

ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE POSITION OF TRANSLATED PERSIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH LITERARY POLYSYSTEM

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ABSTRACT.

The present study aims at elaborating on the position of translated literature in the English literary polysystem by focusing on English translations of classic Persian poetry- Khayyam, Hafiz and Rumi in particular. Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory is introduced briefly. Then Persian poetry in English Translation are properly contextualized. Edward Fitzgerald's 19th century translations of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat and Peter Avery and John Heath Stubbs 20th century translation are compared and contrasted in terms of intra-textual and extra-textual features. It concludes that western image of Persian literature translated over time into English, has always been within the framework of power relations rather than literary exchange. Fitzgerald's translation occupied a primary position in the literary polysystem due to the vacuum for the theme of Carpe diem as well as new rhyme and style in the English literary polysystem, while Avery and Heath-Stubbs' translation was marginalized. The data provided also shows that major works of Persian Literature in English translation have undergone the three phases of ignorance, admiration and Disregard respectively.

Key words: Persian literature, polysystem, Itamar Even-zohar, Khayyam, Rumi

“Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel from person to person, from situation to situation or from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas (...) whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or losses in strength or even in one historical period and culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation. There are particularly interesting cases of ideas and theories that move from one culture to another, as when so-called Eastern ideas about transcendence were imported into Europe during the early nineteenth century...” (Edward Said, 1982)

1. Introduction

The first attempts in translating Persian literature into English dates back to around three centuries ago with translations of Hafiz, Khayyam, Attar, Sa'di, etc. such translations had

considerable impacts on written and translated literature in English language. Even-zohar's literary polysystem (1978) enables us to have a clear idea of the way translated literature works in the recipient literary context. The in hand paper tries to elaborate on the way English literature chose Persian Poetry for translation and also the way such translations treated English literary polysystem and its literary canons.

2. Polysystem Theory

In the 1970s, Polysystem Theory was introduced as a reaction to the static prescriptive models. This theory does not consider translations as single texts, but regards them as a system functioning within a polysystem governed by the literary system in which translations are done (Even-zohar,1978).

Even-Zohar implements Tynjanov's "concept of a hierarchical literary system" and then makes use of the collected data observed on the function of translation in different societies in order to illustrate "the hierarchical cultural system as a whole". The hierarchy, according to Even-Zohar, is "the means by which translations were chosen, and the way they functioned within the literary system". The dominant stratum will gain a position in the center of the polysystem and others will occupy a secondary position. This primary position occupied will change to a secondary one if "perpetuates" sufficiently according to Even-Zohar because this central model has now changed to a "conservative" one in the polysystem against which other strata are struggling (Gentzler,1993).

This dynamic method of evolution demonstrates that the position of translated literature is not permanent in the Polysystem. If the position occupied is primary, it contributes dynamically in shaping the center of the Polysystem.

Even-Zohar (1978) classifies three social circumstances in which translation may preserve a primary position:

- (1) When a literature is at its developing stage
- (2) When a literature is marginal or feeble or both
- (3) When a literature contains a vacuum or finds itself in a state of crisis or at a turning point.

If translated literary work presumes a secondary position, then it provides a minor system within the polysystem. It has no major influence over the central system and even becomes a conservative element, maintaining conventional forms and conforming to the literary norms of the target system.

Even –Zohar believes that the position taken by translated literature in the polysystem originates the translation strategy. If the position is primary, translators do not feel forced to follow target literature models and are more prepared to break conventions, thus, they often create a Target Text that is close to the Source Text in terms of adequacy, reproducing the textual relations of the ST.

3. Persian Poetry in the West

• The first Translations

Since few centuries ago, the poetry of eminent Persian poets has been translated into European languages and particularly English. Among them Hafiz, Khayyam, Rumi, Attar, Sa'di and Ferdowsi may be mentioned.

