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EDWARD FITZGERALD'S "THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM": A SENSE OF THE ESSENCE

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Abstract:

Edward FitzGerald's 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' is an English translation in verse of Omar Khayyam's rubais. Rubaiyat is the plural of 'rubai' in Persian Language. The research paper is mainly focused on the thematic study of Rubaiyat. At the very first stage of his philosophical thoughts it is evident that

Omar believes that one should not think about the past and future but only about Present. Moreover, Omar opines that human life also is a short interlude of consciousness between the nothingness-before-Birth and the nothingness after Death. But at the very stage, Omar candidly admits that love alone has the power to grasp the nature of the ultimate reality. Due to his passionate references of wine and love, Omar Khayyam has been mostly misunderstood by the western readers. But a sense of the essence of his rubais makes Persia and Eastern world to be considered him as a great religious poet.

Keywords: Sufism, mystery, love, life, death, nothingness, timelessness, 'ishq majazi', 'ishq haqqiqi'

Introduction:-

Edward FitzGerald's 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' is an English translation in verse of Omar Khayyam's rubais. Omar Khayyam was a twelfth century Persian poet, astronomer and mathematician. He was a super-achieving genius. Originally, his rubais were written in Persian Language. They have been revered as an inspired Sufi scripture in Persia. But it was FitzGerald's translation of Omar's rubais that brought popularity to Omar, both in Europe and America. Fitzgerald did not just translate the rubais; but he imbibed the very inspiration of Omar and transfused the poetic spirit of Omar's Persian rubais into his English quatrains.

Form of Rubaiyat:-

Infact, Rubaiyat is the plural of ‘rubai’ in Persian Language. The rubai is a quatrain, in which the first, second and fourth lines rhyme together. Thus, the rhyming scheme is- a a b a. The rubai is absolutely complete and isolated unit. A number of rubais cannot be combined to form a poem. In this context, Omar’s ‘rubais’ have close association with an eminent Hindi poet Tulasidas’ ‘Chopai’.

Philosophy of Rubaiyat: - To Live in Present:-

Omar considers present time as the very precious moment for a man .If the person utilizes each and every moment of the present, he may enjoy life with the intensity. In this way, life becomes for a man a matter of hours not of years. The poet says that man cannot grasp the purpose of existence or he cannot efface the past and mould the future to his own way. So, what remains for a man is the present only. It is the only moment of time that really belongs to him. The poet says –

“Ah, fill the cup; what boots it to repat
How Time is slipping underneath our feet;
Unborn To-morrow and dead yesterday
Why fret about them if Today be Sweet”! (37)

Here, Omar seems to suggest that one should not think about the past and future but only about Present.

Mysticism in Rubaiyat:

According to Omar, the mystery of life and Death remains inseparable. The process of dissolution and decay operates relentlessly in life. Everyone- from the sultan to the beggar marches towards the realm of death.The fact is that beauty fades, youth decays, even the glory and grandeur of Emperors is turned to ashes. Omar says-

“Think, in this batter’d Caravanseri
Whose Doorways are alternate Night and Day
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp

Abode his hour or two, and went his way.” (16)

Despite this fact, Omar does not discard the pleasures and joys of life as just illusions. To him, the irony is that the joys are short-lived. Thus, Omar opines just like the joys, human life also is a short interlude of consciousness between the nothingness—before—Birth and the nothingness after Death. So, everything on the earth is in a state of eternal Flux. The poet Says-

“Oh, come with old Khayyam, and leave the wise,
To talk; one thing is certain, that life flies;
One thing is certain, and the rest is lies;
The flower that once has blown for ever dies.” (47)

The same thoughts are expressed by William Shakespeare in his play ‘The tempest’-

“We are such stuff,
As dreams are made on,
And our little life is rounded with a sleep.”

(‘The tempest’ Act-V scene- I)

Furthermore, in his other rubai, Omar shows human body’s affinity with the common clay. He explains that God created Adam out of the common earth, and the bodily forms of the sons and daughters of Adam are destined to be turned into clay again. So, to attain the state of timelessness, one has to rise above the level of the mundane. In this way, with the allegory of clay and cup, Omar presents the philosophical and ethical aspects of human body.

