

## Manipulation and Reception of English Translation of Rubaiyat by the Victorians<sup>1</sup>

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Reza Yalsharzeh<sup>2</sup>, Roya Monsefi<sup>3</sup>  
& Reza Shojaeinia<sup>4</sup>

### **Abstract**

This study investigates the English translation of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat by Edward Fitzgerald in the Victorian age. Khayyam was the great Iranian mathematician, philosopher, and poet whose Rubaiyat received a warm reception by the British audience of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Using a comparative descriptive method, the study first intends to show how an exotic text from the East was introduced to the British audience, how Fitzgerald added an orientation to the translation, in what ways he accomplished that orientation, and why the Victorians welcomed Khayyam's poetry. To achieve this, the study first discusses the reasons for Khayyam's good reception in Victorian age Britain. The discussions depicted that the carpe diem philosophy prevalent in Rubaiyat attracted many Victorians experiencing the religious doubt discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, forty quatrains of Rubaiyat which contain culturally specific items were selected purposefully and compared with their English translations using Bassnett and Lefevere's (1998) cultural manipulation theory to determine how Fitzgerald manipulated the original quatrains. Ten out of forty quatrains were discussed in this study as examples to show how Persian cultural-specific concepts were dealt with in the translation. The results implied that Fitzgerald removed references to the Persian cultural concepts in translating Khayyam, indicating British colonial and imperialistic attitudes towards the East.

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2. Assistant Professor of Translation Studies, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran; email: r.yalsharzeh@azaruniv.ac.ir

3. Corresponding Author: Assistant Professor of Translation Studies, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran; email: r.monsefi@azaruniv.ac.ir

4. M.A. in Translation Studies, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran; email: rezashojaenia@gmail.com

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### Introduction

Translation is of prime importance in re-contextualizing the source language text in another language. From the viewpoint of House (2015, p. 2), "translation can be defined as the result of a linguistic-textual operation in which a text in one language is re-contextualized in another language." Translation does not occur in isolation. It transfers and hinders the transference of the source text's ideological, social, and cultural features into the target language. Whenever manipulation occurs in the rendering process, there may be some triggers. Sometimes the manipulation occurs consciously to distort the cultural aspects of the source text. These manipulations often change the true meaning and intentions of the work and distort the target readership's understanding of the source text. Fitzgerald's English translation of Khayyam is an example of a text which, according to Munday (2016), contains a high frequency of distortion and manipulation that manifests the Victorian attitude towards Khayyam at the age of profound spiritual unrest when modernity and colonialism formed the mindset of most of the western world.

Fitzgerald lived in the Victorian age, the era of industrial developments and the peak time of religious controversies. Modernity which was the outcome of this age affected the traditional beliefs of the people of England. As stated by Turner (as cited in Simidchieva, 2011, p. 59), "between the 1840s and the early 1890s Victorian society found itself in the throes of a crisis experienced as religious doubt, skepticism, loss of faith and conversion", which was because of the scientific progress in the Victorian period. This can explain why the Victorians welcomed Khayyam's ideas and poetry that were in tune with libertine, materialistic Western modernity. Simidchieva (2011, p. 56) argued that Khayyam was "a simple hedonist, a fatalist or alternatively, a materialist

whose unconcern with the afterlife and 'eat, drink and be merry' philosophy" allured many westerns who were seeking the meaning of life in the world where former religious understanding and explanation of the world were losing ground.

Whereas Victorian people of the nineteenth century were satisfied with the commercial and industrial progress, they were confused because of the rapid development of technology. Abjadian (2016) stated that the Victorian age was the transition era, comprising significant transformations that had a twofold dimension: demolition and restoration. The older is interrogated, assaulted and the new is suggested. That is why the Victorian period was sometimes called the era of paradox. The ancient traditions were often criticized and rarely exalted. The critics like Simidchieva (2011) assumed Victorians as materialists who cared for the present life.

According to Drury (2015), Fitzgerald's depreciation of Persian literature had roots in biased colonial attitudes of Victorian Britain towards the East. As Munday (2016) depicted, there was a relation between the manipulations of Rubaiyat in its English translation and the imperialistic spirit dominant in the Victorian age. Apart from the manipulations that have occurred in the translation process, Drury (2015) argued that Fitzgerald was interested in Khayyam's carpe diem philosophy and his poetic style, the fact that can explain why Khayyam was translated in the Victorian age and why it received a popular reception by the Victorians.

