

***Orientalist and Liberating Discourses of
East-West Difference:
Revisiting Edward Said and the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam***

Mohammad Tamdgidi

University of Massachusetts Boston

mohammad.tamdgidi@umb.edu

دشمن به غلط گفت که من فلسفیم
ایزد داند که آنچه او گفت نیم
لیکن چو در این غم آشیان آمده ام
آیا کم از آنکه من بدانم که کیم؟

*The foe claims in vain a philosopher I am.
God knows I am not what he says I am.
But, having endured this sorrows nest, I ask:
Why should I not know at least what I am?*
—Omar Khayyam, c. 12th Century AD

If I were to read to you several paragraphs from the news, a literary work, or a scholarly article in which the words “West” and “Western” alone were to appear numerous times, no eyebrows would be raised and no complaints would be lodged for having heard the terms. But, let the term “East” and “Eastern” appear in any similar texts, in particular alongside the terms “West” and “Western,” and these only a very few times, and expect to hear numer-

ous complaints nowadays, especially from politically-correct quarters, that I or the texts have misguidedly introduced a false dichotomy, a dualism, a binary, a bipolarity, a false separation or distinction, etc., that needs to be immediately corrected and/or justified. The terms “West” and “Western” in and of themselves imply their opposites, that is, the non-West and non-Western—which could be substituted by “East” and “Eastern.” Yet our impulse upon hearing the uses of the terms “West” and “Western” is drastically different when the dichotomy itself is explicitly evoked in our texts and conversations. Say “Western intellectuals” and no one will even think of objecting; say “Eastern intellectuals” and expect quite a stir. Why? Why is it that we gloss over the evocation of a Western identity, but hesitate when the notion of an Eastern identity is evoked?

I just now—at the time of this writing—took a brief moment to conduct a spontaneous content analysis of the internet, thanks

to the wonderful search engine Google, and came up with an interesting list of numbers of appearances of the following terms regarding East and West (I used closed quotes to ensure phrase searches when applicable, noting that phrases such as “Eastern Politics” would also pick up “Middle Eastern Politics,” but East and West may at times refer to regional distinctions within a country as well. However, overall, the broad results were interesting; “m” stands for “million”):

East-West: 7,340,000
 West: 247m, East: 179m
 Western: 132m, Eastern: 59m
 Western World: 2,190,000;
 Eastern World: 44,900
 Western Thought: 287,000;
 Eastern Thought: 51,700
 Western Philosophy: 347,000;
 Eastern Philosophy: 235,000
 History of Western Thought: 10,800;
 History of Eastern Thought: 574
 Western Art: 982,000;
 Eastern Art: 66,100
Western Religion: 43,100;
Eastern Religion: 117,000
 Western Civilization: 1,240,000;
 Eastern Civilization: 13,800
 Western Science: 137,000;
 Eastern Science: 13,100
Western Politics: 15,400;
Eastern Politics: 33,700
 Western Logic: 6,020;
 Eastern Logic: 517
 Western Culture: 1,090,000;
 Eastern Culture: 66,800
Western Archaeology: 494;
Eastern Archaeology: 31,400
 Western Literature: 155,000;
 Eastern Literature: 16,200
 Western Colonialism, 18,800;
 Eastern Colonialism: 134
Occidental: 4m, Oriental: 17m

East and West dialectically imply one another. Use of the term West in and of it-

self evokes the notion of a supposed “East;” and vice versa. However, among all the terms randomly chosen above, except for the four areas of religion, politics, archaeology, and “oriental”/“occidental,” the pattern of wider use of the term associated with the West is maintained. But the very different set of numbers above, reversed in pattern, is quite telling. This may be too sweeping a generalization, but for the sake of argument the numbers support the notion of the East as a much older (“archeology”) tradition central to whose cultural production is spirituality (“religion”), yet has experienced a higher share of conflict (“politics”) and been, relatively speaking, much more often subjected to the gaze of its opposite (“oriental”). And yet, from the standpoint of political correctness today, representing oneself as “Eastern” is perceived as being more problematic than being labeled as “Western.”

The Omar Khayyam’s quatrain opening this paper speaks to the heart of the crisis of representation facing the non-Western/European world. I know that the other cannot really know who I am over and above how I represent myself; but why could not I, or more importantly should not I, know who I am? Why can’t I know and represent myself? Why am I not acknowledged for having the capacity and power to represent myself? Is the difficulty with self-knowledge and self-representation, individual or collective, an impasse arising from an inescapable human condition, or is it a socially, a world-historically, constructed condition that privileges the other over the self in seeking individual and collective self-knowledge and self-representation? What is the nature of this condition—what Khayyam refers to as the “sorrows nest”—which has shaped our ontologies, epistemologies, sociologies, and psychologies, to privilege the other over the self to the point where even when one, individually and/or collectively, engages in seeking self-knowledge and self-reflection, the effort is imme-

diately pathologized?

