Age has certain characteristics and writers. This period reflected the social, political, economic and religious as well as intellectual controversies of the time. It also reflected the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the Victorian people in general and the working class in particular. The period also witnessed conflict between science and religion with the appearance of the theories of Charles Darwin and his book: *The Origin of Species*. In addition to this the appearance of biology and astronomy affected man's mind.

As a result of these changes, many intellectual issues appeared in the life of the people. Issues like the mystery of life, and afterlife became a wound which demands a balsam. So it was natural to find that much of the literature of this period is characterized by melancholy and pessimism. Similar pessimistic idea also appears in *Rubaiyat* Al-Khayam.

When the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Al- Khayam appeared, English readers in general, and English poets considered them as a resort from their suffering from the conflict between science and religion. Edward Fitzgerald translated the *Rubaiyat* and published it in 1859. His translation was a free

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one. He transmitted them as he understood them. He expressed the thoughts of Omar on love and wine, life and death. The Rubaiyat then gained fame in England because they became a balsam to the Victorian wound resulting from the conflict between science and religion.

The Victorian Period (1837–1901):⁽¹⁾

The Victorian period was a period of intense and prolific activity in literature, namely by poets and novelists, essayists and philosophers. Much of the writing was concerned with problems resulting from the industrial revolution, the influence of the theory of evolution, movements of the political and social reform⁽²⁾. Hence, during this period, namely at the second half of it, there was a conflict between science and religion. Science was developing fast while religion was not. Since it was a time of rapid industrial growth, social unrest and scientific discovering of new ideas and theories emerged, challenging accepted and received believes. Accordingly, the Victorian poetry marked by religious doubts, personal despair and general uncertainty about life and the human condition⁽³⁾.

The Victorian poetry shows a greater awareness of the complexity of life and its lack of cohesion⁽⁴⁾. Issues like these appeared in the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites⁽⁵⁾, Elizabeth Barret Browning (1806–61), Robert Browning (1812–89), and Lord Tennyson (1809–92)⁽⁶⁾.

The poetry of this period is that of escape and the individual moment. In their attempt to transcend the doubt of the age, the Victorian poets used imagination as a means of

escape. This is achieved by using symbols as a means of expressing personal and private world moving from the limitation of reality into an ideal dream vision. For instance, love and art for Robert Browning are potentially transcendent, allowing the individual to rise above physical circumstances. The escape can only ever be momentary and most of his poems end in a sense of failure.

Lord Tennyson also escapes from reality by retreating into a dream world trying to convey to the readers just what it would be like to escape from realities of the Victorian age⁽⁷⁾. For example, in the following poem: *Akbar's Dream: Hymn*", by Tennyson, written in 1892 we see it is based on a dream. The Oriental elements in it support its imaginative aspects:

*"Once again thou flamest heavenward, once
again we see the rise
Every morning is thy birthday gladdening
human hearts and eyes
Every morning here we greet it, bowing
lowly down before thee,
Thee the Godlike, the cheangeless in thine
ever-changing skies..."⁽⁸⁾*

In the upper lines, the speaker is reciting a hymn in which he is glorifying the sun. Akbar was the great Mogul ruler of India from 1556 to 1605. He used a new way of worshipping. In the poem he relates a dream about building a temple where all people of all creeds might worship⁽⁹⁾. In the same way there is another poem by Tennyson "The Vision of

"Sin" in which appears mythological elements, great palace, and horse with wings:

*"I had a vision when the night was late;
A youth came riding toward a palace gate.
He rode a horse with wings, that would have flown,
But that his heavy rider kept him down" ⁽¹⁰⁾. p.51.*

Additionally, the Victorian poets deal with the past in a different way. They look beyond the spirit of passing time to something more lasting. The Pre- Raphaelite poets used the past as an analogue for the present. Robert Browning in his poem "Love among the Ruins" uses the past and present together to explore physical and psychological difference. He develops a sequence of antithetical images. The open land which now is grazed by sheep was the site once of a city great and gay ⁽¹¹⁾. (lines 1–12):

*"Where the quiet-coloured and of evening smiles
Miles and miles
On the solitary pastures where our sheep
Half-a sheep
Tinkle home word thro' the twilight, stray or stop
As they crop-
Was the site once of a city great and gay,
(So they say)
Of our country's very capital, its prince
Ageas since

Held his court in, gathered councils, wielding far
As you see" ⁽¹²⁾*

*In (part 2, lines 57 – 8) the young lovers meet in the:
"Turrent whence the charioteers caught soul
For the soul"*

In the same part (lines 59 – 60) the poet tells us the king looked where the girls:

*"Looks now, breathless, dumb,
Till I come"*

Then sound of the past intensifies the meaning of the lovers' meeting in the present⁽¹³⁾. The ancient city described here is supposed to be Nineveh or Babylon⁽¹⁴⁾.

