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Emrah ATASOY

Assist. Prof. Dr., Cappadocia
University / Turkey
emrah.atasoy@kapadokya.edu.tr



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5008-2636>

A Victorian Interpretation of *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm* by Edward FitzGerald

Edward FitzGerald'ın Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm Eserinde Victoria Dönemi Yansımaları

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Abstract

Edward FitzGerald's translation of Omar Khayyam's ruba'i in his work, *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm* (1859) demonstrates stark differences from the actual work of Omar Khayyam. FitzGerald's translation or re-writing includes numerous themes and characteristics such as pessimism, skepticism, loss of faith, brevity, transience, ephemerality of life, hedonism, Epicureanism, materialism, and cynicism peculiar to the Victorian era. In this respect, FitzGerald's literary work does not communicate the underlying features of Khayyam's poetry, but illustrates the concerns, anxieties, doubts, and the mainstream mood of the Victorian era, an age of duality. This study will, therefore, discuss to what extent FitzGerald's *Rubaiyat* is a Victorian invention. Prior to the discussion, brief information about the poet, Omar Khayyam will be given. Then, through specific references from the work and the explication of domestication and foreignization strategies in translation, it will be ultimately argued that FitzGerald's translation does not communicate the Persian poet Omar Khayyam's rich literary legacy, but is adapted or re-formulated in order to reflect upon the Victorian period.

Keywords: Edward FitzGerald, Omar Khayyam, Victorian era, *Rubâiyât*, translation

Öz

Edward FitzGerald'in çevirmiş olduğu *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm* (1859) başlıklı eser, Ömer Hayyam'ın orijinal eserinden çok büyük farklılıklar göstermektedir. FitzGerald'in çevirisi, karamsarlık, şüphecilik, inanç kaybı, fanilik, hayatın kısalığı, hedonizm, Epikürcülük, maddecilik ve sinizm gibi Victoria dönemini yansıtan özellikler ve temalar taşımaktadır. FitzGerald, eseri sadece tercüme etmekle kalmamış onu adeta yeniden yazmıştır. Bu bağlamda, FitzGerald'in edebî eseri, Hayyam'ın şiirinin temel özelliklerini yansıtmamakta; aksine, zıtlıkların çağı olan Victoria döneminin kaygılarını, endişelerini, insanların genel ruhsal durumunu ve toplumdaki atmosferi ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma, bu anlamda FitzGerald'in *Rubâiyât* eserinin Victoria dönemini ne kadar yansıttığını tartışacaktır. Tartışma öncesinde, Ömer Hayyam hakkında kısa biyografik bilgi verilecektir. Daha sonra, eserden spesifik örnekler ile "yerleştirme" (domestication) ve "yabancılaştırma" (foreignization) çeviri stratejileri tartışması üzerinden, FitzGerald'in çevirisinin Ömer Hayyam'ın edebî mirasından ve şiirinden ziyade Victoria dönemini yansıtmak üzere yeniden uyarlandığı ve o doğrultuda ortaya konduğu tartışılıp kanıtlanacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Edward FitzGerald, Ömer Hayyam, Victoria devri, *Rubâiyât*, çeviri

Introduction

Many European and American poets look beyond the Western literary canon for inspiration. The English poet and writer Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883), a figure influenced by the literary cultures of other geographies, found his inspiration in the literature of the East. He was highly influenced by Omar Khayyam, the Persian scientist, mathematician and poet. FitzGerald translated Khayyam's *Rubâiyât* into English or, in other words, produced his own poetry that reflects the characteristic features of the Victorian era. Although FitzGerald is referred to as the translator of Khayyam's work, it is open to discussion whether it is right to call him a translator. He actually presents his own ideas and emotions regarding life, death and his own age in his translation. He takes Khayyam as a source of inspiration and creates his own poetry highlighting the dominant mood of his age. One might expect to learn about Khayyam's poetry by looking at the title of the work, *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm* (1859); however, it turns out that FitzGerald conveys his own perspective through Omar Khayyam and his stance towards his age, the Victorian era. This study will, therefore, discuss to what extent FitzGerald's *Rubâiyât* is a Victorian invention, touching on pessimism and skepticism of its age by dealing with the prevailing mood of the period. Prior to discussion, however, brief information about the poet, Omar Khayyam will be given. Then, through specific references from the work and explication of domestication and foreignization strategies in translation, it will be ultimately argued that FitzGerald's translation does not communicate the poet Omar Khayyam's rich literary legacy, but it is adapted or re-formulated in order to reflect upon the Victorian period.

