The Position of Persian Poetry in the English Literary Polysystem:

The ‘Trilogy’ of Hafiz- Khayyam- Rumi

Before undertaking to discuss the position of each individual translation of Ruba‘iyyat in the English literary scene at the time, let us elaborate on the position of translated Persian poetry, collectively, in the English literary polysystem in a diachronic perspective from mid Eighteenth Century until now.

Chapter Four has disclosed that from the onset of the Eighteenth Century, the English literary system had the tendency for either translating Eastern literature in general and Persian poetry particularly, or adopting some its features.

In the course of this research, the researcher has discovered that Omar Khayyam’s famous poem Ruba‘iyyat occupied the middle of a ‘Trilogy’ that began with Hafiz and ended with Rumi. The premier part of this ‘Trilogy’, as I have termed it, 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. Critics appreciated the eloquence and brilliance of his poetry as well.
As disclosed in that chapter, 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, a writer named Nicholson had once translated Rumi in 1898; but both critics and poets disregarded it until the second translation was done.

There is not a plethora of quotations as evidence for my idea of ‘Trilogy’ but the effects are nonetheless visible. The parts are not clear-cut, maybe, and even they overlap for decades, but one can distinguish them.

I believe that each part of the ‘Trilogy’ experienced three different phases of *Reception, climax* and *Disregard* respectively. A certain work is introduced into the English literary society. After a very 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 in his paper ‘FitzGerald and the Ruba’iyyat, In and Out of Time’ states:

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.\(^1\)

The Fourth Chapter has disclosed therefore that the first phase or Reception 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 not anymore 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 passed completely through all three of these phases. That is, they are both marginalized translated editions of original Persian poetry residing at the second position. Regarding Rumi- the last in the trilogy- I can claim that his poetry, currently, enjoys a primary position in this poly-system; though, his position is not guaranteed, there is sufficient evidence that after a couple of decades, it will also fall into secondary position.

At this point, let us examine the position that selected translations of Omar Khayyam's poetry in the English literary system have taken, which is the concern of this study.

The Position of the Selected Translations in the Literary Polysystem

Fitzgerald's Translation

Fitzgerald's translation of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyyat* 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 a 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 Sadiq 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 chapter Four has indicated.

Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s Ruba’iyyat appeared to occupy the primary position in the literary Polysystem 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, according to findings in the
Fourth Chapter firstly, there was an apparent vacuum in English literature and secondly, the literature had arrived at its turning point. While it enjoyed the primary position, Fitzgerald’s *Ruba’iyat* impacted the centre of this system variously.

J. D. Yohannan claimed in his paper *Tennyson and Persian Poetry* that Fitzgerald was personally instrumental in introducing Persian poetry in general and *Ruba’iyat* specifically into the mainstream of English literature.² The second of two translations covered in this chapter is the Heath Stubbs-Avery Translation (below).

**Peter Avery and John Heath Stubbs’ Translation**

There have been a number of reasons for selecting the Peter Avery & Heath Stubbs’ Translation, among which is that their translation can be considered as representative for a set of published translations at that time. Along with the above mentioned set of English translations of the *Ruba’iyat*, the Avery Heath Stubbs’ Translation gained secondary position at the time of its production and are considered marginal in the English literary poly-system. There is no record of any major influence on the centre of the system, however. These translations mostly became conservative elements for
preserving conventional forms conforming to the literary norms of the target system. Here I provide reasons for occupying such position.

Andrew Lefevere in his book *translation, rewriting and the manipulation of literary fame* believes that ‘professionals within the literary systems’- including reviewers and critics whose comments affect the reception of the text, teachers who generally decide whether a book is studied or not, and translators themselves, who decide on the poetics and at times the ideology of the translated text - control translations in a given literary system. ³

Rather than the factors mentioned above, issues such as ‘post-war situation’, ‘post-colonial era and the notion of global society’, ‘emerging translations’, ‘decreasing demand for classics’, etc. had, specifically, control over the position taken by Avery & Heath Stubbs’ translation in the literary polysystem.

English literature and, consequently, the literary Polysystem have undergone immense changes in the period between these two translations. As the Fourth chapter has described, both World War I and World War II impacted the forms and themes of English poetry (perhaps in both America and
England) considerably. This is shown through the poems of W.H. Auden and T.S. Eliot, who wrote after the First World War.

