

Wine of the Mystic
Paramahansa Yogananda's Spiritual Interpretation of
Fitzgerald's *The Rubbaiyat*

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to see how the geographical, religious and cultural boundaries of Persia, England and India vanish in Sri Paramahansa Yogananda's philosophic and mystical interpretation of the first edition of FitzGerald's translation (or to put in his own words—'transmogrifying') of The Rubbaiyat of Omar Khayyam leading the readers into an endless labyrinth of spiritual truth.

“Paroksha Vâda Rishayaha
Paroksham mama cha priyam”

Canto XI:Part II — Chap 21:35

Srimad Bhagavatham

Paramahansa Yogananda, a renowned spiritual leader of the twentieth century was a disciple of Sri Yukteswar Giri, a great master of Yoga. He spent ten years in his hermitage before receiving the formal vows of a sanyasi of the venerable monastic swami order. He learnt from a Persian poet that Persian poetry, like the Sanskrit scriptures, also has two meanings—the literal and the metaphoric, ‘an inner and one outer’ (Yogananda 1997:vii). Having had good exposure to symbolic poetry along with sound knowledge of yoga, when Sri Yogananda read FitzGerald's translation of the *Rubaiyyat* of Omar Khayyam, he felt that the “outer meanings crumble away” and the poetic work comes as,

a dream castle of truth, which can be seen by any penetrating eye... a haven for many shelter-seeking souls invaded by enemy armies of ignorance.

(Yogananda 1997:vii)

Edward FitzGerald's translation, rather adaptation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyyat*, is available in about two hundred editions which speaks of its enduring popularity throughout the world. Translating (or to put in his own words—'transmogrifying') the *Rubaiyyat* in 1860s, Edward FitzGerald initiated the veritable Fitz-Omar cult. FitzGerald was of the contention that the "...translator is one who paraphrases the original work while conserving the author's spirit" (qtd. in Ali-Shah 1967:10). He had no high regard for the Persian poets; according to him, they needed "a little Art to shape them" (Briggs 1998:xvii). Taking liberties with, he transformed the *Rubaiyyat* for amusement. His translation led the western world to believe that Khayyam was more of a reveler and his mystical work got labeled as a drunkard's rambling. However, one needs to acknowledge that it was FitzGerald who brought fame to Omar who was till then merely known as an astronomer and mathematician.

It is already an accepted fact that no two translators can ever arrive at the same version and "...if a dozen translators tackle the same poem, they will produce a dozen different versions" (Bassnett 2003:33). The sustained interest in *Rubaiyyat* led to hundreds of editions of the text with many variations and almost a century later in 1967, Robert Graves collaborating with a Sufi poet and scholar Omar Ali-Shah published a new version from the manuscript handed down in Ali-Shah's family. Graves had several reasons to depreciate FitzGerald's translation. Graves claimed that only he has translated the most authoritative *Rubaiyyat* which was the family manuscript of the Sufi poet and classical Persian scholar Omar Ali-Shah and that in their version they freed the *Rubaiyyat* "of all accretions, interpolations and misunderstandings". Graves went on to question George Saintsbury, an acclaimed critic of the early twentieth century who praised FitzGerald's work as a magnificent work, accusing him of being "blind

to Fitzgerald's obvious shortcomings to verse craftsmanship" (Ali-Shah 1967:11). He quoted instances of conceptual errors. Besides these, Graves finds unacceptable 'accretions' and also deliberate omission of stanzas which give clue to the fact that Khayyam was a Sufi. And Omar Ali-Shah under whose surveillance Graves translated, goes on to instruct that,

'Khayyam' should be treated as a generic term for a Sufi way of teaching which is necessarily misleading unless learned with the guidance of an accepted sheikh.

(Ali-Shah 1967:45).

Whatever the justifications, it was not the work of Graves but only the first edition of FitzGerald that was found fit for the philosophic and mystical interpretation of Paramahansa Yogananda. Though he attempted another literal translation with the help of a Persian scholar, he found the 'fiery spirit' of FitzGerald missing in his work.

When we read the western critics or translators, one finds certain striking similarities even in the choice of words and metaphors when poets, especially mystic poets, talk of divine experience.