The first translation of a Hafiz *Ghazals* into Latin was published in 1680. After almost a century, in 1771, Sir William Jones translated Hafiz into English. This first translation had an

immense immediate and long-term influence. In 1774 J. Richardson translated the Latin version into English. Soon the translation of Persian poetry, specially Hafiz, into English became so fashionable that within a short time Hafiz became a familiar name. The poetry stimulated Byron, Swinburne, Moore and many others. Byron imitated his rhyme-structure and later Swinburne perfected the stanza (Aminrazavi,2005).

According to Aminrazavi (2005), not only did the English Romantic poets of the early 19th century fall under Hafiz's magic charm, but the interest in Hafiz became even greater as the century progressed into the Victorian Age. From 1905 until now approximately another eighty translations into English have appeared.

The thread of Hafiz's influence reached America in 1838 when Ralph Waldo Emerson read in German Goethe's *Divan*. Emerson translated some of Hafiz's *Ghazals* into free-form English verse from the German translation and many of Emerson's poems were influenced by Hafiz.

The Romantic Movement in Europe during the late part of the 18th century and during the beginning of the 19th century rejected the neo-classicism, rationality and realism of the 'Age of Reason' and sped in the direction of feeling, passion and sentiment. It is understandable that at the end of the Age of Reason Hafiz's 'philosophy of unreason' would affect many of them.

Tennyson as one of the major English poets of the nineteenth century had considerable acquaintance with Persian poetry and specially Hafiz. He happened to know about Persian poets from the translations of Sir William Jones and the influences soon manifested in his poetry.

Descriptions of facial beauty and images of *gul u bulbul* or *the rose and the nightingale* are used frequently (Yohannan,1942):

The living airs of middle night
Died round the bulbul as he sung

At this time Tennyson was so much fond of Hafiz and *Ghazal* form. He used the form of the Persian *Ghazal* or ode in "the Princess" in a song that was added in 1850. According to J. D. Yohannan in his paper *Tennyson and Persian Poetry* Tennyson had believed that "Hafiz was the most Persian of the Persian poets."

It seems that the form of *Ghazal* and dominant themes of Hafiz poetry are not considered as practical in major English literary circles today.

- **The Transmission of the *Ruba'iyat* into the West**

The earliest and first translation ever made of the *Ruba'iyat* was by Thomas Hyde in the 18th century, when he translated one quatrain into Latin.

Aminrazavi in his book *The Wine of wisdom* (2005) asserts that the discovery of Omar Khayyam has been attributed to both coincidence and to Western readiness to understand and accept his message. He adds that the European Romanticism particularly that of England, turned eastwards to seek spirituality and Oriental marvels, and found a parallel message to the needs and interests of both Europe and America.

The eighteenth–nineteenth-century view of the Eastern world was of a strange, exotic, mysterious and mystical world where one may have access to wisdom not available in the West. Most people believe the east to be more spiritual than the West, which abounds with materialism. At that point of time, Omar Khayyam became the image of 'Oriental wisdom'.

- **The Introduction in England: Edward Fitzgerald**

Edward FitzGerald showed interest upon Persian literature by translating some of the

prominent literary works. In 1858, FitzGerald translated thirty-five quatrains of Omar Khayyam's *Ruba'iyyat* based on Calcutta edition of the poem and sent them to *Fraser's Magazine* for publication. One year later he published it in a pamphlet of 20 pages with Quaritch Press entitled, *The Astronomer-Poet of Persia*. Four versions were published during his lifetime and a fifth one was discovered after he had died.

Since, according to Leacock (2000), Fitzgerald's Knowledge of the Persian language was extremely poor, accuracy and adequacy is not expected, though regarding the rhyme scheme and meter, as well as the theme of the *Rubaiyyat* (Carpe diem), he stayed close to the ST.

