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MYSTIC PHILOSOPHY OF OMAR KHAYYAM, THE GREAT PERSIAN GENIUS

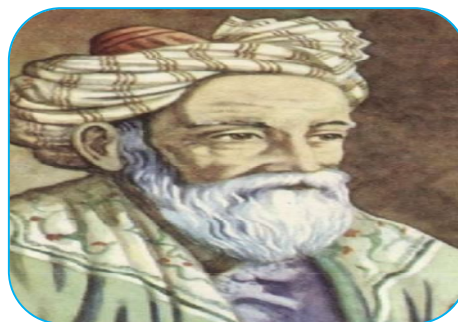
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ABSTRACT

Omar Khayyam the great Persian polymath has earned universal recognition in varied branches of human activities and knowledge. He is not only confined to Persia or the Orient. His couplets known as Rubayyat have earned worldwide popularity. He has shown a propensity to transcend the narrow confines of time and space. The rationalistic erudition which was combined with his extraordinary poetic talent was not just significant to the Persians and its neighbour. It also created ripples in the Indian subcontinent as well. The popularity of Khayyam as a poet still continued in the twentieth century South Asia when Persian ceased to exist as a dominant language of high culture in the sub continental context. We have translated versions of Omar's poetry in different South Asian languages including Assamese and Bengali. The philosophy of Khayyam about God, Universe, Man, life after death and Nature are of immense importance. In this paper an attempt has been made to bring into light the different aspects of the philosophy of Omar Khayyam through his beautiful Quatrains.



KEYWORDS: Rubayyat, philosophy, God, reality, Persian etc.

INTRODUCTION

Omar Khayyam, the great mystic poet philosopher, greatest mathematicians, encyclopaedic scholar, astronomers and physicians was one of the distinguished products of the Iranian renaissance during the Seljuq rule. His complete name was Ghiyasuddin Abu'l Fath Umar ibn Ibrahim Khayyam (1048 A.D.-1131).¹ He was born at Nishapur in Khorasan, Iran. It is known that many Persian poets derive their names from their occupations. Thus we have "Attar", a druggist. Omar thought to have been born into a family of tent makers. Khayyam means 'tent makers'. It is a byname derived from the father's craft. Khayyam signifies a tent maker. He is said to have exercised that trade at one time. Khawaja Nizami Aurizi Samarqandi the reknowned author of the celebrated book *Chahar Maqala*, was his pupil. He relates to a very interesting story which worth mentioning here. "I often used to hold conversation with my teacher, 'Omar Khayyam, in a garden; and one day he said to me, 'my tomb shall be in a spot where the north wind may scatter roses over it".² Further narrates that it was just outside a garden, and trees laden with fruit stretched their boughs on the garden wall, and dropped their flowers upon his tomb, so that the stone was hidden under them. ³

Nizami Uruzi Samarqandi, assigns him in the ranks of astrologers and a writer per excellence. At present Khayyam is known to us as a scholar of philosophy, mathematics, jurisprudence, history and

science. His works in all the mentioned fields have been translated into numerous languages of the world. He was at home in Arabic besides Persian. He used to prove scientific problems. Having recognised his expertise in the field of different branches of science Sultan Malik Shah Seljuki and his minister Nizam ul Mulk Tusi appointed him to be the head of the Council of Scholars commissioned to reform the calendar. According to Rypka the success of this work made his name famous. He used to predict events to come for which he was highly esteemed.⁴

His significance as a philosopher and teacher, and his few remaining philosophical works has not received the same attention as his scientific and poetic writings. The famous historian, Al-Zamakhshari referred to him as “the philosopher of the world”. Many sources have testified that he taught for decades the philosophy of Avicenna (*Ibn Sina*) in Nishapur where Khayyam was born and buried and where his mausoleum today remains a masterpiece of Iranian Architecture visited by many people every year.⁵

The fame of Khayyam particularly rests on his Rubaiyat or Quatrains. Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883) an English scholar with the able assistance of his master Professor E.B. Cowell rendered the quatrains of Omar Khayyam into English. With this the name of Khayyam as a poet of excellence became popular in the western world as well as in other parts of the world. In Assamese also we have versions of translation of the Quatrains of Khayyam. His Quatrains are also rendered in different Indian languages of India including Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Maitheli, etc. Rypka says, “In Europe and America he is in fact the most famous oriental poets.⁶ He is also of the opinion that through the publications of interpretations of Khayyam’s works by western scholars, more specifically Edward Fitz Gerald he acquired or regained a reputation as a poet in Iran as well.⁷

