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## Reading the Rubā 'iyyāt as “Resistance Literature”

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## Reading the *Rubā 'iyyāt* as “Resistance Literature”

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*O' righteous preacher, harder at work we are than you,  
Though drunken, we are more sober than you;  
The blood of grapes we drink, you that of men,  
Be fair, who is more blood-thirsty, we or you? <sup>1</sup>*

The *Rubā 'iyyāt* of 'Umar Khayyām have traditionally been read as timeless words of wisdom that address the fundamental existential problems of the human condition. It is precisely the timelessness and eloquence of the *Rubā 'iyyāt* that accounts for their fame and reception in so many cultures throughout history. While the profundity of the *Rubā 'iyyāt* are undeniable, rarely, if ever, have the *Rubā 'iyyāt* been studied from a socio-political perspective.

In the present work, I would like to argue that many of the *Rubā 'iyyāt* were written as a reaction to the rise of Islamic orthodoxy and the demise of the intellectual freedom which was so prevalent in the first four centuries of the Islamic history. I will argue that once Khayyām's *Rubā 'iyyāt* are placed within the historical context of his time, they will no longer appear to be the pessimistic existential bemoaning of a poet-philosopher like Schopenhauer. Rather, one can see the *Rubā 'iyyāt* as an intellectual critique of the rise of orthodox and legalistic Islam as represented by the faith-based theology of the Ash'arite. It is my argument that 'Umar Khayyām, a tolerant sage who was witnessing the demise of the intellectual sciences at the hands of the enemies of rationalism and free thinking, took refuge in poetry and used “poetic license” to resist the rise of religious orthodoxy. The *Rubā 'iyyāt* became the literature of resistance against those who saw no room for serious scholarly debate and discourse in religious matters and, using such Qur'anic verses as “Be obedient to God and His messenger and those with authority upon you,”<sup>2</sup> demanded absolute obedience.

To defend this thesis, it is imperative that we first briefly survey the intellectual and political landscape of the Islamic civilization in the first few centuries after its inception, and to reflect on those elements which contributed to the flourishing of the Islamic civilization and then to its demise. It

is only by placing the *Rubāʿiyyāt* within the larger political scheme of the Seljuk dynasty that we can begin to fully appreciate their socio-political significance.

From the middle of 2<sup>nd</sup> /8<sup>th</sup> century when Maṣṣūr became the Caliph, a massive effort began to promote science, in particular mathematics and astronomy, and to explore Greek intellectual thought<sup>3</sup> and its use of reason and rationalism. After Maṣṣūr, Maḥdī who became the Caliph sought to encounter anthropomorphic interpretations of Islam which inadvertently led to theological debates in order to encounter heresy. When Mamūn became the Caliph, the scientific, philosophical and translation movements reached a new high. Mamūn, whose mother was Persian and himself had spent some time among Persians in Khurāsān, was keenly interested in the newly-formed rationalistic theology of Muʿtazilite.

By the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, rationalistic theology of Muʿtazilite, had become *Modus Operandi*, and much of the Greek intellectual heritage had been translated into Arabic especially in philosophy, logic and medicine. The Renaissance of the Islamic world had begun and scholarship, scientific research and the spirit of rationalism flourished and led to break troughs in every facet of scientific endeavor.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the Greek masters, in particular Plato and Aristotle who had been given such honorific titles as “Divine Sages” (*al-ḥakimayn al-ilāhī*), should be given credit for the blossoming of sciences in the Islamic world.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding what had been described as the “Golden age” of the Islamic period, D. Gutas, in his work, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* says, “By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, almost all the Greek scientific and secular philosophical works that were available in late antiquity, including diverse topics like astrology, alchemy, physics, mathematics, medicine and philosophy, had been translated into Arabic.”<sup>6</sup>

As the spirit of rationalism withered away in the 5<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century, the outstanding achievements of Muslim scientists began to decline. The voices of the orthodoxy gained prominence at the court of Caliph Al-Mutiwakkil (232-247 AH), who opposed intellectual debate concerning religious matters. It took another century for the orthodox theologians to consolidate their position and to present the legalistic and orthodox version of Islam as the official version. This allowed such jurists as Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal to formally charge philosophers and theologians, particularly the Muʿtazilītes, with heresy. With freedom of expression substantially curtailed, the spirit of rationalism was replaced by the Ashʿarites orthodox theology, which emphasized faith as opposed to reason.<sup>7</sup>