References of Woman and Wine in Rubaiyat:

In one of his famous rubais, Omar craves for a jug of wine, a book of verse and the beloved’s presence with a song on her lips. This provides a clue as to how bliss may be attained through the senses too. He says-

“Here with a loaf of bread beneath the Bough
A Flask of wine, a Book of Verse- and Thou

Beside me singing in the wilderness-

And wilderness is Paradise enow.” (11)

The wine that exalts man and frees him from the anxieties is meant here to raise him from the mundane level of life. The book of verse represents the attainments of human imagination. The beloved who is both the source and the object of love is one who appreciated through the senses, elates and sublimates the feelings of the lover. According to Omar, woman, wine and book- all these combined together can turn the moment of bliss into eternity. He says-

“And David’s lips are lock’t but in divine
High- piping Pehlvi, with ‘Wine! Wine! Wine!
Red wine! – the Nightingale cries to the Rose
That yellow cheeks of hers to incarnadine.” (06)

Omar admits the limitations of human intellect. He candidly admits that only Love alone has the power to grasp the nature of the ultimate reality. According to Omar, Love is not merely a sensual enjoyment to satisfy lust. He believes in the Platonic Love. In this state, there is no carving for the exclusive possession of the beloved. The beauty of the beloved is considered as the light that illuminates the lover’s life. Her very presence inspires and elevates the lover. Even her memory also sublimates and raises the lover to the beatific vision of sweetness and light. This love has neither unison nor parting. It does not claim exclusive monopoly. Thus, Omar believes that earthly love can also lead to the heavenly love.

The Sufi concept of Love: ‘ISHQ MAJAZI’ TO ‘ISHQ HAQQIQI’:-

Omar is very much aware of the limitations of human intellect. He candidly admits that love alone has the power to grasp the nature of the ultimate reality. So, the path chosen by Sufis for this purpose is- ‘Ishq majazi’ to ‘Ishq haqqiqi’. In ‘Ishq majazi’ lover has normal earthly feelings of joy, pain, agony and ecstasy. In ‘Ishq haqqiqi’ the lover is a human being and the beloved is God. But it doesn’t mean that the Sufis are in search of worldly comforts. They neither yearn for Heaven nor live in fear of Hell. They seek only the enchanting sight of the Beloved. The poet says:--

“Our world upon joy and love was once built
Why is it that we reproach and cause guilty?

If we can simply correct our moral tilt

We too will only will what God wilt.” (28)

The same thought are expressed by Leigh Hunt in his poem in ‘Abou Ben Adhem’-

“I pray thee then

Write me as one that loves his fallow man.” (12-13)

The poet strongly believes that the beauty of the beloved is the light that illuminates Life. It implies that ‘Ishq majazi’ leads to ‘Ishq haqqiqi’.

Conclusion:-

Omar Khayyam has been mostly misunderstood by the western readers. Due to his passionate references of wine and love, the western thinkers considered him as an erotic pagan poet. He is considered as a hedonist and sceptic person by the westerners. But, in fact, love and wine are merely established metaphors of Sufism. This is the typicality of the entire Sufism where Love stands for the rapturous devotion of God and Wine stands for the joy of the spirit. Actually, Mysticism is the pivotal point of Sufi poetry. The Sufi way is direct communion and absorption in the supreme with sheer love and devotion. Sufis believe that God is present in every human being but he is hidden from us by ‘Khudi’ or ego, what is called ‘Aham’ in Sanskrit. We need to overcome ‘Khudi’ before we can become one with the supreme. Therefore, in Persia and Eastern world, Omar has been considered as a great religious poet.

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The illustrated Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, translated by Edward Fitzgerald, at Internet Archive

Project Gutenberg: etext#246 (translation by Edward FitzGerald) and etext#5408 (a parody by Wallace Irvin).