The same dilemma of representation exists in regard to the discourses of East-West difference and speaks to the heart of the orientalist attitude which the late Edward Said (1979) sought to severely critique and expose as part of his engaged humanist scholarship.¹ *Orientalism* opens with the quote from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* by Karl Marx, "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented." According to Said, orientalism is the representation (or more accurately and often, misrepresentation) of the East through the eyes of the West serving the interests of imperial and colonial control. Orientalism is about imperial misrepresentations of the colonized East by the West, of a subjugated East by an imperial West, not as how the East sees and imagines itself, but as how the West does.

1. Edward Said clearly associated himself with the humanist tradition, drawing sharp lines of dissociation with the postmodern perspective. In this regard it is important to note how Said represents his own intellectual project:

The purpose of intellectual's activity is to advance human freedom and knowledge. This is still true, I believe, despite the often repeated charge that "grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment," as the contemporary French philosopher Lyotard calls such heroic ambitions associated with the previous "modern" age, are pronounced as no longer having any currency in the era of postmodernism. According to this view grand narratives have been replaced by local situations and language games; postmodern intellectuals now prize competence, not universal values like truth or freedom. I've always thought that Lyotard and his followers are admitting their own lazy incapacities, perhaps even indifference, rather than giving a correct assessment of what remains for the intellectual a truly vast array of opportunities despite postmodernism. For in fact governments still manifestly oppress people, grave miscarriages of justice still occur, the co-optation and inclusion of intellectuals by power can still effectively quieten their voices, and the deviation of intellectuals from their vocation is still very often the case. (Said, 1994:17-18)

I am sure my pointing to the East-West difference in the preceding lines has already raised some eyebrows with regards to the so-called dichotomization of East and West. But this was precisely my intention. My purpose in this paper is in fact to direct our attention to that question, and more specifically to a misreading of Edward Said's text in regard to the issue of East-West difference. I believe this issue is of fundamental significance in our efforts not only to critique but to transcend orientalism (and occidentalism) and the crisis of representation in search of authentic autobiographies and world-histories.

The irony implicit in the title I have chosen for this paper ("Orientalist and Liberating Discourses of East-West Difference") may now be clear. I am distinguishing between different (orientalist vs. liberating) approaches to the East-West difference, not for blanket dismissal of the East-West difference itself. The irony that I see here is that, on the one hand we call for respecting diversity and difference, and on the other dismiss or even condemn the evocation of the East-West cultural difference as being artificial, dichotomous and expressive of a false dichotomy. We reject the politically-incorrect notions of color-blindness or gender-blindness but insist on pushing the notion of East-West difference under the carpet in favor of a culture-blind discourse in political correctness. In the very conference in which we are invited to explore theories and praxes of difference—and this, on a campus whose academic and pedagogical identity is strongly built on recognition and respect for diversity and difference—we are also invited to revisit a prolific thinker, i.e., Edward Said, whose critique of orientalism is believed by some to have involved the questioning of the East-West binary, dualism, and difference.

In parts of his own writings, Edward Said seems to lend credence to this interpretation of his text:

Recently, for example, Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University advanced the far from convincing proposition that Cold War bipolarism has been superseded by what he called the clash of civilizations, a thesis based on the premise that Western, Confucian, and Islamic Civilizations, among several other, were rather like watertight compartments whose adherents were at bottom mainly interested in fending off all the others. (Said, 1979: 347)

... This is preposterous, since one of the great advances in modern cultural theory is the realization, almost universally acknowledged, that cultures are hybrid and heterogeneous and, as I argued in *Culture and Imperialism*, that cultures and civilizations are so interrelated and interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated descriptions of their individuality. How can one today speak of "Western civilization" except as in large measure an ideological fiction, implying a sort of detached superiority for a handful of value and ideas, none of which has much meaning outside the history of conquest, immigration, travel, and the mingling of peoples that gave the Western nations their present mixed identities? ... And this was one of the implied messages of *Orientalism*, that any attempt to force cultures and peoples into separate and distinct breeds or essences exposes not only the misrepresentations and falsifications that ensue, but also the way in which understanding is complicit with the power to produce such things as the "orient" or the "West." (Said, 1979: 347)

In the same text of the Afterword to *Orientalism*, however, we find instances in which Said himself uses the East-West terminology and distinction to elaborate on his approach to the subject. He writes, for instance,

I must confess to a certain pleasure in listening in, uninvited, to their [Orientalists'] various pronouncements and inter-Orientalist discussions, and an equal pleasure in making known my finds both to Europeans and non-Europeans. I have no doubt that this was made possible because I traversed the imperial East-West divide, entered into the life of the West, and yet retained some organic connection with the place from which I originally came. (Said, 1979:336)

If there is no dichotomy between East and West, in other words, why traverse their divide? Elsewhere, in his *Freud and the Non-European* (2003) lectures delivered to the Freud Museum of London, Edward Said draws upon the works and thought of Franz Fanon in contrast to that of Freud, when speaking of cultural difference. Approvingly acknowledging that "[t]he notion that there were other cultures besides that of Europe about which one needed to think is really not the animating principle for his [Freud's] work that it was in Fanon's..." (22), Said writes:

Not surprisingly, then, and even though his prose and some of his reasoning depend on it, Fanon rejects the European model entirely, and demands instead that all human beings collaborate together in the invention of new ways to create what he calls "the new man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth." (Said, 2003:21)

In other words, in one passage the East-West dichotomy is eschewed, while in another the distinction of the European or Western from the other is used to advance his own, via Fanon's, argument. Is this an inconsistency in Said's presentation of his argument? Does the East-West distinction become problematic only when employed by the adversary, but not so when used in advancing Said's own argument? Karl Mannheim's distinction (1936) between the analysis of ideology and the sociology of knowledge—and of the transition from the former to the latter—comes to mind here. The distinction specifically involved a transition from awareness of biases in others' to those in one's own views. Are we witnessing here a similar distinction in Said's awareness of biases in his adversaries, but not in his own views?

Said is not entirely dismissive of the issue of East-West cultural difference—or at least its possibility. In the same Afterword to his *Orientalism* (1979), he writes:

What has been of special interest for me has been the extension of post-colonial concerns to the problems of geography. After all, *Orientalism* is a study based on the rethinking of what had for centuries been believed to be an unbridgeable chasm separating East from West. My aim, as I said earlier, was not so much to dissipate difference itself—for who can deny the constitutive role of national as well as cultural differences in the relations between human beings—but to challenge the notion that difference implies hostility, a frozen reified set of opposed essences, and a whole adversarial knowledge built out of those things. What I called for in *Orientalism* was a new way of conceiving the separations and conflicts that had stimulated generations of hostility, war, and impe-

rial control. And indeed, one of the most interesting developments in post-colonial studies was a re-reading of the canonical cultural works, not to demote or somehow dish dirt on them, but to re-investigate some of their assumptions, going beyond the stifling hold on them of some version of the master-slave binary dialectic. (Said, 1979:350-51)

My argument here is that we need to distinguish between Said's literary and political rhetoric and the substantive point he is making in regard to the East-West difference and orientalism. His work is a critique of a particular, that is, orientalist, way of seeing, reading, imagining, and subsequently ruling the non-European, the non-Western, world exacerbated by the political and conjunctural realities of the post-WWII and especially post-Cold War period. He is not, in substance, dismissing the East-West cultural difference itself. Said's own argument needs to be historically contextualized, in other words, to reveal the severity of his critique of orientalism. His is, at heart, a critique of a particular way of gazing and imagining the East-West difference, not the denial of the possibility or reality of a difference itself. In Said's view, human history is a history of constant reciprocity and exchange of ideas, values, information, and influences across cultures, traditions, and millennia.

However, it is one thing to represent oneself and another to be represented by an other, and more specifically by an imperial other whose interpretations of any cultural difference that may exist is shaped by its own imagination, desires, and interests in maintaining the master-slave dialectic. Critiquing these misrepresentations is the most immediate and primary purpose of Said in *Orientalism*, not the search for what an authentic representation of the East may be. But the tension in Said's rhetoric seems at times to be inconsistent in this regard.

For instance he writes in his Afterword:

Yet *Orientalism* has in fact been read and written about in the Arab world as a systematic defense of Islam and the Arabs, even though I say explicitly in the book that I have no interest in, much less, capacity for, showing what the true Orient and Islam really are. (Said, 1979:331)

But then he immediately follows this statement in which he confesses to a lack of interest and capacity for showing the true Orient and Islam with the statement:

Actually I go a great deal further when, very early in the book, I say that words such as “Orient” and “Occident” correspond to no stable reality that exists as a natural fact. Moreover, all such geographical designations are an odd combination of the empirical and imaginative. (Said, 1979:331)

These kinds of rhetorical claims and counter-claims somewhat obstruct Said’s main purpose in *Orientalism* of primarily critiquing an idea which “derive[s] to a great extent from the impulse not simply to describe, but also to dominate ...” (Said, 1979:331). But in the process of advancing such a rhetoric, space is opened not only for an inconsistency in his argument but for a misreading of his intentions. Aijaz Ahmad, in his “Orientalism and After” states:

There had been, [...], no evidence until after the publication of [*Orientalism*] that Said had read any considerable number of non-Western writers. By contrast, references to principal figures of the counter-canon of ‘Third World Literature’ surface very regularly in his more recent writings, even though not

even one of them has yet been treated with the hermeneutic engagement and informed reading that Said offers so often for scores of Western canonical figures; in the rare event that he actually refers to particular texts—as in the case of George Antonius or Ranajit Guha [...]—none receives the kind of detailed scrutiny which Said routinely accords to a wide range of European writers, from Swift to Renan to Schwab to Kipling. (Ahmad, 1994 [1983]:170)

Said himself warns his readers, in the concluding chapter of his *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), not to turn creeds and intellectuals into “Gods that Always Fail.” “I am against conversion to and belief in a political god of any sort,” Said continues, “I consider both as unfitting behavior for the intellectual.” It would be fitting therefore not to turn Said in turn into a god, for, if not his own words, but our misreading of his rhetoric, may lead us to impute certain meanings and intentions to his text that were not intended. At other times, however, we must always take into consideration that Said’s own biography and perspectives—his secularism and upbringing and education in the West, for instance—may have played an important role in his dismissal of certain aspects of non-Western culture which he may have considered, for political reasons, unacceptable or indefensible. Those who insist on historicizing Said’s discourse cannot make an exception to historicizing his own biography and the historical context shaping (and perhaps limiting) his world-view.