ʿUmar Khayyām lived in the 6/12<sup>th</sup> century when the glorious days of intellectual debate and discursive reasoning in Persia had come to an end. Philosophers like Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Zakariyā Rāzī and Bīrūnī, all of whom were once venerated figures, became symbols of apostasy and heresy. A new dawn began in which Islamic law (*Sharīʿah*) became the

supreme truth and only legal formalism was identified with faith; orthodox jurists of the time (*fuqahā*) established their hegemony and teaching intellectual sciences was forbidden in schools in Khurāsān. Libraries were purged, and poets and even philosophers were forced to criticize rationalism.<sup>8</sup> As Muḥammad ibn Nijā' al-Arabālī confessed: "God most exalted is the Truth and Ibn Sīnā was wrong."<sup>9</sup>

Khayyām bore witness to the rise of intellectual fascism around him as the circle of permissible sciences was shrinking. The Shi'ite theologian Mūsā Nowbaktī, in his work on the refutation of logic, wrote, "He who practices logic is a heretic."<sup>10</sup> With philosophy and logic already denounced, even mathematics was viewed as the instrument of the devil. Khayyām, a mathematical genius, was there when geometry was pronounced a heretical subject. Aḥmad ibn Thawābah, an orthodox jurist, said, "God, I take refuge in you from geometry, protect me from its evils."<sup>11</sup> Another orthodox jurist, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, found an opportunity to include even mathematicians among heretical subjects. The famous Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī, a contemporary of 'Umar Khayyām who allegedly studied philosophy with him, rejects mathematics all together and offers a detailed list of all the evils that may arise from studying mathematics in *The Beginning of Sciences (Fātiḥat al-'ulūm)*. A jurist may only learn enough arithmetic, Ghazzālī tells us, to enable him to calculate the collection of necessary religious taxes.<sup>12</sup> Khayyām, an astronomer who made the most precise calendar up to date, also witnessed *fatvās* (religious edicts) against astronomy. Mūsā al-Nowbaktī, a jurist whose family was known to have been among the notable astronomers, wrote a book ironically entitled *Treatise on the Rejection of Astronomers (Kitāb al-rad 'ala 'l-munajjimīn)*. Other orthodox elements used the opinions of such eminent jurists as Imām Shāfi'ī, who had lived earlier, himself a practicing astronomer, who abandoned and then condemned its use. Even the science of medicine did not escape the wrath of the enemies of free thinking. The famous theologian Jāḥiz rejected the use of medicine, considering it an interference with God's will.

The demise of rationalism took a turn for worst when Caliph Al-Mutiwakkil Billāh's command that only the Quran, Ḥadīth and Sunnah alone can be taught and debate on religious matters are forbidden, led to the harassment of the Mu'tazilites forcing many to move north. The Ḥadīth scholars who had long emphasized absolute obedience to the Prophet's statements and tradition used this opportunity to implement their views forcefully, giving rise to the importance of "transmitted sciences" (*'ulūm al-naqlī*) at the expense of "intellectual sciences" (*'ulūm al-'aqlī*). Such a censure of intellectual activities reached a new high when Caliph Alqādir Billāh (381-422 AH), issued a decree on "forceful belief" in which he not only embraced the position of orthodoxy but legally enforced it. Perhaps the spirit of the time is best described in an apocryphal Ḥadīth, clearly

made up to justify the position of the jurists, which quotes the prophet Muhammad as saying “There is no benefit in the science of medicine, and no truth lies in the science of geometry, the science of logic and natural sciences are heretical and those practicing them are heathens.”<sup>13</sup>

In Persia, the new Ghaznavīd and Seljuq dynasty abandoned the patronage of intellectual sciences and embraced orthodoxy. Maḥmūd ibn Sabuktakin, the conqueror of the city of Ray, wrote to Sulṭān Al-Qādir Billāh declaring the Daylamites who gave refuge to Mu‘tazilites to be heretics and atheists.<sup>14</sup> Such distinguished poets as Sanā’ī,<sup>15</sup> who was a contemporary of Khayyām and Khāqānī who lived shortly after Khayyām, composed, perhaps under pressure, poems criticizing discursive reasoning and philosophy.