The Victorian period was a period of transformation and transition marked by numerous scientific and technological developments. To give an example, revolutionary scientific studies such as Darwin's work, "On the Origin of Species" (1859) caused people to question their ingrained beliefs and ideas, especially about religion. With respect to this transition in the Victorian period, Michael Timko states that "never before had men thought of their own time as an era of change *from* the past to the future" (1975: 610). Under the strong influence of such dramatic developments and changes, people needed to adapt to their new lives.

Furthermore, there was a gradual shift from optimism to pessimism, which was likely due in part to mechanization, dehumanization, and a waning belief in progress. This shift brought with it a disruption of traditional values. The Victorian man was expected to work hard "at the highly individualistic task of absorbing the new science, the new philosophies, the new social conditions, and achieving, against the continued flux of things, an inward integrity" (Valerie, 1962: 251). FitzGerald as a Victorian poet influenced by these social improvements chose an exotic figure, Omar Khayyam to communicate his feelings and ideas about his own age, which was not a coincidental choice. Before analyzing FitzGerald's Khayyam, however, it is important to introduce

the real Omar briefly in order to comprehend the differences between the real poet and FitzGerald's version of him.

Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), the Persian poet, mathematician, philosopher and poet, was born in Naishapur in Khorasan. He was a "cautious, withdrawn man, reluctant to clash openly with accepted beliefs," which is a very different image from that of the Victorian Omar¹ (Dashti, 1971: 43). His life was influenced by certain figures of his time such as Nizam-ul-Mulk, Malik Shah the Grandson of Toghrul Beg the Tartar, and Vizier to Alp Arslan the Son (FitzGerald, 2003: 27). As can be seen, he was close to many of the important figures of the time. Khayyam received an education in philosophy, science and astronomy. The time period in which he lived was a period of religious, cultural and political confrontation in the aftermath of the decay of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad.

Omar was respected both politically and religiously. Although FitzGerald creates a hedonistic Omar, this does not reflect the reality. Zare-Behtash comments on this point as follows:

What should seem surprising to foreign readers of the *Rubaiyat*, who have an Epicurean and hedonist image of Omar Khayyam at the back of their minds, is the fact that Omar enjoyed the highest social and religious respect of his society and was accorded religious honours throughout his life (1994: 46).

As can be understood from this quotation, Omar was not an isolated figure. He did not seclude himself from the society and was not a recluse. On the contrary, he had a good reputation in the eyes of the people at the time. Hence, it is possible to argue that FitzGerald's Khayyam does not match with the personality of the real figure, but, is instead a character of FitzGerald's creation, a Victorian invention which he developed using domestication and foreignization strategies.

These two strategies are important in order to gain a better understanding of FitzGerald's work. Domestication can be defined as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (Venuti, 1995: 20). Venuti stresses that the translator erases the sense of foreignness and creates a recognizable and familiarized text, which is adjusted to the target text's cultural and linguistic dimensions (1995: 20). On the other hand, foreignization regards "the source text as the only objective reality of a literary work" and the aim of its followers is "to transfer the original idea of the text as exactly as possible—without any additional interpretations, explanations or adaptations" (Vid, 2008: 2). In this

¹ Omar Khayyam in FitzGerald's translation is referred to as "the Victorian Omar" within the context of this study.

strategy, the translator is expected to preserve “the foreign identity of the source text, i.e. to keep linguistic and cultural differences in the translation” (Vid, 2008: 2).