- **Omar Khayyam and the British literary Circles and Figures**

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood have been considered the first avant-garde movement in art founded in 1848. They defined themselves as a reform-movement. Those poets who had connection with the Pre-Raphaelite circle include Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, George Meredith, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

In 1857, Alfred Lord Tennyson, a friend of Edward FitzGerald and Rossetti, who was one of the first famous poets to discover and propagate FitzGerald's translation of the *Ruba'iyyat*, was engaged in discussions concerning the application of the salient features of nature, such as leaves of a tree, forms, shapes, colors, wind, water, etc. in poetry. That's a considerable reason for his interest in Omar Khayyam.

Some of the most important members of the Circle spread the Khayyamian message to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; for the *Ruba'iyyat* had all the characteristics which defined the very essence of this movement. (Aminrazavi,2005)

- **Omar Khayyam's Club of England**

In 1887, three noted gentlemen namely Sir Richard Burton, known as the "Arabian night man", Even Francis Thompson and Nathan Haskell Dole proposed "that a club be formed of admirers of the Omar Khayyam on the basis of good fellowship and Oriental learning"(Burrage,1921). The interest of these men became the foundation for London's Omar Khayyam Club.

As the Omar Khayyam Club developed, the members wrote their own versions of *Ruba'iyyat*. Owen Seamen composed similar quatrains to Khayyam's in his poem "To Omar." examples are given below (Aminrazavi,2005):

Master, in memory of that Verse of Thine
 And of Thy rather pretty taste in Wine
 We gather at this jaded Century's end
 Our Cheeks, if so we may to incarnadine.

Seamen, is one of the first poets of the club to follow the rhyme and metre of Edward Fitzgerald's edition of the *Ruba'iyyat*. Seaman's poem follows the same scheme (a-a-b-a) as Fitzgerald:

And o'f Thy ra'ther pret~ty tas'te in Wi~ne

Save for perhaps stretching the line a little, we find that he has written iambic pentameter, identical to that of Fitzgerald. Orientalism is further expressed in his line "Where East is East and never can be West".

The next is J.H. McCarthy's poem, of which the following quatrain has been selected (Aminrazavi,2005):

Omar, dear Sultan of the Persian song;
Familiar friend, whom I have loved so long;
Whose volume made my pleasant hiding-place
From his fantastic word of right and wrong.

- **The earliest review of the *Ruba'iyat***

In 1960, just six months after the publication of the first edition of FitzGerald's *Ruba'iyat*, a review was written in *The literary Gazette*, a London weekly. According to Bloom (2007) the reviewer introduces Omar Khayyam as a Persian poet "who is little known in Persia". The reviewer then briefly provides a biography of Khayyam, and continues with explaining Khayyam's Epicurean thought.

- **Khayyam in America**

In 1869, Charles Eliot Norton published an article in the *North American Review*, and included Fitzgerald's translation of the *Ruba'iyat*. He confirms the translator's viewpoint regarding the mystic interpretation of the *Ruba'iyat*. Soon the *Ruba'iyat* became popular among the North American writers and intellectuals of the time. According to W. J. Black (1932), America was ready for the message Khayyam was supposedly conveying to the public: the "lofty idealism that precipitated the Civil War had given way to a sordid materialism." This materialism gave way to 'hedonism' and 'moral decay' (Aminrazavi, 2005).

- **Omar Khayyam's Club of America**

America's readiness to receive Khayyam's message along with the beauty of the Fitzgerald translation, and the application of Khayyam's pessimism towards the problems of the West in the 19th Century resulted in the foundation of the Omar Khayyam Club of America.

several members and their friends collected newer editions of the poem and amateur translators produced their own versions. Other members paralleled the style of the poem in their own works. For example, Stephan C. Houghton penned a philosophical poem titled *In the Path of the Persians* and Charles Hardy Meigs captured the spirit of the *Ruba'iyat* in his own miniatures.

The international alliance of Orientalists spread Khayyam's *Ruba'iyat* throughout America and Europe. Several major Orientalist societies held annual meetings to share the latest research on various aspects of the Orient with the European powers and America. The purpose of these meetings was not always to share the wisdom of the East, but as Niranjana (1992:33) states literary translation is a discourse that "inform the hegemonic apparatus that belong to the ideological structure of colonial rule", that uses translation as a means of "constructing a rewritten image of the East that stands for the truth".