To clarify what may lay at the root of the crisis of representation, the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley’s (1902; cf. Jacobs, 2004) notion and definition of the “looking glass self” may be useful here. In my reading, the looking glass self is not an inescapable human attitude and condition, but a

pathological state conditioned by an alienated and alienating society which imposes on its members a mode of self-inquiry that is based less on authentic self-representation than on representation via our imaginations of how others view and judge us—whether or not this is based on how they actually view and judge us. Of course Cooley's definition is expressed from the vantage point of the observer, of how one imagines one appears to and is judged by an other, and the feeling one obtains as a result. But the definition may also be used to express the crisis of representation in social psychological terms, and in fact points to a plausible explanation for why, as a result of the looking glass self process, the self may have a difficulty in representing him/herself.

Cooley's definition emphasizes a central feature of the "looking glass self" process, that is, the role played *by imagination* in how the looking glass self comes to be. Cooley's widely-cited statement explicating the three phases of this reflective process is as follows:

... the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling; such as pride or mortification. (Cooley, 1902: 184)

Significant in this definition is that the imagination of the other by a self, in this case of the East by the West, does not really have to involve—and it often does not—how the other, the East, really is. The Western looking glass self involves how the West encapsulates its own colonial desires and needs in its imaginations of the East, resulting in the imagined judgment of its own superiority in the eyes of the East, culminating in its feelings of imperial pride and superiority. However, from the vantage point of the colonized, due to the very process of imperial imposition and rela-

tions of ruling, the East internalizes the West's attitude, imagining its own inferior appearance to and judgement by the Western other, resulting in a self-feeling of inferiority and incapacity to represent itself—to the point where the very reality of its existence is challenged by implying the notion of political incorrectness of posing binaries such the East-West dichotomy. Denying the East-West difference, in other words, may itself come to be regarded as the hallmark of an orientalist attitude in disguise.

Using Cooley's definition in the imperial/colonial context, in fact, one may arrive at a preliminary and plausible explanation for the crisis of representation: the crisis and inability of self-representation on the part of the East is itself a result of the operation of the economic, political, and cultural relations of imperial ruling—what Michel Foucault (1979) would call the internalized technologies of self-subjugation invented by the imperial carceral society to discipline and punish the colonized. The Western and orientalist psychologies' telling us that we need an Other to know who we are, when translated in the colonized context, metamorphoses into the notion that the East needs the West to know who it is—where the opposite possibility is often taken for granted. The notion that "East" does not exist, when the terms "West," "Western," or European, are unproblematically used to label a particular set of cultures from others, is therefore itself problematic and may signify the presence of a subtle internalized eurocentric bias at work.

The privileging of the Other over the self in the philosophical, scientific, and social psychological discourses of the West is itself an important epistemological impediment that disempowers the colonized subject to seek representation on its own apart from the authority of the imperial other, and devalues any efforts it may make in favor of authentic autobiographies and

historio-graphies. Khayyam's quatrain noted above is a protest against the privileging of the other over the self while being also an acknowledgment of the difficulties encountered in finding one's own identity and voice in the midst of a "sorrows nest," implying the alienating society. The very crisis of self-representation of the East is itself a product of imperial theorizing and world-historical praxes.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her famous article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) has noted how "writers like Edward FitzGerald, the "translator" of the Rubayyat of Omar Khayyam ... helped to construct a certain picture of the Oriental woman through the supposed "objectivity" of translation" (1994 [1988]: 102). The key point regarding the relevance of Khayyam to the argument advanced here is in fact the juxtaposition of an oriental vs. an authentic representation of his thought. Just because a FitzGerald mistranslated Khayyam and willy-nilly helped construct an orientalist view of his poetry, his philosophy, and in fact of his spirituality and the "East," does not mean that an authentic representation of Khayyam's thought is not warranted or possible. The most telling, if not damaging and degrading aspect of the introduction of Omar Khayyam to the world through FitzGerald has been the notion that Khayyam's culture is incapable of representing itself through producing verse translations of its own to convey the beauty and subtlety of his quatrains; that we need a FitzGerald to give us a taste of Khayyam in English, while his culture cannot; that we cannot represent ourselves; that we must be represented.

The orientalist stereotypes of the East cannot adequately represent the notion that an Eastern—yes Eastern—intellectual, can have a critical mind, reject unwarranted influence of powers that be, and refuse to fit into the straitjackets of blind adherence to particular religions, sciences, and philoso-

phies of his time. Khayyam, a global, or now a world-historical, intellectual was wary of all habitually accepted metanarratives that claimed to have an answer for cosmic and human mysteries; yet at the same time he made lasting contributions to science, spirituality, and philosophy of his time. The orientalist representation of Khayyam makes us believe that he was distinct and different, not because he was an Eastern intellectual, but because he was more "like us," Westerners, being a "free-thinker," "hedonistic," "skeptic," etc. Our orientalisms, open or subtle, lead us to dismiss the relevance of a certain set of poems by an astronomer and mathematician turned poet, i.e., Khayyam, or a mystic such as Rumi, in our sociological discourse, because such poetic or "mystical" pursuits are deemed "different" from the kinds of scholarships our "Western" sensibilities have made us familiar with.