Khayyām was witnessing the end of an era: the chemistry of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, mathematics of Khāwrazmī and Birūnī and the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā were being replaced by theological stricture. Khayyām’s lack of interest in teaching publicly and his apparent reluctance for scholarly debate should be understood in light of his fear of condemnation by the orthodox elements. Khayyām himself explains this:

*The secrets of the world, our book defined  
For fear of malice could not be outlined  
Since none here worthy is amongst the dolts  
We can’t reveal the thoughts that crowd our mind<sup>16</sup>*

Khayyām chose two strategies to resist intellectual stagnation: philosophy and poetry. While Khayyām called Ibn Sīnā his teacher, but in all likelihood he studied directly with Ibn Sīnā’s famous student Bahmanyār. In an attempt to revive the spirit of rationalism, he wrote six short philosophical treatises in the Aristotelian tradition.

Khayyām’s other means of resistance against the rise of religious orthodoxy was to adopt a poetic mode of expression, perhaps sharing his verses only with a select group of his students. This accounts for why Khayyām was not known for his poetry when he died and the *Rubā‘iyyāt* gradually gained notoriety only after his death. It is in this context that his *Rubā‘iyyāt* should be understood as a reaction to the rise of religious orthodoxy.

Despite Khayyām’s interest in the intellectual debates of his time, which were primarily between the rationalist Mu‘tazilite and the orthodox Ash‘arite, he must have been reluctant to become directly involved. This was partially because the Mu‘tazilī-Ash‘arī debate had become politicized, often leading to violent clashes between the two sides. Yet, even with his serious demeanor and disengagement from politics and religious debates, Khayyām did not escape the wrath of the jurists, who charged him with heresy. Khayyām subsequently went to Mecca to signal his piety. One can imagine what would have happened to him if he had written a treatise

against the Ash'arite theology at a time when he was surrounded by Juwaynī, Ghazzālī and other orthodox masters of this School.

Khayyām's position with regard to such theological debates was unique: he simply thought these discussions are futile and idle speculations. In the absence of sufficient evidence, making claims that can neither be verified nor falsified are simply foolish. Khayyām could not have possibly responded to Ash'arite theological positions that had the support of the Royal Court in a systematic way. Poetry however, may have provided him with the poetic license to respond without being recognized as party to the conflict. Khayyām states:

*I saw a wise sage! he did not heed  
For caste or creed, for faith or worldly greed;  
And free from truth and quest, from path and goal,  
He sat at ease, from earth and heaven freed.<sup>17</sup>*

### **Khayyām's Poetic Response to the Mu'tazilite-Ash'arite Debate:**

The central debate in the Islamic world is and has always been between those who support reason and discourse (*ḥukamā*) and those who rely on a strictly legal understanding of Islam (*fuqahā*). The former is interested in dialogue and the latter in dictating the nature and the terms of that dialogue.

Khayyām happened to live at a time when the conflict between the two had reached its apex, putting him in a precarious position. The masses of people followed the orthodox clergy and the jurists as they always had, and so did the Saljuq Sultans, who needed the endorsement of the orthodox '*ulamā*'. This translated into a victory for the orthodoxy and a defeat for free thinkers like Khayyām.

Let us briefly consider Khayyām's poetic response to the specific points of contention between the rationalist Mu'tazilites and the orthodox theologians of the Ash'arite school. Although Khayyām responds through poetry, he does so as a scientist who consistently reminds the ardent believers that in the absence of sufficient evidence, one is not justified in making a claim. Khayyām reminds us that this is particularly true with regard to religious matters, since masses of people tend to follow the authorities blindly.