- **Major American Poets and Literary Figures influenced**
- **by the Quatrains**

T.S. Eliot

William Greenleaf Eliot (1811—1887), T.S. Eliot's grandfather was the first one in Eliot's family who showed admiration for the *Ruba'iyat* of Omar Khayyam. Then, Charles

Eliot Norton, his cousin, introduced the *Ruba'iyyat* in a review article. Charles William Eliot, the other cousin, was next, and finally it was T.S. Eliot himself who developed an interest in Omar Khayyam and his poetry. Eliot used themes that echo throughout the *Ruba'iyyat*. The structure of the poem also appears in Eliot's work. For example, *Ruba'iyyat* and *Wasteland* both begin with a tavern scene and proceed to offer an illustrated depiction of spring. Erik Gray (2001), however, in his paper '*FitzGerald and the Ruba'iyyat, In and Out of Time*' argues that Eliot's experience of the *Ruba'iyyat* had three phases of ignorance to admiration to disregard (P.6)

Mark Twain

The great American novelist Mark Twain was extremely reverent for the *Ruba'iyyat*. In the 1870s, he learned of the *Ruba'iyyat* and of Fitzgerald's translation. He regarded the following quatrain by exclaiming "No poem had given me so much pleasure before" (Gribben & MacDonnell,1983)

Oh Thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make
And ev'n with Paradise devise the snake
For all the sun where with the Face of Man
Is blacken'd – Man's forgiveness give – and take!

He wrote his edition of the *Ruba'iyyat* in 1898. The following *Ruba'iyyat* indicate how Mark Twain played with Fitzgerald's translations and made a burlesque version of them (Aminrazavi,2005):

Sleep! For the Sun scores another Day
Against the Tale allotted You to stay,
Reminding You, is Risen, and now
Serves Notice – ah, ignore it while You may! (Mark Twain, no.1)

Wake! For the Sun, who scatter'd into flight
The Stars before him from the Field of Night,
Drives Night along with them from Heav'n, and strikes
The Sultan's Turret with a Shaft of Light. (FitzGerald, no.1)

Ezra Pound and Ralph Waldo Emerson also developed a great admiration for Khayyam and his *Ruba'iyyat*. Emerson, who was interested in Sufism and admired Persian Sufi poetry, read Fitzgerald's translation on his trip to Europe. Having taken interest in the *Ruba'iyyat*, he translated few quatrains from German into English.

4. Peter Avery & John Heath Stubbs

Peter Avery is an eminent British scholar of Persian and a Fellow of King's college, Cambridge. He was born in 1923. He has contributed to some English language work on Persian history and literature, such as *The Collected Lyrics of Hafiz of Shiraz*, *Medieval Persia*, *Modern Iran* and *The Age of Expansion*. Avery's best known work is a translation (with poet John Heath-Stubbs) of the Persian text of *Ruba'iyyat of Omar Khayyam*.

John Heath-Stubbs, (1918-2006), British poet and translator, studied at Oxford. He taught Poetry at Leeds University from 1952 to 1955. He has translated Hafiz and Leopardi, written

several collections of poetry, and edited numerous works. Like Avery, Heath-Stubbs is known for his translation of Omar Khayyam's *Ruba'iyat* in 1979.

Their translation differs from FitzGerald's in that it contains considerably more verses (235 quatrains), with a different order, and that they try to be more faithful to the original Persian. Their translation is based on Sadiq Hedayat's edition of *Ruba'iyat*.

The language of the translation is modern, especially in comparison to FitzGerald's version. Avery and Heath-Stubbs make no effort to rhyme the poem. Archaic words are rarely used and accuracy is the concern of the translators.