Domestication and foreignization can be also used simultaneously in one work. FitzGerald’s *Rubâiyât* draws on these two strategies, which can be observed in his choice of words. He does not change certain words such as “Sultan,” “Caravanserai,” and “Muezzin.” These words most probably do not signify much to the English reader since they are not part of the constitutive characteristics of their culture. As can be seen, FitzGerald blends these two strategies in his work, which transforms his work ultimately into a Victorian invention.

In this work, it is possible to observe certain themes and subjects that are evocative of the Victorian era. For instance, transience, pessimism and skepticism are the dominant themes in this period, which are highlighted in *Rubâiyât*. The speaker constantly emphasizes the transience and ephemerality of this life. He is skeptical towards religion, which probably stems from the emerging scientific developments at the time. Thus, the text presents “an Oriental figure whose heightened awareness of stimuli leads to philosophical wisdom and scientific achievement” (Çelikkol, 2013 :554). In a similar vein, Wilmer points out that FitzGerald “is addressing the doubts and desires of his mid-Victorian readership” (2011:49)

It can be useful to have brief background information about Edward FitzGerald (1809-1883) before examining his *Rubâiyât*. FitzGerald, born as Edward Purcell, was interested in the literature of the Middle East. He was dubious about religion, which can be seen in his letters to John Allen:

The other night when I lay in bed feeling my head get warmer and warmer, I felt that if I should pray to some protector for relief, I should be relieved: but I have not yet learned the certainty of there being any. It is a melancholy thing that the want of happiness and security caused by scepticism is no proof of the truth of religion. (FitzGerald qtd. in Zare-Behtash, 1994: 15)

It is possible that he wished to believe in a divine power, but he could not be sure about God’s existence, which led to his questioning.

Moreover, FitzGerald experienced ambiguity and dilemmas in his life. His life and poetic career were influenced by his time: “[They] strikingly reflect the gradual transition of Victorian England from a culture of production to a commodity culture” (Riede, 2005: 188). Accordingly, his life was marked by duality and dilemma between two different aspects. In the light of this brief biographical information, it is also possible to observe the traces of his skepticism in *Rubaiyat*.

FitzGerald’s *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm* reflects Victorian values rather than those of Persian society. Zare-Behtash states that *Rubâiyât* is “the archetypal Victorian poem. It has dramatic form through its invented persona of Omar; it has mysticism,

Epicureanism, melancholy, loss of faith, anxiety about the future, and unfamiliar exoticism as well” (1994: 183). The presence of these thematic elements makes the work more of a re-creation than a faithful translation of the real *Rubaiyat*.

FitzGerald’s work focuses on indifference, another trademark of the Victorian period. The notion that life is transient and people are ephemeral is a major theme of *Rubâiyât*. Matthew Reynolds states that “John Keat’s *Don Juan* and Edward FitzGerald’s *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm*—turn out to be pervaded by and valuing of indifference such that they really deserve to be called poems of *indifference*” (2006: 531). The speaker is presented as the one who delights in sensual pleasure. He is indifferent to what happens in life by not taking them seriously as he is highly aware that life is fleeting. This indifference can be regarded as a characteristic of the Victorian era. This work in this regard gives “a new twist to a widespread mid-Victorian preoccupation, the problem of striking an appropriate balance between memory and oblivion” (Gray, 2001: 765). The period shifted from optimism to pessimism, which gradually led to indifference and oblivion towards life as people lost their faith in the notion of progress.

Furthermore, FitzGerald’s Khayyam enjoys living each day without thinking about the past and the future, which stems from his awareness of the transience of life. He therefore wants to enjoy life as much as possible:

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend;
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and –sans End! (FitzGerald, 2003:
No. 24)

The speaker expresses his belief that all people will return to dust. No one is immortal; therefore, one should become conscious of this fact and begin to know how to take pleasure out of life and the present. One should make the most out of life through sensual pleasures like wine and song, as has been pointed out in the lines. After all, death will catch people someday since there is no escape from it. This can be clarified through the Victorian sense of pessimism because the Victorian man lost his faith in the notion of development towards the end of the period, probably due to the dehumanizing effects of the age. Such pessimism possibly led to people’s desire for escapist entertainment.