Mystic philosophy of Omar Khayyam:

Different great scholars have analysed the hidden thoughts and contents of the quatrains of Khayyam. Khayyam was a staunch philosopher and wine was one of the important components of his verses which he used in sanctity and piety and complete devotion in the path of reality and abstraction from the materialistic world. Khayyam considered wine as a part of the ancient culture of Iran and consequently, talks much about indulging wine. Simultaneous to the rise of Islam in Iran, there was an increasing influence of the Semitic culture. It was in Persia where wine had been invented during the reign of emperor Jamshed and consequently, a special festival “*Navruz*” was celebrated to mark the occasion. Every year, on “*Navruz*”, barrels of old wine were opened and drinking parties were organised. The Aryan conscience of Khayyam could not tolerate this disregard to wine and ancient civilization. Thus Khayyam's use of wine is a symbol of challenge to the Semitic culture. A portion of his quatrains compels us to assume that his philosophy is the philosophy of that of the common men leaving aside the religious orthodoxies and narrow mindedness. Khayyam enunciated a comprehensive, matter of fact and a kind of a practical philosophy through his quatrains. Some of the scholars are of the opinion that Khayyam was influenced by the Buddhist philosophy and thoughts. He is also said to have been influenced by the *Charvaka* and the *Sankhya* doctrines of the Indian thought. Khayyam realised joy and happiness in beautiful things and experienced ecstasy in doing so.

Sadiq Hedayat a celebrated and legendary figure in the corpus of modern Persian literature is of the opinion that Omar Khayyam in the light of his quatrains tried his best to forward the solutions of different problems and puzzles of the natural life of the human being. In a very straight forward and uncomplicated expression he concentrated in the expression of the bitter realities of human life. Based on his observations and materialistic courses of human life he tried to solve problems related to life and death.

However, there have been widely divergent views on Khayyam. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr no other Iranian writer/scholar is viewed in such extremely differing ways. At one end of the spectrum there are nightclubs named after Khayyam, and he is seen as an agnostic hedonist in the same manner as that of Brhaspati, the founder of the Charvaka, the materialistic school of Indian philosophy that lays emphasis on eats, drink and be merry.⁸

Khayyam has put forward an important philosophical ideology about the essence and value of life. He advised us to enjoy life to the utmost, leave in pleasure forgetting sorrows and grief. He says in a poem....

*"Oh' my friend! Let us not worry about the future,
And avail and enjoy this moment of life,
Tomorrow, when we shall depart from this mortal world, we shall be
Among those who have been buried seven thousand years ago."*

In another poem he says,
*"Don't think of yesterday which has already passed,
Don't make hue and cry about future which has not yet come
Don't make your basis on the past and future
Be happy at present and not waste your life"*

Khayyam as we know was a poet with nationalist ideologies. He always had ample respect and honour to the glorified civilization of his native land and was felt extreme proud of it. This was the reason why he lamented in the memory of the ancient emperors of Persia. Jamshed and Bahram who are considered to be among the pioneers of ancient Persia were the mighty emperors of ancient civilization. Omar Khayyam has chosen his Rubayyat for conveying his messages and beliefs about creation, the Being Cosmos and Man for posterity. Omar Khayyam's Thoughts in connection with the Creator, Creation, the Universe and the role of Man, as the symbol of Being or Creation; the very simple and natural questions, however, always were not and are not as simple and natural questions.

According to Rezaazadeh Shafaq the noted Persian literary historian in his book *Tarikh-e-Adabiyat Iran* remarked about Omar in the following manner:

"The first hearty passion of the poet (Khayyam) is from the ignorance and unawareness of human being towards the secret of The Creation and enigma of the Universe. Nobody gave us any information about where we came from and where we are going to; what is the life, with such scuffle, and why this caravan of men (and woman) pave this by- way of life, with such grief..."

