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**Omar Khayyam and Fitz Gerald:**

## **Bridge between Persian and English Literature**

Omar Khayyam and Fitz Gerald are the two inseparable names in the annals of world literature whose fame chiefly rests upon the Rubaiyat. Khayyam wrote the Rubaiyat in the thirteenth century AD but his literary out-put received scanty attention in his own country's Persia, not alone the world. Persia has a rich and enormous literary heritage of great classical masters such as Ferdowsi ,Rumi ,Sadi, Hafiz and a host of others and vis a vis their works such as the Shahnameh ,the Masnavi, the Bustan , the Gulistan and the Diwan of Hafiz,theRubaiyat of Omar Khayyam was negligible. But fate had great fame in store for Omar Khayyam rather than the classical masters of Persia.The Rubaiyat transcribed in 1461, preserved in the Bodleian Library containing one hundred and fifty eight quatrains attracted the attention of Edward Fitz Gerald through his tutor and friend Edward BylesCowel in 1857, when the East India Company yielded India to Queen Victoria and simultaneously the Rubaiyat was added as a jewel to the crown of Victorian English literature.

Fortune smiled both upon Omar Khayyam and Fitz Gerald, when the Rubaiyat fell into the hands of Rossetti, Swinburne, Tennyson, Browning, Ruskin, Norton, Greaves and several other writers and poets of literature in English.

The Anglo -Persian contact was primarily a political and economic encounter but it did not leave any permanent mark on the pages of the history of the two countries. The monarchs of the countries conspired with one another to contain the growing Russian influence or in the Great Game, Persia was used as a pawn to create sphere of influence for the contesting powers of the world. Under such political conditions, the Rubaiyat was the conduit to connect civilization by Fitz Gerald for the progress of human ideas, thoughts and understanding. The word "pedar" and "madar" in Persian are the same as "father" and "mother" in English and there has been a connectivity between Persia and Britain which has remained blurred under the thick clouds of geo- politics and the Great Game. The timely translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam into English was a re-birth of the Anglo- Persian relationship that cut across the narrow boundaries of power-politics and imperialism and saw Omar tossing goblets with Edward Fitz Gerald and both successfully created a beautiful garden of poetry whose fragrance reached the continents such as America and Asia. It was not an easy task for Fitz Gerald to translate the Rubaiyat of Khayyam into English. His labour of love induced him to undertake this project

and discover a poet of twelfth century Persia in the nineteenth century England. His understanding of Persian language and literature was indeed profound as he had already tried his hands at a major work: the Salaman and Absal of Jami in 1856. He gave a new life to the unnoticed, unheard, unsung and unseen Rubaiyat of Khayyam. His embellishments, poetic investments into and English treatment of the Persian Rubaiyat are praiseworthy which remind us of Caesar leaving Rome of bricks and Augustus turning it into that of stone. However it was a great contribution of an English poet to introduce a forgotten and neglected Persian poet to the world of poetry, thus making Omar Khayyam more celebrated beyond the frontiers of Persia.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam was painstaking translated into English by Edward Fitz Gerald within six months from July, 1857.<sup>1</sup> Fitz Gerald was a person who never cherished any expectation of reward neither in this world nor in the world hereafter. His obsession with poetry was so deep that he found poetry above religion and belief and he was a great believer in the truth of art for the sake of art. True the Rubaiyat were written by Khayyam but in the English rendering Fitz Gerald did not lag behind to express himself also. The voice of the poet-translator is at times more audible than the Persian poet in the work on anvil. In fact the Victorian England in the mid nineteenth century was highly materialistic and conservative at the same time. Fitz Gerald was sensitive against the currents and cross currents of the English

society. He therefore lived far away from the madding crowd of London where people were accustomed to Victorian norms and values and sensitive to commercial loss and gain in society. The Rubaiyat of Fitz Gerald was a rejoinder to them:

A like for those who for To-Day prepare,  
And those that after some To-Morrow stare,  
A Muezzin from the TOWER of Darkness cries,  
'Fools! Your Reward is neither Here nor There' 2

Of course Fitz Gerald never anticipated that his labour of love would pay rich dividends and impinge upon the course of development of literature in English. Unsold copies of the Rubaiyat were removed from the shelf of Bernard Quaritch and dumped into a penny box outside the Book-seller shop would attract the attention of Lord Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, Burn-Jones, Meredith, Ruskin, Robert Graves, Norton and last but not the least Rossetti. Wonder of all wonders it would be printed in edition after edition and would be sold like hot cakes at exorbitant prize. However, the translation of the Rubaiyat in English was a timely addition to the literatures in English and this shift has made bridges between cultures.

