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The Awakening Wine: A Contextual and Philosophical Reading of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*

Uyanış Şarabı: Hayyam'ın *Rubailer*i'nin Bağlamsal ve Felsefi Bir Okuması

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ABSTRACT
This article offers a philosophical and contextual analysis of the metaphor of "wine" in Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, challenging reductive interpretations that associate Khayyam solely with hedonism and secularism. Drawing upon a clearly defined corpus of quatrains authenticated by leading Khayyam scholars, including Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob, Abdolhamid Gheibi, and Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı, the study argues that Khayyam's frequent invocation of wine functions as a profound metaphor for spiritual awakening, existential inquiry, and intellectual liberation. Rather than promoting literal intoxication, Khayyam employs wine to critique religious hypocrisy, emphasize the fleeting nature of life, and advocate for a conscious, wisdom-driven engagement with the present. The article examines the deep roots of wine symbolism within the Persian *hamriyye* (wine poetry) tradition, tracing its development from pre-Islamic ritual through Sufi mystical appropriation. It also examines how specific Western translators, including Edward FitzGerald, Friedrich Rückert, and J. B. Nicolas, have distorted Khayyam's original metaphysical intentions by reinterpreting his symbolic motifs within culturally alien frameworks. By situating Khayyam's poetry within its historical, linguistic, and intellectual contexts, and by engaging closely with authenticated Persian quatrains alongside their English translations, the study reclaims the richness of his symbolic language and restores the philosophical integrity of his worldview. Therefore, the article highlights how Khayyam's quatrains transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, offering a timeless call to self-awareness, moral clarity, and existential authenticity.

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Introduction

It is essential to recognize that not all *Rubaiyat* attributed to Omar Khayyam in various manuscript collections can be definitively ascribed to him, even when compilers claim otherwise. Many quatrains, now regarded as his, appear in sources compiled several centuries after Khayyam's death, such as *Mersad al-'Ibad*, *Tarikh-i Jahangusha-yi Juvayni*, *Tarikh-i Guzideh*, and *Munis al-Ahrar*. According to Fazeli, texts such as *Nozhat al-Majalis*, published two centuries after Khayyam's passing, contain thirty-one quatrains that some historians consider authentic (2008, p. 67). Due to these complexities, scholars engaged in Khayyam studies have developed rigorous criteria for evaluating and distinguishing his genuine quatrains. These criteria draw upon assessments of Khayyam's historical milieu, literary style, philosophical orientation, and epistemological

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framework. Any quatrain that deviates from these established standards is subjected to thorough scholarly scrutiny before being attributed to Khayyam.

Methodological Foundation: The Authenticated Corpus

The question of authenticity requires systematic methodological clarity. This study adopts as its textual foundation the corpus of 121 quatrains established by the preeminent Turkish scholar Abdülbaki Gölpınarlı in his seminal work *Hayyam ve Rubaileri* (1973). Gölpınarlı's methodology for identifying authentic quatrains rests on three pillars: (1) linguistic consistency, examining vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical patterns characteristic of Khayyam's period and distinct from later imitations; (2) philosophical coherence, assessing alignment with themes present in Khayyam's scientific and philosophical treatises (e.g., *Treatise on Existence*); and (3) manuscript transmission, prioritizing quatrains found in early sources predating the fourteenth century, when widespread attribution began. This approach is complemented by the scholarship of Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob (1979) and Abdolhamid Gheibi (2001). Zarrinkoob emphasizes thematic consistency with Khayyam's deterministic worldview and skeptical epistemology, while Gheibi contributes criteria based on historical contextualization—quatrains that reflect specific intellectual debates of the Seljuk period. Quatrains meeting at least two of these three scholars' criteria are treated as authentic in this study. All Persian originals cited herein are drawn from this authenticated corpus unless otherwise specified, with any deviations clearly noted. English translations are cited from various scholarly sources (Govinda Tirtha, 1941; Yogananda, 2000; Parchizadeh, 2010; Tajvidi, 1960) where these translators have rendered Gölpınarlı-authenticated quatrains. This methodological grounding ensures that the analysis proceeds from a defensible textual foundation.

Although Khayyam neither invented the *rubai* nor was its earliest practitioner, the form achieved considerable prominence through his innovative and influential contributions. His distinctive rhetorical approach encouraged later poets to adopt the quatrain as a vehicle for ontological inquiry and philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, the resemblance of certain anonymous or pseudonymous quatrains to Khayyam's stylistic and thematic characteristics is sometimes so marked that separating them from his authenticated corpus remains a significant critical challenge.