For instance, the Ash'arite emphasize the notion of religious certainty. As their chief exponent, Ghazzālī, asserts, "certainty is the essence of religion and from ascertaining it, there is no relief."<sup>18</sup> Khayyām could not reject Ghazzālī's call openly but he could respond in the following fashion:

*Ye do not grasp the truth but still ye grope  
Why waste then life and sit in doubtful hope  
Beware! And hold forever Holy Name  
From torpor sane or sot in death will slope*<sup>19</sup>

Let us examine Khayyām's engagement with and response to the emerging spirit of orthodoxy within the context of the Mu'tazilite-Ash'arite debate in more detail. The debate centered around the following themes:

1. Unity (*Tawhīd*)
2. Justice (*'Adl*)
3. The promise of reward and punishment in the hereafter (*Wa 'd wa wa 'īd*)
4. The state between the two states (*Manzil bayn al-manzilatayn*)
5. Commanding to do good and prohibiting from doing evil (*Amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa nahy 'an al-munkir*)

#### 1. Unity (*Tawhīd*)

While the Oneness of God was affirmed both by the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites, the relationship between God and His attributes was a major point of contention. We will never know the ultimate answer to these questions, Khayyām tells us; nor do they alleviate the suffering and agony of the human condition. In light of the futility of the nature of this debate, what would be the point of such a discussion? A Khayyāmian quatrain explains:

*Some strung the pearls of thought by searching deep,  
And told some tales about Him, – sold them cheap;  
But none has caught a clue to secret realms,  
They cast a horoscope and fall in sleep.*<sup>20</sup>

#### 2. Justice (*'Adl*)

Presenting the Mu'tazilites argument syllogistically is as follows:

1. God is all just.
2. From an all just God can only come justice.
3. God has created everything.
4. Everything is just

From this argument it follows that all the injustices of the world only appear unjust, since in essence they must be just. Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār, an eminent Mu'tazilite, asserts: "From the knowledge and what is related to justice (*'adl*), the person should know that God's acts are all good and He does not do what is bad and does not refrain to do what is necessary for Him. In informing us, [He] does not lie and in judging does not do injustice."<sup>21</sup>

Khayyām was preoccupied by the problem of theodicy his entire life, and this concern emerges as the most salient feature of the *Rubā'īyyāt*. Khayyām who considered the world to be fundamentally unjust; with no apparent purpose and the presence of much evil in it, relentlessly questions the notion of a just world:

*Had I but on the heavens control  
I'd remove this bullish ball beyond the goal  
And forthwith furnish better worlds and times  
Where love will cling to every freeman's soul*<sup>22</sup>

And in another quatrain he laments:

*This ruthless Wheel that makes so great a show,  
Unravels no one's knot, shares no one's woe;  
But when it sights a wounded, weary heart,  
It hurries on to strike another blow*<sup>23</sup>

Khayyām not only questions the concept of Divine justice, but points the finger at God as the source of evil and injustice. He says:

*Since mortal compositions are cast by a Hand Divine,  
Why then the flaws that throw them out of line?  
If formed sublime, why must He shatter them?  
If not, to whom would we the fault assign?*<sup>24</sup>

Khayyām's views, should not be understood merely as a poet's play with words, perhaps similar to Abu'l 'Alā' Ma'arrī, the Arab poet who was equally critical of an unjust world. The Mu'tazilī-Ash'arī debate concerning the intricacies of how God's justice could best be explained seemed hardly relevant at a time when the injustices and corruption of the Royal Court and the Sultan together with the horrors of wars, destruction and famine throughout the land were obvious examples of injustice and evil. Khayyām asserts:

*Dedicate yourself to the wise when you find  
Forget fasting and praying, you need not mind  
But listen to truth from what 'Umar Khayyām says,  
Drink wine, steal if you should but be ever kind.*<sup>25</sup>



3. *The promise of reward and punishment in the hereafter*  
 (Wa 'd wa wa 'id)

Another salient feature of Khayyām's *Rubā'īyyāt* is the thorny subject of eschatology. Few issues are examined more extensively by Khayyām than the promise of reward and punishment in the other world.<sup>26</sup>

Khayyām's treatment of the subject matter is what I call "satirical deconstructionism," or a version of *reductio ad absurdum*, a method he adopted and used consistently to respond to the type of debates he thought were irrelevant to the human condition. His response to the orthodox Ash'arite theologians who argued for the bodily resurrection was a sarcastic one:

*Anon! The pious people would advise,  
 That as we die, we rise up fools or wise  
 'Tis for this cause we keep with lover and wine  
 For in the end with same we hope to rise*<sup>27</sup>

And in another *Rubā'ī* he says:

*In Paradise are angels, as men trow  
 And fountains with pure wine and honey flow  
 If these be lawful in the world to come  
 May I not love the like down here below?*<sup>28</sup>

Khayyām's method of deconstructing eschatological theories begins by questioning the epistemological foundation of certitude. He asks how those who postulate about heaven and hell know about such matters? Even the Prophet Muḥammad said, "After passing away, you shall join the mysterious caravan of death." Khayyām's quatrain on the subject seems to be a commentary on the prophetic Ḥadīth:

*Ye go from soul asunder this ye know,  
 And that ye creep, behind his curtain low;  
 Hence sing His Name, ye know not whence ye came  
 And live sedate, ye know not where to go*<sup>29</sup>

After casting doubt on the epistemological foundation of the Mu'tazilite-Ash'arite debate, Khayyām brings our attention to here and now where the real game of life is played:

*They tell "In Heaven angels come to greet!"  
 I say "The juice of Vine, in truth, is sweet."  
 Take the cash, let go of future promises,  
 We bear with drums when further far they beat.*<sup>30</sup>

Khayyām's satirical deconstructionist project, which begins by questioning the relevance of the debate concerning life after death, takes a radical turn when he undermines the entire subject, he asserts:

*From thee, O sāqī!<sup>31</sup> Those who went away,  
They fall, of course, to dreaming pride, a prey,  
Drink the chalice of wine and hear this Truth  
"Just empty air is every word they say."<sup>32</sup>*

#### 4. *The state between the two states (Manzil bayn al-manzilatayn)*

What happens to a Muslim who sins? Does he/she go to hell or receive a lesser punishment for being a Muslim? Theological schools such as Khawārij, Murja'ite, Waiydites, among others, held different positions on the subject. Waṣīl ibn 'Atā, a supporter of the well-known theologian Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, argued that such a person is neither a heretic nor faithful, but has simply acted sinfully (*fāsiq*), this view came to be known as a state between the two states.

Khayyām was intrigued by the discussion concerning the gradations of sin and its consequences, eschatological reward and punishment and the certainty with which theologians commented on such matters. He casts doubt on the whole discussion by questioning the insufficiency of evidence regarding the existence of life after death and sees the entire debate as a form of unhealthy obsession with a world about which one may only speculate:

*O unenlightened race of human kind  
Ye are a nothing, built on empty wind  
Ye a mere nothing, hovering in the abyss  
A void before you, and a void behind<sup>33</sup>*

What we do know is that we come from the abyss of nothingness to which we return. Why ignore the presence, Khayyām wonders, and speculate on a state between hell and heaven? Who has come from the other world to tell us there are such places, Khayyām questions:

*Of those who have passed away before,  
Who's come to help us Mystery explore?  
Lo, in this double way of wish and dream,  
Leave naught undone; you shall return no more.<sup>34</sup>*

5. *Commanding to do good and prohibiting from doing evil (Amr bi 'l-ma'rūf wa nahy 'an al-munkir)*

In the Qur'an, the Prophet Muḥammad is addressed as follows: "You are the best of the community who have come for people, command them to do what is right and forbid them from doing wrong."<sup>35</sup> This seemingly simple principle quickly became controversial since one must be certain of what is good and bad before commanding others. As Qāḍī 'Abd al-Jabbār tells us, "one does not always know what is good even though something might appear to be good. If one knows or suspects that one's drinking wine may lead to the death of a group of Muslims or burning of a neighborhood, forbidding him is not necessary, in fact it is not good or desirable."<sup>36</sup>

For Khayyām, good and bad are intrinsically embedded within us; and humans can make a morally sound decision by relying on the power of their own reasoning. In fact it is, the "wheel of fortune" according to Khayyām and not humans who is in need of instruction not to inflict evil on humans making them the victims of a ruthless game of chance. He conveys this:

*The good and evil in the mold of man  
The joy and grief in fate and fortune's plan  
Leave not to the wheel of fortune, for in reason  
A thousand times more helpless than in man*<sup>37</sup>

In the foregoing discussion, I have tried to bring to light the place of Khayyām's *Rubā'iyāt* within the context of the intellectual debates of his time and show that the *Rubā'iyāt* are much more than didactic aphorisms or spiritual utterances. One could make a list of many of the points of contention between the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites among whom we can name, Divine attributes and their relation with Divine essence, God's omniscience and predestination, beatific vision of God, and find at least one *Rubā'ī* that is a direct response to it.