We cringe when we hear of discourses of utopianism and mysticism when it comes to our Western sociologies and psychologies. It is just simply inconceivable to consider Rumi's or Khayyam's poetry as theoretical works expressed in poetic form, since our Western, or Westernized, sensibilities assume that theory must always be abstract, dry, and mostly incomprehensible to the world. Reciting Khayyam or Rumi in a sociology conference?—how exotic and "different!" We complain about binaries of East-West, but nevertheless continually construct binaries in which questions about social theory and poetry, science and spirituality, humanism and science, as well as mystical, utopian, and academic theorizing and praxes must be classified, compartmentalize, "disciplined," and frozen across rigid disciplinary boundaries. The works of a certain Rumi, or Khayyam, or a certain "enigmatic" Gurdjieff (1950; 1973) are seen to be too exotic and "mystical" for our so-called scientific, scholarly, psychological, and sociological pursuits, such that those of us coming from "different" cultural and in-

tellectual backgrounds have to justify at each step why we are studying and seeking to build dialogues across multiple civilizational traditions that have shaped our biographies and histories. And even when we insist on our interests that are different from others, we are pathologized for having fears of influence and afflicted with narcissism of minor differences. What for an imperial other is a minor difference, may be for the colonized selves major experiences of oppression.

Howard Zinn, in his *Declarations of Independence: Cross-Examining American Ideology* (1990), wrote "How we think is ... a matter of life and death" (1990). In other words, what appears as minor in theory may have major repercussions in praxis. As sociologists, among others, I think we also need to be asking the question, Who determines whether a difference is major or minor? Just note what the Bush administration basically said about the Abu Ghraib scandal: what happened there were just "minor" deviant behaviors of a few prison guards—nothing major. As Robert Merton asked about functionalism ("functional for who?") We need to be asking, major and minor for who? What is minor or major is, it is true also, in the eye of the beholder. And that is precisely what the gaze of the West does to the East. "Why insist on minor differences? He or she—the Eastern other—must be an "anxious type" ... better be psychoanalyzed!" Orientalism is not just an object of academic discourse, it shapes the very conceptual, curricular, scholarly, or even recreative structures of the knowledges we use, here and now.

To challenge simplistic Huntingtonian notions of clash of civilizations we do not need to abandon the substantive relevance and interpretive value of the East-West difference. On the contrary, by insisting on false polemics about using false binaries—when we abandon the same regarding race or gender blindness—we introduce false

clashes among ourselves about whether it is worth contemplating about the difference itself. Embracing or critiquing orientalism can be ironically similar in outcome if we are not careful; the whole enterprise of seeking, articulating, and representing the subaltern voice may be set aside and forgotten. Neither the East nor the West is a monolithic block. There are terrorists and humanists on both sides; there are barbarisms and civilities on both sides. The very notion that civilizations need to clash in an either/or intellectual, political, and militaristic confrontation is itself an uncivilized and barbarian proposition that engages and feeds the fundamentalist and terroristic tendencies on both sides. Binaries in and of themselves are not politically incorrect. Problematic is the dichotomous and dualistic ways in which they are conceptualized in mutual exclusion of one another, not in terms of their *identities in difference*, of the dialectics of part and whole. We use binaries all the time. Interesting is to wonder and understand why the East-West dichotomy is so stigmatized among other binaries in our scholarly debates.

The East-West difference may no longer be a clearly demarcated geographical distinction, but it arose from a geographically differentiated world-historical trajectory across millennia that produced distinctive contributions to world culture. The distinction may be analogous to the workings of the two halves of the human brain. One is analytical, specializing, splitting, and separating; another integrating and synthesizing (Deikman 1982). They represent cultural contributions made in favor of the equally necessary epistemological and methodological tasks of splitting and reintegrating modes of human dialectical discourse and development as a whole. One insists on the separation of human sciences and spirituality, of the separation of the two humanistic and social/scientific cultures (Wallerstein 1991; Gulbenkian Commission 1996), another cannot envis-

age human discourse without a holistic, integrative, cosmic, natural, scientific, artistic and creative discourse. Neither the analytic nor the integrative efforts in the global human cultural production can succeed in the absence, in opposition to, and in clash with the other. A dialectical conception of the East-West cultural difference, in fact, aims to integrate both into a singular and holistic framework while maintaining the distinctive contributions of each to the world culture.