Critics such as Valentin Zhukovski (1898) and Arthur Christensen (1927) have censured Khayyam for his recurring references to wine, often interpreting these as evidence of hedonism or religious skepticism. However, Persian-speaking historians provide a more nuanced and multifaceted perspective. For example, contrary to the secularized portrayal often found in modern interpretations, Mustafavi cites a quatrain recorded in *Nuzhat al-Arwah wa-Rawdat al-Afrah* by Shams al-Din Mahmud Shahrazuri, in which Khayyam declares:

> Like fasting people, I abstain from all forms of overt and covert wickedness, and I do not walk except in the path of faithfulness. I break my fast in the remembrance of God and lead the misguided group back to the right path"; he further states: "My life plan is similar to a bridge that prevents the blind from falling. (Mustafavi, 1960, p. 135)

It is necessary to note that *Rahat al-Sudur wa Ayat al-Surur*, one of the earliest Persian biographical chronicles—composed by al-Ravandi in 1164, forty-two years after Khayyam's death—documents poets, significant locations, the Seljuk dynasty, and interactions with the Ghaznavids. Notably, al-Ravandi does not explicitly acknowledge Khayyam as a poet, although he includes a quatrain about wine that some sources attribute to him (Iqbal, 2006, p. 325). Furthermore, as Saeed Nafisi (1965) observes, numerous poets composed quatrains employing wine-themed imagery, including but not limited to Khayyam (pp. 60-61).

Western translators have played a particularly influential role in shaping Khayyam's reception. Edward FitzGerald (1859), the German Orientalist Friedrich Rückert (1822), the French consul and scholar J. B. Nicolas (1867), and later translators including Richard Le Gallienne (1897) and Franz Toussaint (1924) have selectively attributed wine-themed quatrains to Khayyam in ways that reflect particular interpretive tendencies**.** A detailed examination of FitzGerald's transformative role is provided in Ghodrat Gojar (2022). As will be demonstrated through specific comparative analysis in subsequent sections, FitzGerald's Victorian sensibilities led him to emphasize *carpe diem* themes while downplaying metaphysical dimensions; Rückert's Romantic orientation colored his rendering with mystical overtones foreign to Khayyam's original; Nicolas's colonial perspective positioned Khayyam as a skeptical rationalist in the European Enlightenment mold; Le Gallienne's paraphrases exaggerated sensual pleasure; and Toussaint's eroticized renderings further sensationalized the poetry. Moreover, socio-political figures in both Eastern and Western contexts have misrepresented him by associating his name with misattributed quatrains, thereby diminishing his stature as a scientist and philosopher committed to the pursuit of knowledge and faith. Nonetheless, the philosophical framework articulated in Khayyam's authenticated works demonstrates a coherent intellectual system that engages with themes such as the evolution of matter, the dynamics of existence and nonexistence, and the principles of division and aggregation, ideas that intersect with contemporary discussions in biology and philosophy. Accordingly, Khayyam's references to wine and the enjoyment of life are best understood as symbolic or psychological motifs, rather than literal endorsements of hedonism or moral irresponsibility, which would contradict the foundational values of philosophical and ethical inquiry.

The Wine of Khayyam

The term "wine" stands as one of the most debated metaphors in Persian poetry, particularly within the quatrains ascribed to Omar Khayyam. Edward FitzGerald (1859), followed by literary historian Arthur Arberry (1952), posited that any poetry lacking this motif cannot be considered genuinely Khayyamian. According to Shokrollahzadeh, such interpretive stances, largely shaped by Western readings of Eastern literary traditions, reflect a reductive understanding that is fundamentally misaligned with Khayyam's authentic oeuvre (2016, pp. 20-21). In reality, the metaphor of wine constitutes only a minor element within Khayyam's broader thematic repertoire, which more prominently encompasses motifs such as fate, death, the pot, the circle, the earthen blanket, the potter, the revolving heavens, and the nature of existence. Conversely, the appropriation of Khayyam's name and likeness on wine labels in Italy and France exemplifies the persistence of these misreadings—a trend fueled by centuries of inauthentic attributions and superficial interpretations that have circulated widely since his death (Shokrollahzadeh, 2016, pp. 20-21). Within Khayyam's genuine poetry, however, wine functions not as an endorsement of hedonism, but as a symbol of vigilance and spiritual awakening—a counterpoint to those absorbed in worldly distractions or misguided interpretations of existence and its mysteries.