FitzGerald’s Khayyam is skeptical towards the divine power, as he talks about the loss of faith, which is another characteristic of the Victorian age. This skepticism, the prevailing mood in this period, can be interpreted as “not intellectual Doubt, but moral Doubt; all sorts of infidelity, insincerity, spiritual paralysis” (Carlyle, 1899: 14). People were no longer faithful, which probably stemmed from the newly emerging ideas,

scientific or ideological. People started questioning existence and tried to understand the mystery of existence, but they could not reach a satisfactory solution, which can be also observed in FitzGerald's Khayyam:

Earth coul't not answer; nor the Seas that mourn
 In flowing Purple, of their Lord forlorn;
 Nor rolling Heaven, with all his Signs reveal'd
 And hidden by the sleeve of Night and Morn. (FitzGerald, 2003: No: 33)

Omar is in search for the reality behind these mysteries; however, he is unable to find the reality in nature. Earth and the seas do not show him the real picture. His word choice demonstrates his emphasis on impermanence, which can be detected in words like "flowing" and "rolling." Since he cannot attain the reality, FitzGerald's Khayyam turns to drink, which earned him the reputation of a hedonist in the West, but this inclination toward bodily delights does not communicate the reality about the Omar from history. What FitzGerald's readers encounter instead is a Victorian invention.

The *rubai* form is also functional in revealing and highlighting the skepticism of the time. It allows Omar to "indulge in satire, parody, veiled jokes sometimes taken as serious observations by critics, and in piety as well as scepticism" (Hassani Jewett, 1977: 74). Although *rubai* is short and concise, its content is comprehensive and touches on various issues such as the ephemerality and transience of life. These were also common themes and issues in the Victorian era, as people felt anxious about the future since pessimism was dominant among people.

In this regard, the use of wine is related to skepticism in FitzGerald's work. Through wine, Omar rebels against destiny and God, which reflects his Victorian feature. It functions as something that makes people forget about insolence: "O, many a Cup of this forbidden Wine, Must drown the memory of that insolence" (FitzGerald, 2003: No. 30). FitzGerald's Khayyam focuses on the present day and enjoys through wine, thereby forgetting about those memories. Thus, *Rubâiyât* "speaks to men in their questionings" and scepticism is communicated through Omar and wine, which also acts as a healer agent (Forbush, 1905: 359).

Domestication and foreignization strategies also contribute to FitzGerald's invention. Through foreignization, skepticism of the time is reflected in his lines:

Alike for those who for TODAY prepare,
 And those that after some TOMORROW stares,
 A Muezzin from the Tower of Darkness cries,
 "Fools! Your Reward is neither Here nor There. (FitzGerald, 2003: No. 25)

Muezzin as an exotic symbol casts light on this questioning issue. He warns people not to waste their time with the past and the future since they do not bring happiness. Moreover, he is not sure about God's existence. It is also surprising to have *muezzin* and darkness in the same line because in Islam, a *muezzin* is a religious person who is not supposed to be associated with darkness. The fact that he does not change the word, *muezzin* in order to invoke its Victorian era connotations supports the idea that FitzGerald's *Rubâiyât* is an invention instead of an accurate translation.

Through the strategy of domestication, he adapts certain concepts and terms into his culture, thereby transforming the original lines and values into the Victorian era. For instance, in rubai 77, he changes "the images of "burning" and "cherishing" to the ideas of "love" and "wrath" and also the image of "mosque" to "Temple" to give a universal or a Christian theme to the quatrain" (Zare-Behtash, 1994: 114). By making these changes, FitzGerald substitutes Persian words with those with which members of Victorian society were more familiar. Since mosque is not a part of the Christian vocabulary, FitzGerald changes this word implicating Islam into another word connoting Christianity. These changes are functional for the readers of the time as they make sense in the Victorian culture.