According to Drury (2015, p. 147), Fitzgerald made his translation of Rubaiyat "elaborate a philosophy of "seizing the day": through lamentation, through the recounting of personal experience, through bald assertions of defiance against conventional piety, through metaphorical representations of a world in which human beings lack meaningful volition." In a like manner,

Aminrazavi (2005, p. 3) asserted that Rubaiyat of Khayyam became “modern revival of Epicureanism” during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Aminrazavi maintained that in the West, Khayyam was known as “a freethinker, the ‘Eastern Voltaire’ of the Islamic world whose cynical view on religion made him the hero of the thirteenth AH/nineteenth-century Europe.” As Hama and Raheem (2010) believed, Khayyam’s Rubaiyat won fame because they mirror religious and scientific controversies in the Victorian era.

In the same line, Farahzad (2006) maintained that Fitzgerald’s translation of Rubaiyat

gave an epicurean explanation to Khayyam’s quatrains and left no room for any Sufi interpretation of them in order to fit his so-called translation into the Western frame of thought, and gain himself a fame he would perhaps never achieve otherwise (p. 46).

Although many of the English scientists of the Victorian age believed in religion, their discoveries had the most significant effect on religious beliefs and shook the general public’s faith. In 1859, Darwin’s contentious book “*Origin of Species*” was published. It caused a great disturbance and disarranged doctrines of the church in the field of creation. Darwin’s book introduced a new image of the creation and transition of humans and other creatures’ lives. These new thoughts and discoveries weakened Victorians’ beliefs in church and Bible and promulgated religious doubts.

As can be seen, the epicurean orientation of Fitzgerald’s translation fitted the materialistic spirit of the Victorian age, the fact that can explain the warm reception of Rubaiyat in the 19th century. In the next section, the study investigates how Fitzgerald’s translation which received a popular reception by the Victorian, was manipulated to suit the imperialistic spirit of the Victorian age.

## Literature Review

Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) first introduced the hypothesis of translation as a form of cultural interaction, manipulation, and rewriting, which was then framed in Cultural Manipulation Theory and practiced in translation studies by different scholars in different languages. In their cultural manipulation theory, Bassnett and Lefevere (1998) focused mainly on examining the factors that systemically governed the reception, acceptance, or rejection of literary texts, such as power, ideology, institution, and manipulation. They maintained that translation is the most recognizable type of rewriting, and it is potentially the most influential because it can project the image of an author and those works beyond the boundaries of their culture of origin.

For instance, Aleahmad (2021) studied the effect of ideology on the content and form of Fitzgerald's translation of Khayyam. He stated that Victorian people's scornful outlook toward the East led to ideological manipulation of source texts by translators such as Fitzgerald. Similarly, Nakhaei (2019) investigated the English translation of Khayyam to determine the impact of power and ideology on Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubáiyát from a postcolonial approach. She concluded that Fitzgerald maintained a negative attitude towards Persian and somehow ignored the historical and ideological contexts in which the Persian text was created. Drawing on imperialistic attitudes towards the East, she stated that translations demonstrate the relation of stronger versus weaker, of free versus confined, and of owner or master versus servant or slave.

In another study, Mashhady and Noura (2012) aimed to study the translation techniques that Fitzgerald used in translating *Rubaiyat*. In addition to acknowledging the various difficulties the translator faced, the study demonstrated that omission and domestication were among the important strategies in the English translation. In his research, Zare Behtash (1994)

intended to show how Fitzgerald recreated a fresh persona in his English translation of Khayyam, a hedonistic nihilist who did not care for the afterlife at all. He maintained that the English Khayyam, who bears no trace of his Eastern nature, is entirely in line with the Victorian image of a perfect man. In a like manner, Dave (2017), in a study about Khayyam's English translation, argued that the Persian poet is roughly misunderstood and his philosophical thought is reversely perceived among target readers.

As can be seen from the above studies, most of the literature regarding the English translation of Khayyam considered the manipulations that occurred in the translation and did not explain the reasons for the warm reception of Khayyam in the Victorian age. Focusing on the characteristics of the Victorian age, the study elaborates on the motives of favorable reception of Khayyam among the Victorians, while explaining the manipulations done in the process of translation which manifests the hierarchical attitudes of the westerns towards the east.