In the second half of the Twentieth Century, the world entered the post-colonial era. The lands have been explored almost fully for decades and, for more than a century, the West is not so physically prevalent in the Eastern former colonies. The East with all its exoticness has become very familiar to its colonizers today since English is left as major language of literature and poetry, specifically. The world is experiencing global language and society.

Omar Khayyam’s *Ruba’iyyat* received the confrontations of both poets and critics; and some of these confrontations were new translations opposing the form, or one or another major aspect, of the earlier editions. This opposition splintered the unity of The *Ruba’iyyat* fans.

By the turn of the century, demand for the classics had decreased and so had the quality of publications. The craze for “modern literature” is another reason that Burges sees a system driven by critics, advertisements and the easy fame of inferior, often female, writers.\(^4\)
To claim that English literature was at a developing stage at the time for Fitzgerald’s translation would be very difficult, since English literature was not young, and development is perceived as a feature of young literature. At this point, let us extend Zohar’s view that both English language and literature experienced a situation after the middle of the last century that still continues. The Language Revolution, as David Crystal argues, that occurred in the late Twentieth Century, in which the last translation was placed, would lead to argue that both English language and literature were in their developing stage.

All literature, and indeed all art and material culture, is both a product of changing times and affected by that change. The reception of the *Rubaiyat* and its side effects are no exception. Reaching the shores of Europe first and the United States later, the *Rubaiyat* had a variety of effects which some in the USA claimed to be the erosion of social conscience. Khayyam Clubs were established and the poem was both analyzed and emulated, as we have mentioned before. It created a kind of euphoria as well as socio-cultural phenomenon. However, its latter day reception was very tepid.

This tepid reception may be due in part at least to the changing times and
interests aforesaid. The first English translation occurred in the Britain of Queen Victoria. It is said that the times exhibited a kind of straight-laced ethic concerning many aspects of human society and most particularly with regard to sexuality and love. However, it followed the Romantic era, a time that displayed keen interest in the Orient. Fitzgerald was a Romantic whose work equaled that of Shelley and Byron.

As Fitzgerald’s society changed and developed, new outlooks and attitudes certainly developed with it simultaneously. The exuberance of those days gave way to realism, seriousness and the diminution of the Romantic spirit. The public that promoted the writing and publishing of the novel, and of the poetic style became less frivolous. Evidence can be found among the recent documents on the poem, such as Daniel Karlin and Erik Gray, for example.

Karlin points out that the poem has weakened to the point where only few phrases are likely to be remembered:

Meanwhile the prestige of the *Rubā‘iyat* itself has declined; the "Fitz-Omar" craze which Gosse records (and to which, it is fair to say, he contributed, though of course he keeps quiet about that) has died down, and confident statements about the
poem being one of the two or three most memorable in the
English language are true, if at all, only up to the end of the
Second World War.' It will probably continue to circulate in
non-academic editions, as a gift-book, for example; it lends
itself to illustration, though the loan is often repaid in the
coinage of pure kitsch." But its status as a poem that "everyone
knows" has diminished to the point where only fragmentary
phrases ("A Flask of wine, a book of Verse, and Thou," "The
Moving Finger writes") are likely to be recognized.¹⁵

Erik Gray echoes this sentiment as follows:

Whereas it was once a poem that people might quote without
even knowing that they were doing so—it was often cited (and
also parodied) that parts of the poem had simply entered into
English speech—it has now largely disappeared from public
view.⁶

Gray in his paper *FitzGerald and the Rubā’iyāt: In and Out of Time* approves
professional critics disregard to the *Rubā’iyāt*:

The *Rubā’iyāt* has not been exempt from the effects of time.
The past fifty years, for instance, which are the focus of this
introduction (and of the bibliography that follows), have seen
dramatic fluctuations in the poem’s reputation, both with the
general public and among professional critics. The *Rubā’iyāt*
continues to be widely reprinted and read, but it does not possess nearly the popular currency that it still had fifty years ago.\textsuperscript{7}

He believes that lack of interest in poetry is also a considerable reason for the disregard towards the poem:

This change is mostly attributable to the fact that familiarity with poetry in general has drastically declined: it is debatable whether any other poem has taken the place of the \textit{Ruba’iyyat} in the popular imagination, or whether any lyric poem will ever again become so well known. The change then is not specific to the \textit{Ruba’iyyat}.\textsuperscript{8}

A sterling example that highlights the apathy towards the poem can be found in Daniel Schenker’s \textit{Fugitive Articulation}. Schenker has set up a model experiment of two classes of English poetry. He compares T.S. Eliot’s \textit{Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock} with Omar Khayyam’s \textit{Ruba’iyyat}.

The overall subject of the classes appears to be either poetics or stylistics. Schenker assumes almost immediately that \textit{Prufrock} is more teachable as compared to the \textit{Ruba’iyyat}.

Even naive readers in our day have some idea where to begin with an Eliot
poem: his work signals its own incomprehensibility and quickly shifts the reader into the interrogative mood. Consider, for example, “In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo.” Someone will notice the doggerel meter and the foolishly simple vocabulary are inappropriate for such an oracularly composed line—oracular because the words appear out of the unexplainable gap that twice punctuates the verse.

He tirades the language of the Ruba’iyyat with terms like ‘cliché’ and ‘triviality’. Schenker marks that it is not classroom material. Despite its initial effects on society of the time, today the poem has become rather ‘trite’. Yet, Schenker did not use those words with his two chosen lines from Prufrok:

Our class members will be baffled—disconcertingly baffled into silence—by the seeming clichés and trivialities that are the substance of the Ruba’iyyat.9

In a possible response to the question, “why do we fail to respond to the Ruba’iyyat as a work of serious literary art?” Schenker replies “the charge has been made that the Ruba’iyyat is a “period piece.” Readers should recall that the term ‘period piece’ refers to any literature that is outdated in comparison with the period it is being reviewed in. The term refers to the period in which
the piece, the work of literature, was written. However, if the poem is (viewed as) the archetypal Victorian poem, as Schenker claims, then why is it no longer a classroom material? He lists all the virtues of the poem, contained in all 101 quatrains as “a little bit of everything from the nineteenth century”:

(...)dramatic speech, mysticism, Weltschmertz, sentimentality, Manfred, Epicureanism, the palette of Rossetti and Burne-Jones, the “melancholy long withdrawn roar of the sea in Dover Beach.¹⁰

According to Schenker, the lack of interest in Ruba‘iyyat lies more in its “universal acceptance” as a type of wisdom. Ruba‘iyyat became too familiar and too irrelevant. Victor Schlovsky rephrased the quotation that familiarity breeds contempt by claiming, perhaps accurately, “habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war.” (Schlovsky, p.12) He claims that the scandalized readers accepted his words whereas the conservatives among them interpreted the work as a “theological document.” Some even claimed that Khayyam was a devout Muslim and the wine was truth or holiness, etc. As translated, his poem reads more like existentialism and hedonism. There may be no deeper meaning or symbolism than what Fitzgerald implied.
Schenker continues to stipulate that the poem’s exoticism gave it the status of a mere "literary artifact." Fitzgerald desired to preserve the Orientalism of the poem in English:

“I am more and more convinced of the necessity of keeping as much as possible of the oriental Forms and carefully avoiding anything that brings back Europe and the nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{11}

In conclusion, Schenker hopes that Eliot’s poem would lose its appeal and that \textit{Ruba’iyyat} would reappear in the classroom.

The data provided indicates that a serious change in attitude regarding the \textit{Ruba’iyyat} has occurred in the academic community and the public. The old enthusiasm for the poem and any effort to teach or study it has subsided over the change of the times and, as we have seen, someone considers teaching other works such as Eliot’s \textit{Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock}.

In addition, general interest in reading has changed. Current social interest in reading appears to shift towards non-fiction and, perhaps, to the essay. Leisure is diminishing and fewer people in our modern society read books. The novel, a product of Victorian society, is scarcely read. Besides that, the
average reading ability of a majority of people, as well as their habit and their leisure, is suitable only very concise and straightforward texts such as the newspaper or periodicals.