Terms such as "wine," particularly in poetry, can radically transform viewpoints by engaging the reader's imagination beyond literal experience. One of poetry's distinctive characteristics is its ability to express emotions and thought processes with a depth that prose often cannot achieve. As Kazzazi states, "Thoughts that remain alone in our mind and do not reach the heart lose brightness and flavor" (1989, p. 16). Khayyam's profound hesitation before the mysteries of the cosmos, along with his disruptive questioning of human existence, life, and death, expressed through metaphoric and symbolic terms such as "wine," has drawn sustained scholarly attention, necessitating careful study of his quatrains. Hassanli and Hesampour argue that the eloquence and appeal of these poems derive not solely from the poet's mode of thought; rather, these lofty concepts become artistic phenomena in Khayyam's creative process, which gives them vitality and effectiveness (2005, p. 123).

The *Hamriyye* Tradition and its Development

The symbolic use of wine in Persian literature has a long and well-established history within what classical Arabic and Persian literary tradition terms *hamriyye* (wine poetry). This genre traces its origins to pre-Islamic Arabia, where poets such as A'sha and Tarafa celebrated wine's sensual pleasures. With the advent of Islam, the genre underwent profound transformation. By the 9th and 10th centuries, Persian poets began incorporating wine imagery with increasingly sophisticated symbolic dimensions. The great Sufi poet Abu Sa'id Abul-Khayr (967-1049) employed wine as a metaphor for divine love decades before Khayyam's birth. Subsequently, poets such as Farid al-Din Attar (1145-1221) and Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273) developed the wine metaphor into a comprehensive mystical lexicon wherein the tavern (*kharabat*) represents the state of annihilation in God, the cupbearer (*saqi*) symbolizes divine grace, and intoxication signifies spiritual ecstasy.

The motif of wine, while not exclusive to Khayyam and having been employed by numerous poets, mystics, and writers to evoke meanings that transcend literal interpretation and gesture toward metaphysical or spiritual states became a focal point of extensive criticism following the translation of his *Rubaiyat* into various European languages. Each translator, informed by distinct national, cultural, and literary contexts, rendered the Persian term for wine in ways that gradually diverged from its usage within its native and broader Eastern conceptual frameworks. A recent study by Ebrahimi Fard and Singh (2025) critically examines how Edward FitzGerald's 1859 translation, in particular, reflected Victorian England's cultural and ideological biases, demonstrating that his creative liberties reshaped the themes of the *Rubaiyat* to align with Western sensibilities. These interpretive divergences drew increased scrutiny from scholars of Persian culture, who contended that the hermeneutic worlds constructed by non-Persian translators appeared alien to the spirit of the work, introducing philosophical frameworks inconsistent with Khayyam's original thought (Salehbek, 2023, p. 267). This context intensified scholarly engagement with the work, prompting renewed efforts to reconstruct an authentic understanding of the poet and to preserve his legacy while simultaneously opening new intellectual and literary horizons.

Khayyam's frequent deployment of motifs such as soil, clay, dust, the jar, the bowl, and wine, often combined within notable quatrains, invites symbolic rather than literal interpretation. Any attempt to associate the poet with literal indulgence in alcohol is incongruous with his intellectual and moral character. Indeed, scholarly analysis emphasizes that Khayyam's praise of wine is "mostly rhetoric or metaphoric and is not to be taken literally," often representing "divine ecstasy" or the "wine of wisdom" acquired through contemplation on life's significant questions ("An Interpretation of 'Wine' Metaphor," 2010). This view is supported by research on translator ideology, which confirms that wine functions as an "old and rich symbol in Persian literature" that permits either materialistic or spiritual understanding depending on the reader's disposition (Azizi et al., 2017, p. 135). Within his quatrains, wine appears alongside recurrent terms such as caravan, traveler, wine cup, battlements, and the wine of death, collectively symbolizing the unpredictability and transience of human existence. Human beings are figured as travelers journeying with a caravan that inevitably reaches a singular destination; upon departing this world, their bodies return to dust, from which the potter fashions jars or bricks—sometimes for the battlements of palaces—thereby using, with symbolic resonance, the very dust of kings and viziers. This potter imagery conveys the "fragility of human existence and the need to handle it with sensitivity," a theme that has resonated across cultures, as even biblical reference works acknowledge the "legitimate protest of the clay" heard in Khayyam's quatrains (Hastings, 1909, "Potter").