I have elsewhere (Tamdgidi, 2002; forthcoming) argued that the conflict between settled and nomadic lifestyles is the source of the East-West dialectic long ingrained in our world-historical vocabularies and imaginations. The introversive nature of the East and the extroversive nature of the West are expressions of the same dialectic. The East-West discourse is an expression of the self-world dialectics of human development at work in particular world-historical spacetimes. The distinctiveness of the sciences as exemplified by the works of Eastern global intellectuals such as Omar Khayyam or Rumi, is that for them the sciences of nature, human society, and human mind and psychology are not conceivable apart from one another, and from the larger cosmic paradox of the meaning of human life and existence.

I would like to end this essay with a few of my verse translations of Khayyam's quatrains, not only to help represent the voice of an Eastern global intellectual, but also to provide a taste of the inherently integrative and anti-disciplinary message hidden in the simultaneously spiritual, scientific, philosophical, artistic, poetic, mystical, and utopian discourse immortalized in their midst—it is this holistic and integrative approach to knowledge production that, in my view, is the most distinctive and liberating contribution of the East to world culture and scholarship.

Khayyam has been called a mystic,

sufi, hedonist, skeptic, utopian, scientist, philosopher, freethinker, materialist, and much more, being uniquely criticized and praised by voices in both religious orthodoxy and mysticism. He was not persuaded by the conventional narratives of the religious orthodoxy, nor did he identify himself with any particular mystical school. However, he was also not satisfied with the assumed certitude of the “sciences” and philosophical discourses of the past or his time. Khayyam's quatrains speak of an independent spirit searching for rational answers to the paradoxes of existence. His poetry suggests its author's inclinations towards a mixture of mysticism on one hand and this-worldly utopianism on the other, but identifying with neither of the crowds. He demonstrates a skeptical attitude toward the claims of both religious and secular dogmatism. He may have been *in* religious, “scientific,” and philosophical currents of his time; but he was not *of* them.

In reading the quatrains in the original, one is often struck by the creative skill with which Khayyam employs his keen sense of spatiotemporality to construct his skeptical and paradoxical interpretations of the relationship between himself and the universe as a whole. The spatiotemporal dialectics of the self, here-and-now, and universal world-history as a whole informs the paradigmatic structure of the symbolic imagery built into Khayyam's poetry. A close reading of the rubaiyat makes it apparent how Khayyam's astronomical and philosophical pursuits found their way into the fabric of his poetry. The adoption of the surname “Khayyam” or “tentmaker” may have been a genealogical coincidence, but the imagery of a simple and detached nomadic abode in a transient earthly life perhaps provided Khayyam with a motif for the poetic reconstruction of his life's story.

It would be wrong to extrapolate the meaning of Khayyam's views on life in general from the message contained in each

of his quatrains in isolation, for each quatrain plays only a part in the drama of Khayyam's poetry as a whole. Moreover, a literal interpretation of his symbolism of wine as such—and not as representing a deep, almost intoxicating, appreciation of the nature and dynamics of meditation—would be a gross misrepresentation of the real meaning and purpose of his quatrains. The spatiotemporal poetics of part and whole in Khayyam's rubaiyat involve a synthesis of his multifaceted astronomical and philosophical wanderings in the universe and his everyday selves in search of rational answers to the mysteries of life, death, and immortality.

Reminding himself and his audience of the inevitability of our physical death has for Khayyam a paradigmatic significance in dehabituating and detaching humanity from the transient bonds of greed, fame, wealth, and power, directing our attention to the paradox of our journeys in cosmic space and time. And he finds his ultimate answer to the paradox of immortality in the everlasting flow of the crystal clear elixir of his meditative life, the creative wine droplets of his science and spirituality as expressed in his poetry.

گر من ز می مُغانه مستم هستم
گر عاشق و رند و می پرستم هستم
هر طایفه ای زمن گمانی دارد
من ز آن خودم چنان که هستم هستم

*Am I high from the Magian wine? Yes, I am.
Am I sly, lover, worshipping wine? Yes, I am.
Crowds suppose I am this, that, or the other.
I am my own, the way I am. Yes I am.*

قومی متفکـرند اندر ره دین
قومی به گمان فتاده در راه یقین
می ترسم از آنکه بانگ آید روزی
کای بیخبران! راه نه آن است و نه این

*One crowd in religion ponder their way.
One crowd in science supposedly stray.
I fear one morning town-crier shouts:
"The way's not this nor that! O gone astray!"*

این بحر وجود آمده بیرون ز نهفت
کس نیست که این گوهر تحقیق بسفت
هر کس سخنی از سر سودا گفتند
ز آنروی که هست کس نمیتواند گفت

*This ocean of being grew from the concealed.
No one ever has the jewel of its truth drilled.
All claimed in vain to have found the jewel,
But nobody can tell how it can be revealed!*

در دایره ای که آمدن و رفتن ماست
او را نه نهایت نه بدایت پیداست
کس می نزنند دمی در این معنی راست
کاین آمدن از کجا و رفتن به کجاست

*The circle comprising our coming and going,
Has no end or start—infinately flowing.
No one has revealed its straight truth about
Where we come from and go to—unknowing.*

هرچند که رنگ و بوی زیباست مرا
چون لاله رخ و چو سرو بالاست مرا
معلوم نشد که در طربنامه خاک
نقاش ازل بهر چه آراست مرا