Accordingly, the Victorian period was the period of external and internal struggle between the poet and the environment he lives in. the internal struggle or conflict occurs inside the mind of the poet. All these conditions whether they are religious, social, economic, or political participated in creating atmosphere that paved the way for the Rubaiyat to be received by the English language reader.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Al-Khayyam (1048 – 1122) was introduced into England by Edward Fitzgerald who translated it and published it in 1859. Fitzgerald who was not a so famous Victorian poet, tried his luck in translating a Persian literary work. He had introduced a poet who was minor in his time because of notoriety of the thoughts which he expressed in his poetry. Then, the Rubaiyat gained fame and became much more popular than before⁽¹⁵⁾.

A close reading of the authentic verses reveals Omar as a man of deep thought, troubled by the questions of the nature of reality and the eternal, the impermanence and uncertainty of

life, and man's relationship to God. Omar doubts the existence of divine providence and the afterlife, derides religious certainty and its disturbance by man's frailty and ignorance. Finding no acceptable answers to his perplexities, he chooses to put his faith instead in a joyful appreciation of the fleeting and sensuous beauties of the material world. The idyllic nature of the modest pleasures he celebrates. However, cannot dispel his honest and straightforward brooding over fundamental metaphysical question⁽¹⁶⁾. These matters dealt by Omar Al-Kayyam reflect his personality as an experienced man and a man of knowledge as well.

Omar Al-Khayyam (Abu Al-Fath Omar bin Ibrahim Al-Khayyam, Annisaburi, was born in May 18, 1048 A.D., died in Dec. 4 1122 Nisabur⁽¹⁷⁾. As a man of high learning, he was mathematician of his time. He was an authority in astronomy, philosophy, physics and medicine. Above all a man of science, he was very knowledgeable in music and Islamic religion as well⁽¹⁸⁾, renowned in his own country and time for his scientific achievements but known to English speaking readers for his *Rubaiyyat* published in 1895 by Edward Fitzgerald. Rubaiyyat or quatrain is a piece of verse complete in four rhymed lines. Although in Omar's Rubaiyyat the third line usually does not rhyme⁽¹⁹⁾.

Most of the themes and thoughts of Al-Khayyam's *Rubaiyyat* appealed to the English readers and gained fame during the second half of the Victorian period. These themes and thoughts made his fame outside his country. The first reason of his fame is that Al-Khayyam was not a poet of love, mysticism or a poet of the myths of the ancient people.

Instead, his *Rubaiyyat* deals with issues that concern every man such as meaninglessness of life, life itself and afterlife which every man wants to realize whether it is a fact or not.

Man usually seeks entertainment when he feels tired from the troubles of life. He does so to escape these troubles. Here, Omar Al-Khayyam escapes the troubles of life to wine. He wrote many Rubaiyat dealing with wine, drinking it with beautiful ladies just to relieve himself. The *Rubaiyyat* also deals with the issue of youth stage. With the power of passing time this stage will decay and fade. Man in general, whether he is from the East or West will face this issue and his mind will be worried about it whether he is optimist or pessimist.

The second reason of his fame during the second half of the Victorian period, is that his thoughts and themes are revolutionary. The *Rubaiyyat* contains revolution against what is conventional or familiar in society as well as provoking clergy men and their theories. This matter is similar to what occurred in Europe during Renaissance when poets or writers, such as Voltaire, started campaigns against the church. These matters are desired by the readers and they accept them anywhere⁽¹⁴⁾. Furthermore, pessimism is one of them features of his *Rubaiyyat*. Pessimism appears clearly in *Rubaiyyat* which deals with death through which the poet expresses his attitude toward this world.

The following selected poems will be samples of his poetry that deal with issues appealed to the reader in general, namely the English one during the Victorian period⁽²⁰⁾.

Quatrain 28

*"With them the seed of wisdom did I saw,
And with my own hand labour'd it to grow
And this was all the harvest that I reap'd-
I came like water and like wind I go"*

Pessimistic attitude toward life appears clearly here. Al-Khayyam He tells us that he has gained the knowledge of wisdom, but he finally all the harvest he reaped; he found life is too short: "I came like and like wind I go". Hence, the poet is pessimist toward life as he found it very short and then it is meaningless.

One of the features of the Victorian poetry is that it is poetry of escape when the poet feels tired of the troubles of life. He tries to forget them throughout escaping reality into a world of dreams or imagination. Centuries before the Victorians, Al-Khayyam did the same thing, when he feels tired of the troubles of life, he escapes these troubles into drinking. The following quatrain is a good example.

74

*"Yesterday this day's madness did prepare,
To-morrow's silence, Triumph, or Despair,
Drink! For you know not whence, n or why,
Drink! For you know not whence you came, nor why?
Drink! For you know not why you go, nor where".*

The main idea of this quatrain is death, afterlife and the meaning of life. The tone is pessimistic. Al-Khayyam, here, deals with many important issues that man's mind cannot ignore. Then it reflects one of the main aspects of his

personality which was a magnificent reason for his fame that is pessimism. In this quatrain the poet appears pessimist because he cannot explain the mystery of existence or that of life. The questions he asks in this quatrain are metaphysical. He wants to know from where did he come to this world and where will he go after death. Then the poet relieves himself from these troubles by escaping for drinking wine. He emphasizes drinking as he initiates the word 'drink' at the beginning of the last three lines. This emphasis indicates that he is impatient and he cannot bear those matters anymore. He invites himself to drink wine because the mysteries of life cannot be explained for himself.

