

## **Moving Finger**

Permit me to say that the quotation 'The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on', used by you in your editorial entitled 'The Iconoclast', is not very apt.

The quotation has been taken from the following rendering by Fitzgerald of Omar Khyyam's quotation:

The moving finger writes,  
And having writ  
Moves on: nor all your piety  
Nor wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel  
Half a line,  
Nor all your tears wash out  
A word of it

The quatrain is imbued with a spirit of stark pessimism, which is the warp and woof of Khyyam's poetic genius: and portrays the helpless state of man at the hands of an inexorable blind fate, in whose hands man is little more than a pawn in the game of chess.

When you write 'that the contribution of Lord Delamere and many thousands for whom no statue has been erected is irrevocably woven into a story that has no end...The moving finger writes and writ moves on', you use Omar Khyyam to support your view that the story of human achievements is immortal, whereas Omar Khyyam sought to tell in these words that all human effort and achievement is nothing but fret and fury that signifies nothing, ( Nairobi, August 29, 1961)

## **'Rubaiyat' not the babbling of a booby**

Mr Shamsu Din's opinion of Omar Khyyam that he is a confused poet who did not know what he was talking about does not stand the test of the facts that modern research carried out by famous orientalists like Dr.Nicholson established about Omar and the 'Rubaiyat'.

It is true that the 'Rubaiyat' gives an impression of confusion but it is not very safe to conclude that this confusion is the reflection of Omar's mind and that he has fallen between the two schools of Platinism and Aristotlism. The confusion has been created by by the ascription to Khayyam of quatrains composed by other poets, particularly Avicenna, Attar, Rumi, hafiz, Anwari and Sanai. Omar being the only poet who chiefly used the quatrain as the vehicle of his philosophical thought, all quatrains of unknown authorship have come to be attributed to him. This is quiet evident from the fact that the most ancient manuscript of the 'Rubaiyat' preserved in the Bodleian Library contains only 158 quatrains, while the fullest text comprises 801 quatrains.

Khayyam's use of the quatrain which Mr. Shamsu Din calls a snappy poem, does not prove that he was a confused poet. Up to his time this poetic genre was the sole vehicle of philosophic thought; it was much later that Rumi used the 'mathnavi' form for the expression of his philosophy in verse form.

There is no gainsaying the fact that Omar, who was a many-sided genius, is in his own country of Persia known for his pursuit of sciences, especially astronomy. The reason why, as a poet, he has been relegated to near oblivion by his compatriots is not far to seek; his philosophy runs counter

to their theological beliefs. There is historical evidence to show that he was looked down upon in his own time for his attitude towards the religion of his countrymen.

If we bear in mind the cause of the callousness of his countrymen towards him and the fact that the ideas of other poets have been grafted on his poetry we can have a true understanding of the philosophy in Omar's poetry. The keynote is the deep sense of mortality and evanescence, and love for revelling in eroticism and Bacchanalianism. This not the babbling of a booby. Did not our greatest living philosopher, Lord Russell, say some time ago that the enjoyment of pleasures should not be delayed even for a moment.( Nairobi, October 15, 1961)

## **Prophet**

Two diametrically opposed views have been expressed on the 'Rubaiyat' of Omar Khayyam: according to Mr. H E Mohammed, the 'Rubaiyat' has a message that can condition the mind of the modern man so woefully over-engrossed in worldliness to live a balanced life; whereas Mr. Shamsu Din tells us that it is nothing but pastime reading.

Both these views are wide of the mark in their assessment of Khayyam: he is neither a prophet, nor does he aim at beguiling us. Khayyam's poetry does not have any message that may lift man out of the dross of worldliness, but it depicts the seamy side of life and lays stress on drowning trials and tribulations in the cup.. Surely, this is not the message worth the name.

A message should be made of more edifying stuff. The following lines quoted from Dr. Iqbal, who may rightly be called a man with a message, have a message of all men and all times:-

'Thou art a twig of the Tree of Paradise, do not reduce thyself to the state of a garden weed: although thou hast denied Him, at least do not deny thyself'

'Who and whence art thou that the blue sky is gazing expectantly in thy path with the myriad eyes of the stars?'

To dub the 'Rubaiyat' as nothing but pastime reading is , perhaps, not very just to person who was essentially a philosopher and had deeply studied Greek philosophy. The following quatrain , though written in Omar's characteristic vein does not seek to beguile us; it shows the poet's penetrating vision that gives a forthright view of the problem of how and why that has baffled philosophers into propounding many a fantastic theory:-

'Into this universe and why  
not knowing  
Nor whence, like water,  
Willy-nilly flowing;  
And out of it, as wind along  
The waste,  
I know not wither,  
willy-nilly blowing'

But this sorry scheme of things does not set Khayyam weeping like Heraclitus. His love for thinking suggests to him the remedy. He returns to hedonism:-

'Then to this earthen bowl

did I adjourn  
My lip the secret well of  
Life to learn:  
And lip to lip it murmur'd  
- 'While you live  
Drink – for once dead you  
never return''

Though to Khayyam wine and women are the only 'raison d'être' for life, they cannot cloud his philosophic reason. He knows that pleasure leads nowhere and is the vanity of vanities. Says he:-

'And if the wine you drink,  
the lip you press,  
end in the nothing all things  
end in – yes-  
Then fancy while thou art,  
thou art but what  
Thou shalt be- nothing  
thou shalt not be less'

In conclusion, it might be said that though Khayyam's poetry has not much of a message that may cure the ills of humanity, he does have a philosophy of life. His philosophy has been classified as neo-Platonism in some quarters. (Nairobi September 17, 1961)