“... *Ruba’iyyat* of Omar Khayyam constantly advises the reader to forget...”¹²

Erik Gray in his paper “Forgetting Fitzgerald’s *Ruba’iyyat*” elaborates on the issue of not considering the Quatrains as a serious literary work today:

The critical corpus is small; even major recent studies of Victorian poetry scarcely mention the poem.¹³

He continues:

There is a sad truth about literature that is felt by all who delight in poetry: that a perfectly memorized poem is, to some extent, a dead poem. When one knows a poem so well that one does not even have to reflect in order to recreate it verbatim in one’s mind, one gets little pleasure from remembering it. Poems and passages, on the other hand, that are only half remembered, that need to be reconstructed, continue to haunt the memory. A line that is missing only a single word can be savored and considered, and enjoyed in a way that it denies to lines that arrive already complete. And while searching for the perfect word, the lover of poetry can even know in part the thrill of creating a great work, merely from the fact of having
He believes that this over familiarity is also a typical of the *Ruba’iyyat*, and enables it to remain a living presence in the mind far beyond the usual date.

**Norms in the selected Translations**

As elaborated in the Second Chapter, Target-Orientedness is also concerned with Translation Norms. They are *Initial norms, Preliminary norms and Operational Norms*. These norms are applicable to different stages of translation and different layers of it, but I may only go through those set of norms that have more to do with Product-Orientedness and Function-Orientedness, as have already been covered in the present research. I am not concerned with those norms that are explaining the process of translation and decision making and the strategies that the translator follows during the course of work.

As for the *Initial norms* and the question of “adequacy” and “acceptability”, in both translations we can observe shifts. Fitzgerald’s translation is apparently not an ‘adequate’ translation but exceptionally ‘acceptable’ for the English readers. As it is evident in the Third and the Forth Chapters, FitzGerald deviates freely from many of the features of the original *Ruba’iyyat* – except
for form. He is strictly following the A A B A Rhyme scheme pattern and the regular meter and Rhythm also resembles the original. He honestly confesses his being unfaithful to the original in many aspects and calls his translation a “rendering”. The question of authenticity has always been there for FitzGerald’s version of the *Ruba’iyyat*. In relation to his another translation, FitzGerald again emphasizes on his way of treating texts while translating them:

(...)Whatever I (FitzGerald) have omitted, added or altered, has been done with a view to the English reader of Today, without questioning what was fittest for an Athenian theater more than two thousand years ago.¹⁵

According to Lefevere in his book *translation, rewriting and the manipulation of literary fame*, Edward Fitzgerald, considered Persians inferior and felt he should take liberties in the translation in order to improve on the original, at the same time making it conform to the expected western literary conventions of his time.

But Avery & Heath-Stubbs’ translation is to a large extent ‘adequate’ and
acceptable as well—of course to the contemporary reader. It is not easy to argue that this translation is either ‘adequate’ or ‘acceptable’. In some aspects, the translation conforms to the original, while in some others it sticks to the norms of the source language and literature. As it is evident in Chapter Three, its language is prosaic and one cannot trace regular meter Rhythm and Rhyme scheme. It is composed in free verse that is the dominant form of English poetry at the time. They are not using archaic lexicon as it is in Fitzgerald’s edition. They have tried to be faithful to Hedayat’s original *Ruba’iyyat* even when they are transferring metaphors.

Fitzgerald translation of *Ruba’iyyat*, as mentioned in the Forth Chapter, was not at all random. He was an orientalist interested in Persian literature. By that time he had also translated other works from Persian literature. Moreover, the literary society at his time was so fond of Eastern wisdom. It, of course, should not be underestimated that FitzGerald’s private life also had a considerable role in selecting *Ruba’iyyat* for translation.

Avery was also an orientalist who was well aware of Persian language and culture. He had also translated some Persian literary works by that time. They are not of course in the time of great interest in *Ruba’iyyat* and Persian
literature, but they select the work to translate maybe because Hedayat had produced a new version of the *Ruba’iyyat* at those days and they might have thought that it provides enough motivation for the readers to enjoy their translations as compared to many other translations that used to spring up those days based on the old versions.