John Ruskin (1819-1900) was a critic of art and architecture in London. He was also a poet in his own right and had won the Newdigate prize for poetry.<sup>3</sup> When he read the One Penny Copy of the Rubaiyat, he wrote to Fitz Gerald:

My dear and Very dear Sir,

...translate some more of Omar Khayyam for us... More..more please more 4 Lord Alfred Tennyson was born in 1809 to G.C. Tennyson and Elizabeth Tennyson. He was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge. In Memoriam was the most important work of the poet which he began to write in 1834. He covered a long poetic journey which ended in 1892. He succeeded Wordsworth as the Poet Laureate of England.5 He was a good friend of Edward Fitz Gerald but never discovered a poet in him. When Tennyson read the Rubaiyat of Edward Fitz Gerald, he was full of admiration for the latter and his encouragement induced Fitz Gerald to embark upon the second edition of the Rubaiyat. Fitz Gerald mentions about Tennyson's response to the translation of the Rubaiyat in these words:

To think of Alfred's approving my Old Omar! I never should have thought he even knew of it. Certainly I should never have sent it to him. Always supposing that he would not approve anything but a literal translation.6

Robert Browning was born in 1812 in Camberwell, South London to a clerk of the Bank of England. He had a brief stint as a student in the newly founded London University. He began to write poetry from an early age and his lyrics are looked upon as the master piece of English literature. His collection of poems Men and Women earned him a wide popularity in English speaking world. His poems are tinged with mysticism. He passed away in Florence but he was laid to rest in the West-minister Abbey, England in 1889.7

Browning was a younger contemporary of Edward Fitz Gerald. He came under the influence of the Rubaiyat when he wrote his poem Rabbi Ben Ezra.<sup>8</sup> His poem shows remarkable impression of Fitz Gerald. It was Khayyam who brought and instituted the imagery of Pot or Potters in poetry. One is surprised to find the same in the poem of Browning which established the direct connectivity between Persian and English through the recently famed Rubaiyat. Browning says:

Any, note that Potter's wheel

That Metaphor! And feel

Why time spins fast, why passive lies one clay-

When the wine makes it round

"Since life fleets, all is change, the past gone, seize today."<sup>9</sup> Browning like Khayyam strikes the chord of carpe-diem in his verses. He knows that Time is a powerful force which rotates the universe and completes the cycle of life. A person should be active and respond to the phenomenon of changing time. He can feel the changes in life and accordingly respond to the changing phases of life. There is no point not to enjoy the fruits of youth and complaint against the fag end of life where in old age and infirmities raise their ugly heads. Like Khayyam, he finds a good deal of potentialities in Today and invariably he makes his best efforts to grab it. His approach to life is reminiscent of the following quatrain of Fitz Gerald:

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 Today be  
Sweet! 10

When Fitz Gerald was making new addition of his Rubaiyat Nicholas had already rendered the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam in French prose form and he had invested his work with spiritualism and introduced Omar more as a Sufi rather than poet to the Continent in 1867. But it made a slightest impact on Fitz Gerald. He always adhered to his view that a live sparrow was better than a stuffed eagle and took pride in his most musical and most melancholy version of the Rubaiyat of Khayyam in English 11. His work found way crossing the English Channel to America when Charles Eliot Norton wrote an article on the Rubaiyat in the North American Review October 1869: It's a work of a poet, inspired by the work of a poet; not a copy but a reproduction, not a translation, but a redelivery of a poetic inspiration.12

Fitz Gerald presented exotic motifs which crept into literature in English. One such writer, poet and critic was Robert Von Ranke Graves who was born on 24th July 1895 in London who came under the spell of Fitz Gerald. He has more than one hundred

and twenty works to his credit.<sup>13</sup> He was a British officer in World War I who saw the horrors of war and had an unhappy marriage which ended in 1920. He is remembered as one of translators of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam which is at variance with the Rubaiyat of Fitz Gerald. When Fitz Gerald's Rubaiis read as:

Here with a Loaf of Bread  
beneath the Bough  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse  
-and Though  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow <sup>14</sup>

Graves translates the Rubai in this fashion which is quite contemporary in its idiomatic expressions:

Should our day's portion be one mangel loaf  
A haunch of mutton and a gourd of wine<sup>15</sup>

Khayyam finds the potter as a maker, shaper and destroyer, Graves under Omerian influence finds the White Goddess as the creator, nourisher and finally killer. His preoccupation with Khayyam is very close.

Graves delves deep into the nature of matter and proves that form and exteriority may change but nature will remain unchanged. He also undertook a profound study of Sufism and wrote an erudite introduction to the book titled *The Sufis* by Idris Shah. He rightly pointed out that Islam is the Shell of Sufism.<sup>16</sup> When he said that "Sufi may be common in the West



as in the East, dressed as general a peasant, a merchant, a lawyer... in the world but not of it", he reminded us of Hafiz, the Persian poet who cherished and preached the same idea in the 15th century Iran. He says I am the slave of him who under the Azure sky, severs his relation with every colourful object and sets himself free in the world. His co-translator writes about the impact of Fitz Gerald's translation in the same book:

Khayyam was a great cult in England. His devotees formed clubs, planted roses from Nishapur on Fitz Gerald's grave, sought to emulate him in their poetry. 17

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam translated by Edward Fitz Gerald ran into five editions from 1859 to 1899. Obviously it has left a deep impact on literature in English. The pessimism and predestination percolated into English literature made an impact through the Rubaiyat on even Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde. Hardy has commented in novel The Mayor of Castabridge that happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of life. Similarly, Oscar Wilde drew a gloomy picture in his novel

The Picture of Dorian Gray. It shows Dorian Gray's surrounding becoming gloomier and gloomier when she was ailing more and more day by day.

On 25 March 1897 the Omar Khayyam Club met for dinner in London- an English tradition that continues till date. Sir George Robertson the hero of Chitral, "delighted the company by remarking that men of action were really dreamers and

sentimentalists and has chief pleasure in the mountains of Chitral was the reading of Omar Khayyam.18

**NOTES AND REFERENCES:**

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