### ■ Khayyām and the Revival of Rationalism:

Along with the free-spirited theological debates of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century by such figures as al-Nazzām<sup>38</sup> and Ibn al-Rāwandī,<sup>39</sup> we see the rise of Muslim Aristotelians; that is, the Peripatetic philosophers (*mashshā'is*). Relying on translations of Greek philosophy, the transition from theology to philosophy began with al-Kindī and reached its zenith in Zakariyā Rāzī in 240/854. The following works that are by Rāzī (or may have been attributed to him) tells us much about the tolerant spirit of the time: *Trickery of the Prophets (Makhāriq al-anbiyā')*, *The Deception by Those Claiming to be Prophets (Ḥiyāl al-mutanabbiyīn)* and *A Critique of Religions (Fī naqd*

*al-adyān*).<sup>40</sup> Other philosophers like Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Bahmanyār and Suhrawardī, were equally bold in their claims against orthodoxy.

The spirit found in Ibn Rāwandī, Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, Suhrawardī and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) is best summarized by Ibn Rāwandī in his famous argument. In a book that has not survived, he argued that either revelation is reasonable or it is unreasonable. If reasonable, then we need to follow reason and do not need revelation; and if revelation is unreasonable, then one should not follow what is unreasonable. In either case we do not need revelation. It is noteworthy that Ibn Rāwandī died of natural causes, but Muslims from Khayyām's era up to the present time could not have expressed such views and remained safe from persecution.

Khayyām was the last major figure belonging to the 6<sup>th</sup> /12<sup>th</sup> century Peripatetic philosophical tradition. One needs only to compare Rāzī's critique of religion and narrow-mindedness to that of Khayyām to see the striking similarities between the two. Rāzī asserts:

*If the people of this religion are asked about the proof for the soundness of their religion, they flare up, get angry and spill the blood of whoever confronts them with this question. They forbid rational speculation and strive to kill their adversaries. This is why truth became thoroughly silenced and concealed.*<sup>41</sup>

And Khayyām in a quatrain tells us:

*The secrets which my book of love has bred,  
Cannot be told for fear of loss of head;  
Since none is fit to learn, or cares to know,  
'Tis better all my thoughts remain unsaid.*<sup>42</sup>

While orthodoxy existed in the first few centuries of Islam and remained equally opposed to freethinking and the use of reason, at least there was some degree of tolerance for those who did not aspire to a strictly legal interpretation of Islam. In his work *Nations and Sects* (*al-mīlāl wa'l-nihal*), Shahrastānī places philosophers among those who make "authoritative use of personal opinion" (*al-istibdād bi'l-ra'y*) and says they are not orthodox Muslims nor heretics, but rather independent thinkers who should be allowed to remain so.<sup>43</sup> By the time of Khayyām, however, the kind of tolerance which allowed the likes of Rāzī and Ibn Rāwandī to speak freely and die old men, had disappeared.

*The Demise of Rationalism and the Rise of Theological Stricture*

Despite the revival of Peripateticism in Andalusia and the emergence of such great masters as Ibn Maṣarrāh, Al-Majrītī, Ibn Bājjah, Ibn Ṭufayl and Ibn Rushd himself, in Persia, theological stricture was on the rise.

Khayyām resisted orthodoxy on two fronts: philosophically, he wrote six treatises in the Peripatetic tradition, rationalizing traditional philosophical problems at a time when philosophy was under attack by the likes of his contemporary Ash‘arites like Juwaynī and Ghazzālī. However he paid the price and was charged with “being a Philosopher,” an accusation that implied heresy. He cleverly defended himself by saying:

*“A philosopher he’s” my enemies say,  
Lord knows I am not what they say;  
But while I am in this nest of suffering  
Should I not ask whence and why here stay?<sup>44</sup>*

The following Khayyāmesque *Ruba‘iyyat* are clear indications of the radical encounter with and strong reaction to the orthodoxy’s emphasis on pseudo-morality and a strictly legal interpretation of Islam. Khayyām responds:

*Serve only the wise if and when you find  
Let fast and prayer blast, you need not mind  
But listen to truth from what ‘Umar Khayyām says  
Drink wine, steal if you should but be ever kind.<sup>45</sup>*

And again:

*If ye would love, be sober, wise and cool  
And keep your mind and senses under rule  
If ye desire your drinking be loved by God  
Injure no person, never act a fool.<sup>46</sup>*

Khayyām knew that condemning orthodoxy in a written form would lead to his demise, not to mention that his writings would not have survived, just like those of Rāzī and Ibn Rāwandī. Khayyām’s second option would have been to write philosophical allegories to hide his criticism against the orthodox Muslims. This is indeed a tradition practiced by such figures as Ibn Ṭufayl and Ibn Sīnā, who wrote the *Ḥayy ibn yaqzān*,<sup>47</sup> *Salmān and Absāl* and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī<sup>48</sup> who wrote numerous treatises of this nature.<sup>49</sup>

I believe, ‘Umar Khayyām chose a third alternative to resist intellectual repression by the orthodox jurists: the use the poetic license. Stroumsa in her book *Free Thinkers of Medieval Islam*, reminds us:

*It appears that after the tenth century, blunt prose expression of freethinking was no longer possible. The preoccupation of intellectuals with prophecy then found very different expressions.*

*Philosophical parables like Avicenna's, or poetry like al-Ma 'arrī's and Jalāl al-Dīn al Rumī's, offered ways for discussing this preoccupation that were deemed safer for the writers, and perhaps also intellectually more rewarding. For, rather than forcing these thinkers into a head-long collision with the notion of prophetic religion, these new ways made it possible to integrate transformed echoes of freethinking into the Islamic legacy.<sup>50</sup>*

It is therefore imperative that we see Khayyām's *Rubā'īyyāt* not as the voice of a frustrated poet expressing his bewilderment with the riddles of life but as a form of resistance expressed philosophically and poetically against the forces of darkness who were intent on imposing their version of religion.

*And those who show their prayer-rugs are but mules-  
Mere hypocrites who use those rugs as tools;  
Behind the veil of zealotry they trade  
Trading Islam, worse than heathen are those fools.<sup>51</sup>*

Khayyām's precarious situation is not all that different from the circumstances in which a number of contemporary Muslim intellectuals find themselves. From the rise of the Tāliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan to the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in other countries, the conflict between the free thinkers and orthodoxy appears to be a perennial one. In such circumstances, we also see the rise of the literature of resistance. The use of symbolism, allegory and short and long pieces of highly symbolic literature throughout the Islamic world by the intelligentsia both medieval and modern bears testament to the need to fight orthodoxy through resistance literature.

Nowhere has this been more apparent than the rise of highly symbolic modern Persian poetry in the years since the Iranian revolution of 1979. The contemporary 'Umar Khayyāms, are still carrying the mantle of the old master of Nayshabur in defense of tolerance and liberty. At times of oppression, we have no choice but to become 'Umar Khayyāms ourselves.

## Notes

- 1 Translated by the author, this is a *Rubā'ī* that is attributed to Khayyām.
- 2 Quran, 4:59
- 3 M. Fakhry, *Philosophy, Dogma and the Impact of Greek Thought in Islam*, VARIORUM, 1994, and D. Gutas, *Greek thought, Arabic Culture*, London: 1998.
- 4 Dh. Šafā, *Tārikh-i 'ulūm-i 'aqlī dar tamadūn-i islāmī*, Tehran: 1371.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-134.
- 6 D. Gutas, *Greek thought, Arabic Culture*, London:1998, p. i
- 7 For more information see 'A. Badawī, *Madhāhib al-islāmiyyīn*, 2vols. Beirut: 1973.