As for the ‘Directness of Translation’, Fitzgerald translated- all his five editions- based on the Persian original. Avery & Heath-Stubbs also translated based on the original Persian text, provided by Sadeq Hedayat and Foroughi. But many of the other translations-as can be seen in the Appendix- are from English, French, German etc. rather than Persian text.

Fitzgerald freely deletes, adds and alters the quatrains to arrange them the way he would like. He changes the matrix of the text. The segmentation that he follows is not at all there in the original *Ruba’iyyat*. He is not conforming to the sequence of the original quatrains and the number of quatrains. He gives his *Ruba’iyyat* a thematic unity. Avery & Heath Stubbs, on the other hand, follow the sequence and the number of the quatrains as they are in Hedayat’s version. The matrix of the translated text is indebted, to a large extent, to the original text.
Scope for Further Studies

In this last part, I would like to propose few research plans to those scholars who may be interested in the area of study. The in hand thesis has already provided basis for all three recommended studies.

- A Philosophical Approach to the Two Translations

According to Walter Benjamin in his paper ‘The Task of the Translator’, translation is not there to give readers an understanding of the ‘meaning’ or ‘information content’ of the original. He believes that translation exists separately but in conjunction with the original, coming after it, emerging from its ‘afterlife’. It gives the original a ‘continued life’.

According to him a translation touches the original lightly and “only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.”

Benjamin argues that what good translation does is to “express the central reciprocal relationships between languages”. It reveals innate relationships which are present but which remain hidden without translation. It does this
not by seeking to be the same as the original but by ‘harmonizing’ or bringing together the two different languages. In this expansive and creative way, translation both contributes to the growth of its own language and pursues the goal of a ‘pure’ and higher language.

Benjamin’s stress on allowing the foreign to enter the translation language leads to Schleiermacher’s concept of ‘Foriegnization’ and of bringing the reader to the foreign text. But his style is diffuse and his philosophical idea of creating ‘pure’ language by harmonizing the two languages is an ideal but abstract concept.

Avery’s translation is highly informative. It is bond to the original in many ways and is not able to occur separately. It is not expected to provide the original poetry with a continued life. While Fitzgerald’s free ‘rendition’ – as he himself call it – has just touched the spirit of the original *Ruba’iyyat*. He granted the translated poetry a fresh dynamic unity. The matrix of the text - unlike Avery’s translation - has a separate identity.

Fitzgerald’s translation proved not to seek for being the same as the original but being in a harmony with it. This is what has been violated in Avery’s
translation. He sacrificed the whole poetry for being the same as the original. The 19th century translation of *Ruba'iyyat* contributes, in a creative way, to the growth of its language, pursuing the goal of a ‘pure’ and ‘higher’ language.

- **The position of Persian literature in translation, in English literary Polysystem**

The idea of the Trilogy, as proposed by the researcher, can be an opening for research works in larger scales and on a variety of literary texts. Persian literature, in various forms, has been translated into English since centuries ago. Some dispersed studies have been done on the position of the translated literature but I believe there is an emerging need for a comprehensive study of the position of the Persian literature, in various forms, in the English literary Polysystem.

- **A Target-oriented Approach to the selected translations in the light of Edward Said’s Theories.**

The focus of the in hand study was on examining Toury’s model as both a methodology and a general theory of Translation Studies. Therefore, I tried not to go through other possible perspectives and aspects, while describing the texts. But, a very interesting study may be built on this research focusing
on Edward Said’s ‘Travelling Theory’, ‘Embargoed Literature’, Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism. The position and function of the Eastern ideas and literature in the western literary system is, to a large extent, bond to the forces elaborated by Said in the mentioned works. The information provided in this thesis would be a platform for such research.
Notes.

1. Victorian Poetry, p.3
3. 1992
5. 'Editing the Ruba‘iyyat: Two Case Studies and a prospectus,' Victorian Poetry, p. 90
6. 'FitzGerald’s Ruba‘iyyat: In and Out of Time,' Victorian Poetry, p. 3
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. 'Fugitive Articulation: An Introduction to The Ruba‘iyyat of Omar Khayyam'. Viva Modern Critical Interpretations, 2007. P. 60
10. Ibid, p.72
11. Arberry, p.46
13. Ibid
14. Ibid. p.221