The recurrent reference to wine had already been acknowledged by the western scholars as a mystical vocabulary to refer to the intoxication of divine love. The imagery of wine is clearly translated as a vitalizing divine bliss. Paramahansa Yogananda equates it to 'god intoxication' and in stanza XLVIII, the phrase 'Ruby Vintage' is interpreted as 'Wine of *Samadhi*'. This wine of divine bliss must be quaffed to enable one to forget the ignoble past.

Since Yogananda has undergone the scientific discipline of Yoga, he could give an unparalleled interpretation unveiling completely "the spiritual truths behind Omar's enigmatic symbolism" (Yogananda 1969:xxi). The phrase 'Sev'n ring'd Cup' instantaneously makes him perceive that it is "the cerebrospinal receptacle with its seven ring-like centers of consciousness" which are defined by the Yogic treatises as '*Chakras*' (wheels) or '*padmas*' (lotuses) or 'spokes' or 'petals',

explicated with ease. 'Time and Fate' are 'death and *karma*' and in stanza XXIII death is presented as,

Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,
Sans Wine, *sans* Song, *sans* Singer, and—*sans* End.
(Yogananda 1969:43)

'*sans* end' is a belief in the Indian thought where birth and death are considered as an endless cycle "as souls bound by the law of karma reincarnation new bodies, life after life" (Yogananda 1969:44).

In another context the parallel is between 'Aum' vibration in meditation and 'Amen' which is the Word of God in Bible (John 1:1). In stanza XXXIV, Khayyam talks of the need for a drink 'for once dead you never shall return' (68). Death often makes us think of a lifeless body. To a Yogi it is a state when the individual soul is completely free—without any "residual seeds of actions or stored-up tendencies for future lives" (68). This state is the state of 'samadi'. In this context Sri Yogananda gets a chance to bring out the subtle difference between 'sabikalpa' and 'nirbikalpa samadhi'—the former is condition where the soul is lost in God consciousness 'oblivious of cosmic creation' and the latter where in the absence of ego, the devotee "intuitively feels in bodily 'bowl' the Well of eternal Life" (69).

In the Hindu philosophy 'lilâ' is the term used to refer to entire creation which is a cosmic dance or a drama. Khayyam has used the metaphor of game to refer to the creator's 'lilâ' in stanza XLV "Make game of that which makes as much of Thee" (89). The concept of 'mâya' or the cosmic illusion is conveyed in XLVI where Khayyam calls the creation 'Magic Shadow-show' where we 'Phantom figures come and go' (90). The 'River Brink' (XLVIII) (95) is identified as the "current of life force in the *sushumna*, the astral spine insulated within the spinal cord" (96). And the 'Chequer-board' where destiny plays with men is the law of karma which removes at will people from the 'Checker board of life'.

This extraordinary work of spiritual interpretation ends with stanza LXXV:

And when Thyself with shining Foot shall pass
 Among the Guests Star-scatter'd on the Grass,
 And in thy joyous Errand reach the Spot
 Where I made one—turn down an empty Glass! (145)

In this stanza Khayyam imparts his wisdom to all the mortals to empty their wine glass of delusions and allow their self to pass through the luminous astral region to reach the core of cosmic consciousness when all the divisions and circumscriptions would vanish allowing one to experience “universal brotherhood with all life; and thence attains everlasting union with the One Life” (147).

In continuation of this philosophic interpretation, Sri Yogananda's short piece titled “Omar's Dream-Wine of Love” is made available in the text. Here he elevated Omar Khayyam's work as a ‘Scripture of Love’. He pictures the journey of a human soul trapped in many roles such as an infant, child, man, mother, master, servant, guru-preceptor and endlessly in quest of the finite love, reaching the stage of absence of want when one is “in love with love—with God—alone.” (150) One who has experienced God's love no more loves individuals but realizing God's presence everywhere begins to love him ‘equally *in* all’ and ‘equally *as* all’ (151). In the concluding remarks to the explication of stanza XXXI, with authority, he declares that Omar Khayyam is advanced in “the path of yoga—not of wine!” (Yogananda 1969:62).

Thus we see how the geographical, religious and cultural boundaries of Persia, England and India vanish in Sri Yogananda's mystical interpretation. We find ourselves being led into an endless labyrinth of spiritual truth. But for the ‘divinely inspired writings of FitzGerald’ this insightful interpretation by this renowned Indian Yogi would not have been available to the spiritual seekers of the world.

References

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