- 8 Ibid., p. 144.
- 9 Dh. Şafā, *Tāriḫ-i 'ulūm-i 'aqlī dar tamadun-i islāmī*, p.140
- 10 Ibid., 144.
- 11 Yāqut al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-udabā'*, vol.4, Cairo: 1936, p. 161-173.
- 12 Abū Ḥāmid Ghazzālī, *Fatḫat al-'ulūm*, Cairo: 1322, p. 56.
- 13 *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā'*, Beirut:1957, vol. 4, p.95.
- 14 Dh. Şafā, *Tāriḫ-i 'ulūm-i 'aqlī dar tamadon-i islāmī*, p. 137-38.
- 15 H. Ibrāhīm Ḥasan, *Tāriḫ al-islām al-siyāsī wa'l-dīnī wa'l-thiqāfī wa'l-ijtimā'i*, Cairo: 1965, vol. 3, pp. 168-169.
- 16 A. Saīdī, *Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam*, p. 200. This may be an unauthentic quatrain
- 17 Govinda Tirtha *The Nectar of Grace*, p. 209.
- 18 Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā' al-'ulūm al-dīn*, trans. M. Khwārazmī, Tehran:1378, p.211.
- 19 Govinda Tirtha *The Nectar of Grace*, p.125.
- 20 Ibid., 234.
- 21 Qādī 'Abd Al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsah*, Cairo: 1965, p.139.
- 22 Govinda Tirtha *The Nectar of Grace*, p.26. Modified by the author.
- 23 Ahmad Sa'idi, *Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam*, p. 202.
- 24 Ibid. p.88.
- 25 Modified by author.
- 26 Qādī 'Abd al-Jabbār summarizes this when he states, "Regarding God, since intention and decision making is impossible for Him, assumption of the violation of intention to Him [is impossible] for He is power and more exalted than such allegations." Qādī 'Abd Al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsah*, Cairo: 1965, p.139.
- 27 Govinda Tirtha, *The Nectar of Grace*, p.253, modified by the author.
- 28 Trans. by Whinfield in A.J. Arberry, *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam*, London:1949, p.124.
- 29 Govinda Tirtha, *The Nectar of Grace*, p.200, modified by the author.
- 30 Ibid., p.251. Modified by the author.
- 31 *Sāqī* in Persian means a female who serves wine.
- 32 Govinda Tirtha, *The Nectar of Grace*, 156, modified by the author.
- 33 E. H. Whinfield, *The Quatrains of Omar Khayyam*, p.424.
- 34 Ahmad Sa'idi, *Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam*, p. 181.
- 35 Qur'an, 3:110.
- 36 Qādī 'Abd Al-Jabbār, *Sharḥ al-uṣūl al-khamsah*, p.140.
- 37 A. Sa'idi, *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam*, p.71. Modified by the author.
- 38 Al-Nazzām, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New ed. VII, J. Van Ess, 1057-58. Also, *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia*, ed. S.H. Nasr and M. Aminrazavi, vol. 3, London: 2004, pp. 33-37.
- 39 For ibn Rāwandī see S. Stroumsa, *Free Thinkers of Medieval Islam*, Leiden: 1999, pp.73-86.
- 40 These three treatises may well be part of the same book. See Ibid., p.93.
- 41 As reported by Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *A'lām al-nubuwwah*, ed. S. Al- Sawy, Tehran:1977, p.31. trans. by S. Stroumsa.
- 42 Govinda Tirtha, *The Nectar of Grace*, p.266. This may be an unauthentic quatrain.
- 43 For a survey of independent thinkers, often referred to as "free thinkers," see S. Stroumsa, *Free Thinkers of Medieval Islam*, Brill, 1999 and D. Urvoy, *Les Penseurs libres dans l'Islam classique*, Paris: 1996.
- 44 Author's translation.
- 45 Translated by the author.
- 46 Ibid. 137.
- 47 For Islamic philosophical parables, see H. Corbin, *Visionary Recital*, trans. W.R. Trask, Princeton: 1988.

- 48 For more information on Suhrawardī's allegorical writings see M. Aminrazavi "Suhrawardī's Persian Writings," in L. Lewhison, *Persian Sufism From Origin to Present*, London: 1993, pp.259-283.
- 49 For philosophical parables of Suhrawardī, see *Oeuvres Philosophiques et Mystiques*, vol.3, ed. S.H. Nasr, Institut d'Etudes et des Recherches Culturelles, Tehran: 1993.
- 50 Stroumsa, *Free Thinkers in Medieval Islam*, p. 241.
- 51 A. Sa'idī, *The Ruba'īyyat of Omar Khayyam*, p.104. Modified by this author.

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