*My color and smell—O what beauty!
My face a tulip, and height, a Cyprus tree!
In this jolly garden of Earth, I wonder
Why the Genesis artist painted me!*

ای چرخ فلک خرابی از کینه تست
بیدادگری شیوه دیرینه تست
ای خاک اگر سینه تو بشکافند
بس گوهر قیمتی که در سینه تست

*Your vengeance, O heaven, causes all ruin!
Injustice, your old art, isn't it, O heaven!?
If they slit your chest, O Earth, they'll find
Oh, so many precious jewels hidden!*

ما لُعبتکانبیم و فلک لُعبت باز
از روی حقیقتیم نه از روی مجاز
یک چند در این بساط بازی کردیم
رفتیم به صندوق عدم یک یک باز

*Heaven's a doll player and we, playing dolls—
Real dolls not fake, though, in these cosmic halls.
For a while we played in this vast playground,
Then returned, one by one, to the chest full of nulls.*

این کوزه چو من عاشق زاری بوده ست
در بند سر زلف نگاری بوده ست
این دسته که بر گردن او می بینی
دستی است که بر گردن یاری بوده ست

*This jar, as I, was a poor lover once,
Chained to the long hair of a beloved once.
This handle you see on the neck of the jar
Was a lover's hand on his beloved once.*

پیش از من و تو لیل و نهار بودست
کردنده فلک نیز به کاری بودست
هر جا که قدم نهی تو بر روی زمین
آن مردمک چشم نگاری بودست

*Before you and I were many days and nights.
The heaven's been at work in heavenly flights.
These stones you lay your foot on today,
Were for a time eyeballs of lovers' sights.*

از آمدنم نبود گردون را سود
وز رفتن من جلال و جاهش نفزود
وز هیچ کسی نیز دو گوشم نشنود
کاین آمدن و رفتنم از بهر چه بود

*From my coming here, heaven profited not.
From my leaving, it's majesty increased not a lot.
And my two ears never heard from anyone,
My arrival and leaving this world was for what!?*

کس مشکل اسرار اجل را نگشاد
کس یک قدم از دایره بیرون ننهاد
من می نگرم ز مبتدی تا استاد
عجز است به دست هر که از مادر زاد

*No one has unravelled the secrets of dying.
Outside this circle, no one's been prying.
Novices, masters, all of whom I've met,
Remain as baffled as the newborn crying.*

دریاب که از روح جدا خواهی رفت
در پرده اسرار فنا خواهی رفت
می نوش ندانی ز کجا آمده ای
خوش باش ندانی به کجا خواهی رفت

*Beware! You will go from your soul apart,
Beyond the veil, to the secrets of doom's heart.
Drink Wine! You'll never know where you've come from.
Be jolly! You'll never know where to you depart.*

گویند گسان بهشت با حور خوش است
من میگویم که آب انگور خوش است
این نقد بگیر و دست از آن نسویه بدار
که آواز دهل شنیدن از دور خوش است

*Paradise, they say, is good for its beauts.
Better, though I say, is grape wine's truths.
Take this cash, let go of that promised dream,
For percussion only from long distance soothes.*

افسوس که نامهٔ جوانی طی شد
و آن تازه بهارِ زندگانی دی شد
آن مرغِ طرب که نام او بود شَباب
افسوس ندانم که کی آمد کی شد

*Alas! my blank page of life is now gray.
My springtime is now a winter's day.
That Nightingale called "the bird of youth,"
Flew over me. When? I can't even say!*

این قافلهٔ عمر عجب می گذرد
در یابِ دمی که با طرب می گذرد
ساقی غمِ فردای حریفان چه خوری
پیش آر پیاله را که شب می گذرد

*This life's caravan is so soon passing!
Cherish the moment that's joyfully passing!
What judgments foes pass will pass, O wine pal!
Just pass over the cup, for the night is passing!*

کم کن طمع از جهان و میزی خرسند
از نیک و بدِ زمانه بگسل پیوند
می در کف و زلفِ دلبری گیر که زود
هم بگذرد و نماند این روزی چند

*This world and its full house, desire not.
Of "the good and the evil" free your lot.
Raise the cup and caress a lover's hair.
Like your days they, too, will be not.*

چون آمدنم به من نبود روزِ نَحُست
وین رفتنِ بی مُرادِ عزمیست درست؟
برخیز و میان ببند ای ساقی چُست
که اندوهِ جهان به می فرو خواهم شُست

*In my coming to life, I had no say.
Is leaving unfulfilled part of the play?
Get up O beloved, now pour me wine,
So I can wash world's sorrows away.*

از آمدن و رفتن ما سودی کو؟
وز تار وجود عمر ما پودی کو؟
در چنبر چرخ جانِ چندین پاکان
می سوزد و خاک می شود دودی کو؟

*We all come and go—but the gain is where?
Warps of our life stay—but the weft is where!?
In this whirling kiln many innocent lives
Burn and dust away—but the smoke is where?*

هنگام سپیده در خروسِ سَحری
دانی که چرا همی کند نوحه گری
یعنی که نمودند در آئینهٔ صبح
کز عمر شبی گذشت و تو بی خبری