### **Method**

Using a purposive sampling method, the present comparative-descriptive study investigated 40 quatrains of Khayyam which contain cultural-specific items. This section selected ten out of forty quatrains to determine how cultural-specific concepts were treated in the translation and how Fitzgerald manipulated Khayyam, who was popular among the Victorians. For the Rubaii's interpretations, Dashti (1985), Khorramshahi (2012), and Ghazvini (1984) were consulted. Bassnett and Lefevere's (1998) cultural manipulation theory was used as the study's theoretical framework to explain the manipulation of cultural-specified items present in the source text.

### **Data analysis**

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

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive  
 Articulation answer'd, once did live,  
 And merry-made; and the cold Lip I kiss'd  
 How many Kisses might it take- and give!

برخیز و بیا بتا برای دل ما  
 حل کن به جمال خویشتن مشکل ما  
 یک کوزه شراب تا به هم نوش کنیم  
 زان پیش که کوزه‌ها کنند از گل ما

Come, my love, and for the sake of my heart  
 Resolve my problem with your beautiful presence  
 Bring us a jug of wine, and let's drink it together  
 Before many jugs are fashioned out of our clay.

لب بر لب کوزه بردم از غایت آز  
 تا زو پرسم واسطه عمر دراز  
 لب بر لب من نهاد و می‌گفت این راز  
 می‌خور که بدین جهان نمی‌آیی باز

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 shall return!"

The use of words such as vessel, bowl, and jug in the English translation for کوزه damages its rich meaning and significance in Eastern culture and reduces man to a worthless lump of clay. In Khayyam's view, کوزه is made of the human's clay (Dashti, 1985, p. 279); while, in Fitzgerald's translation, this word is devoid of its rich significance in the source culture. To the western readers, jug

is a container for liquids, whereas in Islamic and Iranian cultures *کوزه*, implies a human's body which turns into dust after death and shows the evanescence of life. By taking the literal meanings of the words, western readers were likely to lose track of the Rubaiis' rich implications.

The other widely used concept in Rubaiyat is "wine" as in the following examples:

بی‌مونس و بی‌حریف و بی‌همدم و جفت	می‌خور که به زیر گل بسی خواهی خفت
هر لاله که پژمرد نخواهد بشکفت	ز نهار به کس مگو تو این راز نهفت

Ah' make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the Dust descend;  
Dust into Dust, and under Dust, to Lie,  
Sans wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and- sans Ende!

فرمای که تا باده گلگون آرند	زان پیش که بر سرت شیبخون آرند
در خاک نهند و باز بیرون آرند	تو زر نه‌ای ای غافل نادان که ترا

And those who husbanded the Golden Grain,  
And those who flung it to the Winds like Rain,  
A like to no Such aureate Earth are turn'd  
As, buried once, Men want dug up again.

در حسرت هست و نیست ناچیز شدند	آنانکه اسیر عقل و تمییز شدند
کان بی‌خبران به غوره میویز شدند	رو بی‌خبرا تو آب انگور گزین

How long, how long, in infinite Pursuit  
Of This and That endeavor and dispute?  
Better be merry with the fruitful Grape  
Than sadden after none, or better, Fruit.

Wine is a recurrent motif in Rubaiyat, where Khayyam extols the virtues of wine as a life force and something that should be enjoyed to make the most of men's time before they descend into dust. As Dashti (1985) and Khorramshahi (2012) believe, the concept of wine has a symbolic role in motivating the audience to seize the day and enjoy every minute of it. In Persian literature, می has a spiritual connotation which means happiness excited by the divine. This understanding of wine is different from the earthly interpretation of it in western modernity. The Victorians took the literal meaning of this cultural-specific element, reducing the metaphysical side of the intention to its material and worldly aspects.

کیخسرو روز مهره در جام افکند

خورشید کمند صبح بر بام افکند

آواز «اشربوا» در ایام افکند

می خور که منادی سحرگه خیزان

Wake! For the Sun, who scatter'd into flight  
The Stars before him from the Field of Night,  
Drives Night along with them from Heav'n,  
The Sultan's Turret with a Shaft of Light.