Although FitzGerald was influenced by the Persian poet, Saadi of Shiraz, who talks about the vanity of worldly desires and the unworthiness of human beings, he did not decide to introduce him to the Victorians. Didacticism was not something that the Victorians needed. The Victorian Omar does not believe in destiny and his main concern is to live today and to enjoy the present situation. In addition, FitzGerald's Khayyam does not conform to God's will: "Ah Love! Could you and I with him conspire, To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire" (FitzGerald, 2003: No. 99). It can be understood from these lines that he is not content with what God has created. These issues are conveyed through "the narrator's character [and] the work's apparent plot of ironic, hedonistic, blasphemous posturing" (Cadbury, 1967: 561).

FitzGerald's Khayyam is hedonist, that is, he takes delight in pleasure. However, he cannot reach spiritual wholeness. As a hedonist, he is "a failure, a living refutation of the advice that he offers in these passages" (Sonstroem, 1969: 12). As a Victorian man, he faces a dilemma. Sonstroem comments on this point as follows:

Wandering between two worlds, one death, the other powerless to be life, Omar dramatizes one more version of a pervasive Victorian predicament [...] its emphasis on wine rather than women; its search for stupor or giddiness; its meandering inconclusiveness; its philosophical and psychological inconsistency; its sense of valueless, shadowy life; its troubled perplexity [...] the *Rubaiyat* shows how thoroughly FitzGerald wove his translation into the fabric of Victorian thought and feeling. (1969: 13)

Those issues shed light on the condition of the Victorian period. The man of the time faces certain difficulties, which are woven into FitzGerald's work in line with the feeling and thought of the time.

FitzGerald does not present a realistic picture of the Persian Omar since his version bears striking differences from him to a great extent. His Omar is "a materialistic Epicurean, audacious in thought and expression" (Norton, 2008: 112). He is courageous in expression because he does not have a conforming nature; on the contrary, his disposition is defying and rebellious. He is influenced by Epicureanism, which offers "a liberating account of the universe which frees humanity to work out for itself its own natural goals without supernatural authority and influence" (Warren, 2009: 2). In rubai 54, Omar advises people not to waste their time with the futile pursuit but be happy, jocund with the grape, which probably refers to wine. Pleasure comes to the fore and the speaker wants to enjoy in the face of death and transience.

In addition, Omar is portrayed as a nihilist and does not trust in the permanence of life. In rubai 63, he stresses that the only reality is the transience of life. Life flies like a bird and people fly with life. Many people who have died have no possibility of coming back to life. In rubai 53, the speaker is doubtful about the future, a characteristic of the Victorian era: "You gaze TODAY, while You are You—how then, TOMORROW, You when shall be You no more?" (FitzGerald, 2003: No. 53). His anxiety about tomorrow is strongly felt since his tone is pessimistic and cynical.

Omar uses the image of dust frequently. This specific choice reflects his nihilistic attitude. When dust remains after something, that thing is almost finished. Omar in rubai 26 says: "Like foolish Prophets forth; their Words to Scorn, Are scattered, and their Mouths are stopped with Dust" (FitzGerald, 2003: No.26). He stresses that people are unable to speak when their mouths are halted with dust. Nihilism may represent an "extreme form of skepticism that denies all existence" and imply the "rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a willingness to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious beliefs" (Parsley, 2007: 59). In this case, FitzGerald's Khayyam reduces human beings to dust and is skeptical about existence and creation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Edward FitzGerald's *Rubâiyât of Omar Khayyâm* communicates strong Victorian values rather than those of Persian society. FitzGerald is often referred to as the translator of *Rubâiyât* by the Persian poet Omar Khayyam; however, by drawing on numerous examples from the primary source and the relevant secondary sources, this study has indicated that FitzGerald actually re-created this literary work through a combination of domestication and foreignization strategies. This difference results from FitzGerald's unique approach to Omar Khayyam from history and his literary legacy in that his objective was to appeal to the Victorian readers, which probably necessitated the recreation of Khayyam's

actual work. Furthermore, it has been revealed that FitzGerald incorporated pessimism, skepticism, loss of faith, brevity, transience, ephemerality of life, hedonism, Epicureanism, materialism, and cynicism into his *Rubâiyât*, all of which were common underlying themes and issues during the Victorian era. All in all, Fitzgerald did not translate the actual work word for word, but rather he interpreted it in such a way that communicates the distinctive values and notions of his time.

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