*Do you know the morning rooster why
Mourns at dawn, raising aloud the cry?
It says: "One more night passed, O fool,
And on the ignorant's bed still you lie."*

افسوس که بی فایده فرسوده شدیم
با داسِ سپهرِ سرنگون سوده شدیم
دردا و ندامتا که تا چشم زدیم
نابوده به کام خویش نابوده شدیم

*Alas! how uselessly perished I!
By heavenly sickle reaped up high!
O what pains and regrets I endured and then,
Died unfulfilled in the blink of an eye!*

من ظاهرِ نیستی و هستی دانم
من باطنِ هر فراز و پستی دانم
با این همه از دانشِ خود شرمم باد
گر مرتبه ای و رایِ مستی دانم

*About how things appear or not, I know.
About the meaning of depth and height, I know.
Shame on my knowledge of things, though,
If a state higher than drunkenness I know.*

آنگه که نهالِ عمرِ من کنده شود
و اجرام ز یکدگر پراکنده شود
گر زانکه صراحی کنند از گلِ من
حالی که پُر از میشِ کنی زنده شود

*When my life-tree's uprooted, or when
Heavenly bodies scattered 'till end,
If you mold my clay into a jar
And fill it up with wine, I will live again.*

یک قطرهٔ آب بود با دریا شد
یک ذرهٔ خاک با زمین یکتا شد
آمد شدن تو اندر این عالم چیست
آمد مگسی پدید و ناپیدا شد

*A water drop it was—joined the sea in pour.
A tiny dust in air—now one with the floor.
You came to this world for what purpose, you think?
A fly just flew by, but is there no more.*

ای پیرِ خردمند پگه تر بر خیز
و آن کودکِ خاکبیز را بنگر تیز
پندش ده و گو که نرم نرمک می بیز
مغزِ سرِ کیقباد و چشمِ پرویز

*Get up earlier at dawn, O wise old friend.
For that child sifting the dust please send.
Advise him, say: "Sift more gently, boy,
"These are kings' heads and eyes at each end!"*

مرغی دیدم نشسته بر بارهٔ طوس
در پیش نهاده کلهٔ کیکاووس
با کلهٔ همی گفت که افسوس افسوس
کو بانگِ جرسها و کجا نالهٔ کوس

*I saw a bird once in the Castle of Tus,
Sitting beside the head of King Keikavoos,
And saying constantly: "Alas, alas, where
Are the battle drums and the bells after the truce!?"*

گر بر فلکم دست بُدی چون یزدان
برداشتی من این فلک را زمین
از نو فلکی دگر چنان ساختمی
کازاده به کام دل رسیدی آسان

*If I, like God, turned my heaven's wheel,
I'd take it apart all seal to seal.
I'd then remake it so the free in mind,
Reached heart's desire with no ordeal.*

بر سنگِ زدم دوش سبوی کاشی
سر مست بُدم که کردم این اوباشی
با من به زبان حال می گفت سبوی
من چون تو بُدم تو نیز چون من باشی

*I broke the night before a porcelain jar:
I'd been drunk I guess to go so far.
The jar cried: "You'll be in pieces too,
Just as I was whole, like now you are."*

کو محرّمِ راز تا بگویم یک دم
کز روزِ نخست خود چه بودست آدم
محنت زاده سرشسته ای از گلِ غم
یک چند جهان بگشت و برداشت قدم

*Where is the confidant! I must reveal,
What is the nature of the human, real.
From the start born of sorrows' clay
To roam the Earth. O what a deal!*

ای دوست بیا تا غم فردا نخوریم
وین یک دم عمر را غنیمت شمیریم
فردا که از این دیرِ کهن در گذریم
با هفت هزار سالگان سر بسریم

*O friend! Let's not bother with pains of next day.
Let's both take stock of this moment's pay.
Tomorrow, when we leave this convent old,
With seven thousand year olds we must lay.*

برخی‌ز و بیا بُتا برای دل ما
حلّ کن به جمالِ خویشتن مشکلِ ما
یک کوزه شراب تا بهم نوش کنیم
زان پیش که کوزه ای کنند از گل ما

*Rise O idol! come over to my heart afar,
Solve with your beauty this problem our!
Let's drink together a whole jar of wine,
Before they make from us a wine jar!*

چون عهده نمی شود کسی فردا را
حالی خوش کن تو این دل شیدا را
می نوش به ماهتاب ای ماه که ماه
بسبب یار بتابد و نیابد ما را

*Since no one can foretell tomorrow,
Now bring joy to lovelorn heart's sorrow.
Drink wine in moonlight O moon, for Moon
May no more cast and find our shadow!*

گر می نخوری طعنه مزن مستان را
بنیاد مکن تو حیل و دستار را
تو غرّه بدان مشو که می مینخوری
صد لقمه خوری که می غلام است آنرا

*Don't blame the drunkard if you are sober,
Don't build life on deceptions, moreover,
You may be proud of your sobriety, my friend, but,
On hundred greater bites you're hooked all over.*

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