The modern language of this translation is justified. although some of Khayyam's major thoughts are elaborated on well, the language is often ineffective. Indeed, some of the phrasing and some of the words give an oddly dated feel to this 1979 translation. The inconsistency in any sort of metre or style also proves to be irritating. With lines varying in length between six and twenty syllables much of the collection simply does not read well. Here is an example of their translation:

Neither you nor I know the mysteries of eternity,
Neither you nor I read this enigma;
You and I only talk this side of the veil;
When the veil falls, neither you nor I will be here. (Avery & Heath-stubbs, 1979, p.39)

5. Rumi

In the modern West, Jalaloddin Rumi has become the best known Persian poet. Rumi's success in the West has to do with the fact that his message transcends the limitation of language. He has something important to say, and he says it in a way that is not completely bound up with the intricacies and beauty of the Persian and the culture which that language conveys, nor even with poetry (he is also the author of prose works, including his discourses, available in a good English translation by A.J. Arberry). One does not have to appreciate poetry to realize that Rumi is one of the greatest spiritual teachers who ever lived.

Rumi's greatness has to do with the fact that he brings out what he calls "the roots of the roots of the roots of the religion," or the most essential message of Islam, which is the most essential message of traditional religion everywhere: Human beings were born for unlimited freedom and infinite bliss and their birthright is within their grasp. But in order to reach it, they must surrender to love. What makes Rumi's expression of this message different from other expressions is his extraordinary directness and uncanny ability to employ images drawn from everyday life.

Rumi wrote about 3,000 *Ghazals*, signing many of them with Shams's name. This explains the title of his collected *Ghazals* and miscellaneous verse, *Divan-e shams-e Tabrizi*, which includes about 40,000 lines. His other great collection of poems, the 25,000-verse *Masnavi*, was composed as a single work with a didactic aim. R.A. Nicholson rendered a great service to the English-reading public by translating it in its entirety. But relatively few of the *Divan's* nuggets have been mined. Nicholson published a number of *Ghazals* in 1898 and A.J. Arberry retranslated these and added many more, for a total of 400.

More recently, a number of poets have undertaken to publish some parts of the *Divan* while trying to preserve the poetical quality in English, usually basing themselves on literal translations done by others. For those who read Persian, most of these versions have been rather pale, and frequently inaccurate.

To celebrate the 800th birth anniversary of the Persian poet Jelalludin Rumi UNESCO announced the year 2007 “the International Year of Rumi.” In 2007 especial ceremonies and programs were held all over the world to commemorate this great poet.

6. The Position of Persian poetry in the English Literary Polysystem: The trilog of Hafiz- Khayyam- Rumi

“...his (FitzGerald’s) Epicurean image of Khayyam soon spread globally, so much that even Persians started rethinking their historic and traditional interpretation of the poet and his Rubaiyat. This distorted image gradually replaced the truth even for Iranians, and was therefore back-translated intersemiotically into a special form of Persian miniature, which depicted highly erotic scenes that seemed to fit the western interpretation originally introduced by Fitzgerald, so much that in 1950s and 1960s the domestic book market of Iran joined the Fitzgerald international market by producing numerous versions of his translation decorated with such miniatures by renowned miniaturists of the time.”(Farahzad, 2006,p:50)

Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s *Ruba’iyyat* shares many similar aspects with Sir William John’s translation of Hafiz’ *Ghazals*. Primarily, they both have introduced outstanding Persian poetry to the English literary society of their time. Within few years, both critics and poets saw the poetry and took interest in it. Then it spread like wildfire for several decades through English. The poems were translated copiously and critics wrote lavish reviews on the beauty, style and structure as well as other aspects of the translations. At that time, the works achieve the status of fad among the common people. Then, it becomes outdated to the intellectuals and the literati. Yet the commoners still like it; actually, they have newly found it, then for their sake various translations are published in beautiful and even pricey prints. Some of these new translations, however, have to do with the events around the source language text. (For example, Avery& Heath Stubbs’ translation was the first translation based on the new version of the *Ruba’iyyat* produced by Sadigh Hedayat) .This status may continue for some time but eventually even the common people forget the legend of the poet of ancient Persia. It is to be noted that Khayyam’s ending proved more catastrophic, as the ending of last section has indicated.

