

Omar Khayyam Deorientalized And Retranslated: A New Understanding

Omar Khayyam, the renowned 11th-century Persian poet, astronomer, and mathematician, has captivated readers for centuries with his enigmatic quatrains known as the "Rubaiyat." However, Western perceptions of Khayyam have been heavily influenced by the Orientalist translations of Edward FitzGerald in the 19th century. These translations, while undoubtedly poetic, presented a romanticized and exoticized version of Khayyam's work, often obscuring its true depth and complexity.



Omar Khayyam : DeOrientalized and Retranslated

by Thomas Hughes

★★★★☆ 4 out of 5

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In recent decades, there has been a growing movement to deorientalize and retranslate Khayyam's poetry, seeking to restore its original cultural context and literary integrity. This article examines this movement, exploring the motivations behind it, the challenges it faces, and the new understanding it offers of Khayyam's work.

The Orientalist Legacy

Edward FitzGerald's 1859 translation of Khayyam's quatrains, titled "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," played a pivotal role in introducing the Persian poet to Western audiences. FitzGerald's translation was a literary masterpiece in its own right, capturing the haunting beauty and lyrical cadence of Khayyam's verse. However, it also reflected the prevailing Orientalist attitudes of the time, portraying Khayyam as a hedonistic sage, indulging in wine, love, and the pursuit of transient pleasures.

This Orientalist interpretation of Khayyam reinforced existing stereotypes about the "mysterious East" and its exotic allure. It presented Khayyam's poetry as a timeless testament to the sensual and fatalistic nature of Persian culture, ignoring its philosophical and scientific undertones.

The Deorientalization Movement

The deorientalization of Khayyam began in the mid-20th century, as scholars and translators sought to challenge the prevailing Orientalist narratives. One of the pioneers of this movement was Robert Graves, who in 1967 published a new translation of the Rubaiyat, titled "The Omar Khayyam." Graves's translation aimed to strip away the Orientalist embellishments and present Khayyam's poetry in a more authentic and nuanced light.

Other notable contributions to the deorientalization of Khayyam include the translations by A.J. Arberry in 1957 and Peter Avery in 1998. These translators approached Khayyam's work with a deep understanding of its historical and cultural context, seeking to convey its full range of meaning and significance.

Challenges and Controversies

The deorientalization of Khayyam has not been without its challenges and controversies. One of the main difficulties lies in the fact that Khayyam's original Persian quatrains are often ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. Different translators have approached these ambiguities in different ways, leading to variations in the final translations.

Another challenge is the need to balance the deorientalization of Khayyam with the recognition of his cultural heritage. While it is important to dispel Orientalist stereotypes, it is also essential to acknowledge the profound influence of Persian culture on Khayyam's work. This delicate balancing act requires translators to navigate a complex terrain of cultural and literary considerations.

A New Understanding

The deorientalized and retranslated versions of Khayyam's Rubaiyat offer a new and more nuanced understanding of the Persian poet's work. By removing the Orientalist veil, readers can now appreciate the full complexity of Khayyam's thought, his philosophical inquiries, and his scientific observations.

Khayyam emerges as a multifaceted figure, not merely a hedonistic reveler but a deeply reflective and insightful observer of the human condition. His quatrains explore themes of transience, mortality, and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe. They grapple with the paradoxes of existence, questioning the nature of fate, free will, and the divine.

Khayyam's scientific knowledge is also evident in his poetry, as he draws upon astronomy and mathematics to contemplate the vastness of the cosmos and the place of humanity within it. His quatrains contain allusions to the precession of the equinoxes, the motion of the planets, and the cyclical nature of time.

The deorientalization and retranslation of Omar Khayyam's poetry has been a significant scholarly and literary endeavor, leading to a deeper understanding and appreciation of his work. By stripping away the Orientalist distortions, translators have restored the cultural and intellectual integrity of Khayyam's quatrains, revealing him as a profound philosopher, a keen observer of human nature, and a master of poetic expression.

The new translations of Khayyam's Rubaiyat invite readers to engage with his poetry on a more authentic and meaningful level, to appreciate its timeless wisdom and its enduring relevance to the human experience. They challenge us to question our own assumptions, to confront the existential uncertainties of life, and to seek solace and inspiration in the beauty and depth of poetic thought.



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