Zabihallah Safa, another distinguished Professor of Persian language and literature in his book *Tarikh-e- Adabiyat Dar Iran* have elaborated his opinion about the perception of Hakim Umar Khayyam from Creation, Creator and the Universe as follows:

"In these poems (Rubayyat) Khayyam states his philosophical thoughts which are mostly on matters such as perplexity of a thinker, a philosopher in the teeth of the secrets of the Creation and his passion from the invisibility of the fate and predestination of man and the shortness of Life and its scourges. He does not believe in the Resurrection Day, as the theologians believe. And as he thinks that doom of the Sons of Adam cannot be compensated, he intends to indemnify it with the momentary pleasures. Although Khayyam has not been neglected from criticising his society and its social order severely in his Rubayyat, he has in particular attacked the hypocritical religious Ulemas of his time who have had a splendid position with a magnificent dignity in the hierarchy of power."

There are three sources of Khayyam's philosophy. The first one is his scientific works, second is his philosophical texts and the third is his poetry. He establishes that God, the only Necessary Being, is good, all powerful and creator of all things. He even treats the delicate problem of the resurrection. This he does more philosophically which shows the 'totalitarian' character of the metaphysical wisdom of Khayyam. The treatise written in Arabic "*al-Risalah fi'l kawn wa'l- taklif* (Treatise on the Realm of Existence and Human Responsibility) is one of Khayyam's substantial philosophical writings in which he mentions Ibn Sina explicitly as his master.⁹

The Treatise consists of answers provided by Khayyam to a number of questions sent to him by Abu Nasr Nasawi, the judge of the province of Fars concerning the creation of the world and man's responsibility toward his Creator. Khayyam who in all of his works was to the point by stating that the subject of philosophy, is essentially the response to three questions: Whether something is and why is it and what it is. The answer to the first question leads in the discussion of being (*wujud*), the second quiddity (*mahiyyah*) and the third causality (*illiyah*). Then he directs his attention to ontology

following Ibn Sina closely in discussing the descending and ascending arcs of existence and the hierarchic chain of being.¹⁰

Khayyam is of the opinion that God created all existences in an ordered and regulated series, which gradually by stages lead up to Him. The first emanation or creation is pure Reason. It is the highest and the best, because it is nearer to God. In the same way He created material existences in a graded series which descends from the highest to the lowest, until it ends in the lowest form of materiality, which constitutes the Universe of Change. Later on, this change and series of material existences ascends from the lower to the higher. The former is called the Arc of Descent and the later is the Arc of Ascent. The last and the highest member of this series is Man, who is the highest so far as composite existences are concerned and the last, so far as materiality, is concerned.¹¹

Khayyam then turns to the question of responsibility towards both God and His creatures, which according to him, has been put within the very substance of man through the act of his creation. Being what he is, man is in need of others and therefore bears responsibility towards them. Khayyam also speaks of the necessity of prophecy. The prophets are the most perfect of all men and can therefore propagate and promulgate divine laws among men in justice. As far as differences in men in virtue and evil character are concerned, Khayyam relates them on the one hand to the difference of temperaments, and on the other to the different make ups of their souls.¹²

Khayyam plays with the notion of life after death in a Variety of ways. First, he casts doubts on the very existence; second he says that based on our very experience in this world, all things seem to perish and not return. Some of his poems play with the idea of transmigration of the soul. This is more symbolic than actual; in numerous poems he tells us that we turn to dust and it is from our dust that other living things rise. According to him the soul in this world can both act and know. At the moment of death, it is cut off from both acting on the world and knowing it will take with it only the fruits of its actions and the knowledge which it has gained of spiritual matters while on this earthly journey.¹³

In the cosmic and universal sense, our presence in this world and our exit is predetermined, a condition that Khayyam bemoans throughout his *Rubaiyyat*. The second sense of determinism is socio-economic, which is rarely addressed by Muslim philosophers. Khayyam observed: God created the human species such that it is not possible for it to survive and reach perfection unless it is through reciprocity, assistance, and help. Finally there is "ontological determinism," which relies on a Neoplatonic scheme of emanation which Khayyam considers to be "among the most significant and complex of all questions," since "the order of the world is in accordance to how the wisdom of God decreed it." He continues, "Necessity is a command which is issued from God Most High, so people may attain those perfections that lead them to happiness."¹⁴