Fitzgerald's free translation of this Rubaii removed references to the Persian cultural-specific items such as the names of the kings. This translation is an instance of the colonial, imperialistic attitude of the western man who is not interested in the nuances of eastern culture. The free translation of Fitzgerald can be explained in the light of the spirit of the superiority of a western man over an eastern man. As Fitzgerald noted:

It is an amusement for me to take what liberties I like with these Persians, who (as I think) are not poets enough to frighten one from

such excursions, and who really do want a little Art to shape them.  
(Fitzgerald, 1857, as cited in Lefevre, 1992, p. 80)

As the above quotation depicts, Fitzgerald's manipulation of Khayyam's poetry displayed a contempt that a western man felt for non-western people. That is why Fitzgerald took liberties to improve the original and correct the possible mistakes of the Persian poet.

و ارامگه ابلق صبح و شام است	این کهنه رباط را که عالم نام است
قصری است که تکیه گاه صد بهرام است	بزمی است که وامانده صد جمشید است

Think, in this batter'd Caravanserai  
Whose Doorways are alternate Night and Day.  
How Sultan after Sultan with his pomp  
Abode his Hour or two, and went his way.

This Ruba'i is related to the evanescence of the world and death (Qazvini, 1984, p. 94). Khayyam alludes to mighty Persian kings whose glorious empires are long gone to emphasize the world's transience. Jamshyd (جمشید) and Bahram (بهرام) are both the famous figures in Iranian history and culture whose sumptuous palaces have become ruined. By mentioning these significant persons, Khayyam wanted to show the fleetingness of life. In the translation, any reference to the names of these two figures was omitted and Fitzgerald employed "sultan" instead of جمشید and بهرام. He managed to transfer the whole idea of the Rubai but omitted the source cultural elements and then added "sultan," which is intelligible to the target readers.

از سرخی خون <u>شهریاری</u> بوده است	در هر دشتی که <u>لاله</u> زاری بوده است
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خالی است که بر رخ نگاری بوده است

هر شاخ بنفشه کز زمین میروید

I sometimes think that never blows so red  
The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled;  
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears  
Dropt in Lap from some once lovely Head.

لاله is the symbol of suffering and martyrdom in the Iranian culture and شهریار is one of the ancient names of Iranian kings. Fitzgerald employed neutral terms such as rose instead of لاله and Caesar for شهریار. لاله and شهریار are less familiar to the western ears and are not very understandable to the target readers. He successfully transferred the whole meaning of the Rubai to the Western readers but removed the source language's cultural elements.

پیمانه که پر شود چه بغداد و چه بلخ

چون عمر بسر رسد چه شیرین و چه تلخ

از سلخ به غره آید از غره به سلخ

می نوش که بعد از من و تو ماه بسی

Whether at Naishapur or Babylon,  
Whether the Cup with sweet or bitter run,  
The Wine of Life keeps oozing drop by drop,  
The Leaves of Life keep falling one by one.

بغداد and بلخ were the important cities of the Islamic world in the past. Fitzgerald used Babylon and Naishpouir to refer to these two cities, which were not exact translational equivalents. It seems that Fitzgerald used the more familiar cities to the western audience and ignored the cultural implications of these cities in the Persian text.

هنگام نشاط و عیش و قوال آمد

ماه رمضان گذشت و شوال آمد

گویند که پشت پشت حمال آمد

آمد گه آنکه خیکها اندر دوش

So while the Vessels on by one were speaking,  
One spied the little Crescent all were seeking:  
And then they jogg'd each other Brother Brother,  
Hark to the Porter's Shoulder-knot a-creaking.

Fitzgerald omitted Ramazan and Shawal in the target text and removed any reference to these two religious concepts of the Islamic world. He added spied, Crescent and seeking, referring to the beginning of the new month. He rewrote these lines in a way that is intelligible to western readers.

### Discussion

The current section focuses on ten quatrains of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*. These purposefully chosen poems were selected to determine how the cultural-specific items were treated by the Victorians who, according to Munday (2016), considered themselves superior to the eastern man.

The English translations of quatrains were published in one of the most diverse historical periods of England, especially in terms of religion. In addition, in the light of scientific advances in the fields of experimental sciences such as astronomy, biology, and geology, people were skeptical of their previous beliefs. Thus, one of the dominant discourses of this period, namely religious doubt, spread and circulated in society in different ways.