This study shows that Omar Khayyam’s *Ruba’iyyat* occupied the middle of a ‘trilogy’ that began with Hafiz and ended with Rumi. The premier part of this trilogy, began with Sir William John’s translation of Hafiz into English in 1771. What followed that was the translation or adaptation of Hafiz into the English poetry of both Britain and America.

The second part of the trilogy begins with Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of the *Ruba’iyyat* in 1856. One may observe that the scenario was identical to Hafiz. The poem was thus introduced to British society, the impact and appreciation was considerable both from other poets and from critics, spreading to America where it received more followers and numerous publications.

Part Three began in the 1940s with the English literary society translating Rumi into English. Historically, however, Nicholson had once translated Rumi in 1898; but both critics and poets disregarded it until the second translation was done.

This study shows that each part of the trilogy experienced three different phases of **ignorance**, **admiration** and **Disregard** respectively. A certain work is introduced into the English literary society. After a short period of obscurity, it creates a shock, and then is received warmly and

both orientalists and intellectuals try their hand at translating some or all of the work. Glorious life lasts for a few decades and finally it vanishes like a dream from the memory of the intellectuals and writers first and from the memories of commoners later.

Erik Gray (2008) states that “According to the standard reception history, starting in 1859 the *Ruba’iyyat* first languished in unjust obscurity, then rose to disproportionate fame by the turn of the century, only to suffer a critical backlash in the first half of the twentieth century.”

The data collected has disclosed that the first phase or ignorance does not last long since the text had been translated to fulfill a social, cultural or literary need. At this stage, it assumes a primary position and thus affects the other works at the centre of this polysystem, whether translations or original manuscripts. But as soon as the needs change or there is a turn, the polysystem- as a dynamic system- place the text in secondary position and the text is pushed to the margins of the polysystem, in the case of the Persian poetry, in a leisurely pace. As soon as the texts are marginalized, they are no longer able to have influences on the center of the literary system. The presence of they themselves, is under the impact of the texts enjoying primary positions.

So far, both Hafiz and Khayyam have probably gone through the three phases. That is, they are both marginalized due to the fact that major English poets and translators no longer find the original form and theme of these poets interesting enough to practice. Regarding Rumi- the last in the trilogy- it seems that his poetry, currently, enjoys a primary position in English literary poly-system; though, there is evidence that proves after a couple of decades, it will also fall into secondary position. This is infact the story of birth and death of the translated literary work in the recipient literary system.

7. The Position of the Selected Translations in English Literary Polysystem

Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s *Ruba’iyyat* appeared to occupy the primary position in the literary poly-system since 1870, when it was introduced to the pre-Raphaelite literary circle. Although one cannot claim that English literature was in a state of crisis, yet according to findings in the last sections, there was an apparent vacuum in English literature and secondly, the literature had arrived at its turning point. Fitzgerald’s *Ruba’iyyat* impacted the centre of this system variously. We observed that eminent English poets employed the form of the quatrains and the meter used by Fitzgerald as a new and creative form of literature. Fitzgerald’s translation can not be considered as an adequate translation, but those aspects of Khayyam poems he keeps in the translation, are mostly considered as the creative aspects of Fitzgerald’s translation. J. D. Yohannan (1942) claimed in his paper *Tennyson and Persian Poetry* that Fitzgerald was personally instrumental in introducing Persian poetry in general and *Ruba’iyyat* specifically into the mainstream of English literature. In comparison, Avery and Heath-stubbs’ translation- though considered as adequate- is marginalized in the literary polysystem probably because the vacuum is no longer there in the polysystem for such a form or content.

Acknowledgements.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to my dear colleagues, Dr Natasha Pourdana and Dr Shahram Modares, who cooperated in undertaking this research.

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