In the quatrain (no. 37) the problem of passing time by which we came to this world and then quickly we depart it. The poet, again orders the waiter to fill the cup with wine because, he explains that our repeated cries over this matter is useless. so why we are worried about them 'if to-day is sweet'.

37

*"Ah, fill the cup: what hoots is to repeat
How time is slipping underneath our feet
Unborn To-morrow, and dead yesterday,
Why fret about them it To-day is sweet!"*

The poet tells us that since there is no escape from the power of death or the power of time, we should live the day if it is sweet. He advises us to live the happy day if it is available and not to be fret about the passing time and death. The tendency of escapism and pessimism is also found in this quatrain.

In quatrain (No. 70) the poet tells us that once he was wondering in a market where he saw a potter in a dusk of a day who was thumping his wet clay to prepare it for making a jar or something like that. The poet hears the clay addressing the potter to hit him gently because this clay came out from the dead bodies:

70

*"For in the market-place one dusk of day,
I watch the potter thumping his wet clay
And with its all obliterated tongue
It murmured - "Gently, brother, gently, pray".*

This quatrain is narrative, it contains setting, time, place, as well as action. If we examine the setting carefully, we will find that its elements are suggestive; The market-place stands for the world we live in. The market-place is just like the world- which everyone can visit for a limited time and then leave it. The time when the poet was watching the potter was dusk which declares the end of the day. Here dusk indicates the approaching of death. Dusk declares the end of the day, here we have the matter of day and night on one hand and the matter of life and death on the others.

This quatrain reflects the pessimistic aspect of the poet. He is pessimist because death is waiting for us and it becomes meaningless since we cannot interpret the mystery of death. The bodies will change into clay to be hit under the hands of the potter.

Finally, Al-Khayyam was a man of deep thought. His quatrains contain great philosophical ideas dealing with the

meaninglessness of life and death. After publishing them in 1859, they became so popular because they reflected all the problems resulted from the conflict between science and religion during the Victorian period. However, the topics which appear in the quatrains of Omar Al-Khayyam are comprehensive. They don't belong to specific people or period. This leads us to say that Al-Khayyam is a poet of humanism.

NOTES

1. When Queen Victoria ruled Britain (1837–1901).
2. J. A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976, p.744.
3. Sara Thorne, Mastering Poetry. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006, p.217.
4. Thorne, p.217.
5. The Pre-Raphaelites: A Mid-19th c. self styled brotherhood of London Artists, all young who united to resist current artistic conventions. They influenced a group of poets who hold the same name. For further details, see Cudden, p. 528.
6. Throne, p.222.
7. Throne, p.223.
8. See: Poetry of the Victorian Period, 3rd. ed., Illinois: SCOTT, Foresman, 1965. p.176.
9. Poetry of the Victorian Period, p.958.
10. Poetry of the Victorian Period. p. 51.
11. Thorne p.221.
12. Quoted from: The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, vol. II, Oxford, 1973, p.1293.
13. Thorne, p. 221.
14. See: The Oxford Anthology of English Literature, p.1293.
15. The New Encyclopedia Britannica, vol.8, Chicago, 1988. p.945.
16. Ibid, vol.8. p.945.
17. Ibid, vol.8. p.945.

18. Rubaiyyat Umar Al-Khayyam: Persian, Arabic, English, French. Translated by Mohammed Salih Al-Karak, Beirut: Dar Al-Manahil, 2008, p.7.
19. Britannica, vol.8. p.946.
20. Abdul-Hak Faddil, Thowrat Al-Khayyam, 2nd. Edn, Beirut: Dar Al-Elim Lilmalyen 1968, p.81,84.
21. All the poems (*Rubaiyyat*) appear here are quoted from: Edward Fitzgerald, *Rubaiyyat of Omar Al-Khayyam*, London, Collins, 1947.

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الشعر الملحمي ورباعيات عمر الخيام: دراسة مقارنة

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المستخلص

يتألف هذا البحث من محورين رئيسيين. يعالج المحور الأول الأوضاع التي نجمت عن التقدم الصناعي والعلمي مما أثار أسئلة عدة عند الشعراء الانجليز تدور حول الوجود والموت ونزعة الهروب من الواقع. ويتناول المحور الثاني شيئاً عن شخصية شاعر شرقي مسلم (عمر الخيام) كان فيلسوفاً ورياضياً كتب قصائد عالج فيها مواضيع الغاز الموت والوجود والنزعة الهروبية التي انعكست فيها قصائد الشعر الانجليزي في العصر الفيكتوري الممتد من الفترة 1837-1904.

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