In his translations, Fitzgerald tried to portray Khayyam as a simple hedonist instead of a Sufi. Persian literature is replete with images such as wine and love; yet, these items rarely refer to the everyday wine used as a drinking material. According to Khorramshahi (2012), these words are often used as a metaphor to convey ecstasy excited by Divine love. By taking the literal meaning of these cultural-specific items, Fitzgerald disregarded the symbolic aspects of these words and depicted Khayyam as a material Epicurean. Moreover, by

removing any reference to the Persian cultural and historical concepts such as the names of the Persian kings and the religious months, Fitzgerald indicated how the Victorians took liberties to manipulate the work and improve the original.

Topics such as the shortness and transience of life, the inevitable and destined destiny, the celebration of time, and breath, the permanence of love and joy, and the inevitability of death and sorrow are the concerns that every mortal human being encounter at any time and place. These topics appealed to the Victorians who were experiencing the religious skepticism of the 19th century.

The portrayal of Khayyam as a hedonist, whose skepticism and unconcern with the afterlife allured the western readership, was in harmony with the Victorian line of thinking of scientific progress and modernity. This fact manifests itself in the epicurean interpretation of Rubaiyat by the Victorians. The removal of the allusions and the metaphorical meanings of the Persian cultural elements in the translation paved the way to the materialistic understanding of Khayyam in the Victorian Britain.

Khayyam's poetry has symbolic and cryptic features in which each symbol expresses a concept and behind each concept, a combination of emotion, imagination, experience, and image can be found. One of the most widely used symbols in his quatrains is "كوزه". Khayyam uses this symbol to convey the concept of death and the transience of life. As in his famous quatrain, he considers the pot to be a human who was once in love, then one day his life ended and he was buried and now he has become a pot. The handle of a pot resembles the hand of a lover around the neck of his beloved.

Considering translation as a form of rewriting, Bassnett and Lefever (1998) maintain that any translation produced based on another text intends to adapt the text to the particular ideology of the receiving culture. They argue that

"neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational 'unit' of translation" (p. 8). As can be seen from Fitzgerald's manipulative behavior in his translations and as maintained by Bassnett and Lefever (1990), translation is probably the most obvious form of rewriting. However, as shown in the English translations of Khayyam, translation is never an innocent aesthetic act as it is with Fitzgerald. According to Bassnett and Lefever (1990), translation always requires "a context in which it takes place, a history from which a text emerges and into which a text is transposed" (p. 11). Translation, therefore, involves more than the mere engagement of Fitzgerald with the original Persian text or the linguistic transmission of the Persian text into English.

### Conclusion

Cultures and ideologies are important factors in the translation process. The English translation of Khayyam's Rubaiyat was culturally and ideologically manipulated to suit the tastes of the Victorian readership. Most of the references to the cultural-specific items of Persian were deleted and were substituted by neutral terms in the English translation. Regarding the imperialistic atmosphere of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, these manipulations can be explained by the translator's disregard for the details of the Persian culture in an attempt to make Rubaiyat conform to the expected western conventions. Besides, the Victorian period in British history was a time of rapid industrial growth, social and religious unrest, and scientific discoveries, resulting in the emergence of new ideas and theories that challenged previously accepted opinions and beliefs. With its unconcern with the afterlife, Khayyam's poetry played an important role in establishing and consolidating one of the dominant discourses of the Victorian period, namely the discourse of religious skepticism.

The cultural-specific items in Khayyam's poetry have different connotations, raising different readings of Khayyam among the readers. Some Khayyam readings consider him a Sufi, and some others regard him as a materialist whose main aim is to seize the present moment. By literal

understanding of the cultural-specific terms, western readers come to an earthly interpretation of Khayyam which was in harmony with the changing spirit of 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Skepticism, one of the recurring topics in many of Khayyam's Rubaiyat, made the attainment of the truth and certainty beyond man's capacity. Given the inability of the human to attain the truth, Khayyam believed that it is better not to put away the wine cup because it does not really matter whether one is drunk or sober. This line of thinking allured the Victorians to the "seize the day" philosophy and made Khayyam famous for his hedonistic character. Moreover, the removal of Persian cultural-specific items in the English of Rubaiyat erased the exotic color of the eastern poetry in the view of western readers.