Duty or responsibility is a command which emanates from God. These commands lead men towards perfection and spiritual well-being, here and hereafter. They prevent men from obedience to bodily pleasure, from injustice to highhandedness, from malpractices and the acquisition of shortcomings which hamper the exercise of intellectual faculties. God has so created mankind that the majority of human beings can neither have, nor attain to, the perfectness in nature, without co-operation and mutual help from each other. As society is based on co-operation human being felt the necessity of a body of law, in order to establish the reign of justice and equality. This law however can only emanate from a person who is spiritually pure and intellectually strong. Such person attends only to that which is absolutely necessary for existence.¹⁵

Hakim Omar Khayyam by his insight into the role of man in the Universe and Creation i.e. a very tiny part of the Cosmos that his being and not being does not have any effect at all, advises men and women, who for such a very short span of time live in the world, to utilize the graces and blessings of life which they are endowed with, and pay deep attention to whatever they have that match their requirements for such a short moment that they live in this dusty Earth. Hakim Omar Khayyam, believes that Man is the main source and fountain-head of Being which has come to existence from naught, while he emphasized that nobody knows that how and when it has happened and whatever is said in this regard has been merely a word of insanity, since nobody knew anything about the nature of it. According to Omar Khayyam all men and women are trying to find out the secret of Creation and

exhaust all their abilities in order to fulfil this wish, but do not reach to any considerable result and therefore begin to say something irrelevant, untrue and false; they orate a lot, by way of their helplessness and propagate their own beliefs and nothing else, since the reality is that nobody has any reliable news and information about this enigma.

Khayyam is also concerned with the question of God's knowledge of the world, a question which has concerned nearly all Islamic philosophers throughout the ages. He asserts that knowledge of 'ilm' is a quality of existence or *wujud* upon all creatures. He knows all of His creation simply by virtue of having brought them into being. As for *wujud*, it is itself an attitude of the Divine Reality (*al-Haqq*) and identical to its Essence. Divine Essence, is also none other than emanation. Divine Knowledge is the same as the presence of God in all beings. Since God is the emanative cause of all exists, He knows both these existents and the relations subsisting between them.

Omar is of the opinion that the ultimate aim of human being, same as the aim purpose of the existence of any other creatures, is to reach to its perfection stage; as the purpose of a plant is to produce its fruit. And passing the days and years of the passing life, in a constant and endless war for survival and existence- vital concurrence- is the aim of an animal. Moreover, as he thought that life is incomplete and unfinished, he emphatically asks men and women to grasp the provided opportunity to them and to get whatever they can get from their passing life and time, in a correct, rightful and free way, without annoying others. He has benefited from the sweetest contents:

*"Though the world is tricked out for you,
Do not make for what the wise shun;
Many like you come and many go,
Snatch your lot as they will snatch you."*¹⁶

*"Rise up O beloved! For the sake of our heart,
To solve our trouble with your charm;
Bring a jug of wine to drink with me,
Before they make jugs from our dust."*¹⁷

Omar Khayyam, while encouraging people to take benefit from the blessings of the world regardless the intimidation of those preachers who do not practise what they preach, regarding the dreadful agony of in the next world. He invites people to: contentment, modesty, magnanimity of temper and avoiding violation of the portion of others from the world and finally moderation and spreading justice in the community:

*"If you try to seek that much of the worldly goods,
Which you need for use, you are excused;
The remaining all, will not be worth receiving free,
Beware! Do not barter your precious life for them."*¹⁸

CONCLUSION:

Khayyam adopted some of the doctrines of earlier philosophers, reconstructed them in a form adaptable to his own cultural environment. He maintains that philosophy is essentially one unit. Religious truth and philosophical truth are objectively one although formally different. Khayyam himself being a poet, scientist and philosopher encompasses some modern and even contemporary notions. He elevates the intellect to a plane so sacred that he is driven to its conciliation with tradition so that philosophy and religion may accord. Omar as true Sufi, and his poem as mystical one in which profoundly religious impulses and doctrines are conveyed in a series of figures wherein the drunkenness lauded by Omar is to be read as rapture of Divine Love, and the Wine which causes it as Divine Mercy. He is known for his beautiful literary creation in the form of *Rubayyat* and he will be remembered forever for his immortal creation in the literary arena of the world literature.

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