

The Literary, Philosophical and Scientific Character of Khayyam¹

Omar Ibn Khayyami Neyshaburi, who is also known as Khayyam although his philosophical and scientific books bear the name of Khayyami, is among the most eminent philosophical and scientific figures in the Moslem world. He had been a peripatetic philosopher and ardent proponent of discursive debates. We have also two other poets with the name of Khayyam, about whom I have discussed at length in my book *Khayyam: the Man and His Ideas*. Among the survived works of Khayyami, there are some concise works that contain great ideas. The following are the titles of Khayyami's works that I have mentioned in my book, too:

His first book is Hakim Omar Khayyami Neyshaburi's *Essay on Algebra*, which – as the title suggests – concerns the mathematical problems and contains Khayyam's ideas in this regard. The second book is *A Treatise on Euclid's Theorems* by Al-Sheikh Al-Imam Ul-Ajal Hujjat Ul-Haq Omar Ibn Ibrahim Khayyami. As you see, Khayyam has been honored with the title of Imam Ul-Ajal in this book. The other book is *The Measure of Wisdom in Genesis and Obligations*. He also has a book that has been devoted to the analysis of three issues. This book contains outstanding ideas. The next work is entitled *The Rational Enlightenment of the Subject of Universal Science*. In addition, he has a Persian book on ontology and the generality of existence. The *Book of Noruz* and *Malekshah's Horoscope* are two other works by Khayyami. This man has indeed presented significant ideas both in philosophy and sciences.

In some ancient biographies, Khayyam has been aligned with Avicenna in Islamic philosophy. This brings us to the conclusion that Western and Eastern scholars need to pay more attention to the philosophical and scientific ideas of Khayyam rather than his quatrains. For example, when one takes a look at Khayyam's *A Treatise of Euclid's Theorems*, one readily concedes that the authorship of such a treatise must have required a considerable deal of knowledge. Having said these, it is not fair indeed to introduce this man as a nihilist poet. Let me read for you part of Khayyam's prologue to this book:

In the Name of God the Merciful the Beneficent. All praise is due to the Lord of all mercy and compassion, and also our praises are due to His chosen servants, particularly Muhammad, the crown of all prophets and his household ...

Research in sciences based on sound rational proofs is among the things that are unavoidable for those who are after eternal happiness and salvation, particularly

1- For more details see: Ja'fari, M. T.; *Analysis of Khayyam Personality*. (Originally in Persian).

the recognition of universal rules, the knowledge of which can help one to demonstrate resurrection, the soul and its eternity, the Necessary Being and its attributes, angels and the order of nature and finally the prophecy of Muhammad, the last one of the Divine prophets and conscience, which is in fact the inner prophet.

As you see, Khayyam delicately discusses in his mathematical work spiritual matters and their scientific relevance.

Some Arab scholars believe that Khayyam was heavily touched by the ideas of Abu Ala Ma'arri. This is not true, as Abu Ala had been a professional literary thinker with a distinguished poetic taste, while Khayyam was a philosopher, scientist and mathematician who had only memorized some verses of Abu Ala's and, according to Jarrullah Zamakhshari, recited them in a gathering. This is not a good reason to think that Khayyam had been under the influence of Abu Ala. As I have mentioned in my book on Khayyam, Abu Ala was not well versed in philosophy, wisdom, natural sciences and mathematics. Of course, there are some similarities between the quatrains that are attributed to Khayyam and Abu Ala's verses concerning the limitation of human knowledge and the agonies of man on the terrestrial.

Said differently, this issue can be explained as follows:

- Firstly, the similarities between the notions that are used by great thinkers in their debates do not necessarily imply that there has been an exchange of ideas between the two. The association of ideas among great minds is a quite general law.
- Secondly, there are still many doubts around the quatrains that are attributed to Khayyam. It is really hard to accept that they all belong to Khayyam. There are only fourteen or fifteen quatrains by Khayyam on the undependability of the world. In fact, everyone with a sound sense can easily acknowledge the temporality of mundane affairs and impermanence of the beauties around. Thus, we cannot claim that Abu Ala had been Khayyam's master only upon trivial similarities, as there is no scientific evidence of it.

The other significant issue in this regard is Khayyam's view on supernatural matters. Besides the prologue of A Treatise on Euclid's Theorems which we quoted parts of it earlier, Khayyam has written in his Book of Retorts which answers the questions asked by Qazi Abu Nasr Muhammad Ibn Abdurrahim Nasawi:

Thus, the observation of prophetic injunctions has three advantages: firstly, self-discipline and the purification of the soul from carnal desires that darken the rational faculty, i.e. the promotion of the soul from passion to reason. Secondly, accustoming oneself to the reflection of divine affairs and the Day of Judgment and keeping daily based prayers and orisons which prepare the soul for understanding of Divine Essence – that is, God, who creates everything, whose majesty is peerless and whose names are divine and there is no God but Him. He has ordered the

divine hierarchy of beings and sustained them through his primordial wisdom ...¹

These words shed light on Khayyam's spiritual status and his views on divinity and divine matters.

Concisely speaking, it is not fair to reduce Omar Khayyam's great character to some dubious quatrains and it shows that we have not understood Khayyam at all!

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1- Khayyam, *Risaleyeh Jawabiyah* ("Book of Retorts").