The idea of "refracted text" proposed by Lefevere in 1992 is manifested in the English translation of Khayyam. This idea proposes that translations are processed and adapted to the receiving audience. These adaptations in the translated texts are inspired by the ideology of the receiving culture in this case the Victorian ideology.

The present study's findings were in line with Zare Behtash's (1994) idea that Khayyam was received differently in British society. The focus on the earthly interpretations of Khayyam and disregarding the metaphysical aspect of his poetry rendered Khayyam into a simple hedonist who cared for nothing except the present moment. The study also moved other studies like Mashhady and Noura (2012) and Dave (2017) a step forward by examining the reception of Khayyam in the British society and the reasons for the allure of Rubaiyat among the Victorians.

Given the success of Khayyam in Britain, future studies can examine Khayyam's reception in other European countries which more or less enjoyed the same spirit of scientific skepticism and were influenced by the rapid industrial developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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## دستکاری و استقبال از آثار خیام در انگلستان عصر ویکتوریا<sup>۱</sup>

رضا یل شرزه<sup>۲</sup>، رؤیا منصفی<sup>۳</sup>

و رضا شجاعی‌نیا<sup>۴</sup>

### چکیده

مقاله حاضر ترجمه انگلیسی رباعیات خیام را به دست ادوارد فیتزجرالد در دوره ویکتوریا بررسی می‌کند. خیام ریاضیدان، فیلسوف و شاعر بزرگ ایرانی بود که رباعیاتش با استقبال گرم مخاطبان انگلیسی در قرن نوزدهم روبرو شد. این تحقیق ابتدا با استفاده از روش توصیفی-مقایسه‌ای نشان می‌دهد چگونه یک متن شرقی به مخاطبان انگلیسی معرفی شده است، چگونه فیتزجرالد ترجمه را به نفع خوانندگان بریتانیایی تغییر داده است و چرا انگلیسی‌های عصر ویکتوریا از ترجمه خیام استقبال کردند. برای دستیابی به این هدف، ابتدا دلایل استقبال از رباعیات خیام در عصر ویکتوریا بررسی شده است. فلسفه «لحظه‌اندیشی» و «خوش‌باشی» رایج در رباعیات خیام بسیاری از مردم ویکتوریا را که گفتمان شک مذهبی قرن نوزدهم را تجربه می‌کردند، به خود جلب کرد. سپس ۴۰ رباعی حاوی موارد خاص فرهنگی به طور هدفمند انتخاب و با ترجمه انگلیسی آن با استفاده از نظریه دستکاری فرهنگی بسنت و لفور (۱۹۹۸) مقایسه شد تا به این نکته پی ببریم چگونه فیتزجرالد، رباعیات خیام را دستکاری کرده است. ده مورد از چهل رباعی در این مطالعه به عنوان نمونه مورد بحث قرار گرفته است تا نشان دهد که چگونه فیتزجرالد با مفاهیم خاص فرهنگ فارسی برخورد کرده است. نتایج این بخش نشان داد که فیتزجرالد در ترجمه خیام هرگونه ارجاع به مفاهیم فرهنگی فارسی را حذف کرده است که بیانگر نگرش استعماری و امپریالیستی انگلیس نسبت به شرق است.

**واژه‌های راهنما:** ایدئولوژی، خیام، دستکاری، فرهنگ، فیتزجرالد، مفاهیم فرهنگی ایرانی

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۲. استادیار مطالعات ترجمه، گروه زبان انگلیسی، دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی، دانشگاه شهید مدنی آذربایجان، تبریز، ایران؛ پست الکترونیک: r.yalsharzeh@azaruniv.ac.ir

۳. نویسنده مسئول: استادیار مطالعات ترجمه، گروه زبان انگلیسی، دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی، دانشگاه شهید مدنی آذربایجان، تبریز، ایران؛ پست الکترونیک: r.monsefi@azaruniv.ac.ir

۴. کارشناسی ارشد مطالعات ترجمه، گروه زبان انگلیسی، دانشکده ادبیات و علوم انسانی، دانشگاه شهید مدنی آذربایجان، تبریز، ایران؛ پست الکترونیک: rezashojaenia@gmail.com