Comparative Analysis: FitzGerald's Transformation of Khayyam

Khayyam presents multiple conceptions of wine that diverge significantly from FitzGerald's rendering, the latter emerging from a materialist perspective whose semantic parameters prove insufficient to encompass the poem's transcendental implications. To elucidate this distinction, it is

instructive to examine the following quatrain in its original Persian alongside FitzGerald's celebrated translation:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı's authenticated corpus, quatrain 47; also authenticated by Zarrinkoob, 1979 and Gheibi, 2001)	آن قصر که بر چرخ همی زد پهلو بر درگه آن شهان نهادندی رو دیدیم که بر کنگره اش کبوتری بنشسته همی گفت که کو کو کو کو
Transliteration	*Ān qasr ke bar charkh hamī zad pahlū* *Bar dargah-e ān shāhān nehādandī rū* *Dīdīm ke bar kongere-ash kabūtarī* *Benshaste hamī goft ke "kū, kū, kū, kū"*
Literal translation	That palace which thrust its side against the sky, At whose gate kings would present themselves, We saw upon its battlement a pigeon Sitting, continually saying, "Where, where, where, where?"
FitzGerald's rendering (First Edition, 1859, quatrain 18)	*They say the Lion and the Lizard keep* *The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:* *And Bahram, that great Hunter—the Wild Ass* *Stamps o'er his Head, but cannot break his Sleep.*

FitzGerald has fundamentally transformed the quatrain, supplanting the contemplative pigeon with imagery of lions, lizards, and Bahram-e Gur drawn from altogether distinct literary traditions. The original philosophical meditation on impermanence becomes, in his hands, a romantic Orientalist tableau. The corporeal wine of FitzGerald's translation had already circulated within European societies both preceding and following his work; consequently, Khayyam's metaphorical deployment of wine ought not to have provoked such sensational reaction. Consider, for instance, Khayyam's reference to the "wine of death," which induces unconsciousness in the individual when the angel of death severs the soul from the body:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	این اهل قبور خاک گشتند و غبار هر ذره ز هر ذره گرفتند کنار آه این چه شراب است که تا روز شمار بیخود شده و بی‌خبرند از همه کار
Transliteration	*In ehl-e ghobur-e khâk goshtand o ghobâr* *Har zorre ze har zorre gereftand kenâr* *Âh in che sharâb ast ke tâ ruz-e shemâr* *Bikhod shode o bi khabar-and az hare kâr*
Govinda Tirtha translation (1941, p. 228)	*Fellows of Graves pursue their dusty course,* *Their atoms each repulse the rest by force.* *O what a spell this wine of death has cast,* *It strips them from their 'Selves' and worldly sores.*

For Khayyam, life itself is a kind of wine that all humans must drink for a time, followed by the inevitable "wine of death," which no one can escape. These elements belong to a deterministic order governed by the Divine "Master," who alone knows when each cup is to be given:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated, quatrain 23; also authenticated by Zarrinkoob, 1979)	ما لعبتکانیم و فلک لعبت‌باز از روی حقیقتی نه از روی مجاز یک چند درین بساط بازی کردیم رفتیم به صندوق عدم یک یک باز
Transliteration	*Mā lo'batakānīm o falak lo'batbāz* *Az rūy-e haqīqatī na az rūy-e majāz* *Yak chand dar īn basāt bāzī kardīm* *Raftīm be sandūq-e 'adam yek-yek bāz*

Yogananda translation (2000, p. 72)	*Lo! Some we loved, the loveliest and the best* *That time and Fate of all their vintage pressed,* *Have drunk their Cup a Round or two before,* *And one by one crept silently to rest.*

The Persian original employs the metaphor of puppets in a puppet show, with fate as the puppeteer—a quite different image from FitzGerald's "vintage" and "cup." Life, in this sense, resembles a children's game played in unawareness until nightfall brings dissolution. Similarly, humans become engrossed in worldly concerns, seeking advantage over others, until a call of farewell suddenly arrives and they are removed, one after another, from the realm of existence.

Another manifestation of Khayyam's metaphorical wine is the "wine of beauty," through which sorrow and grief are alleviated by encounters with beauty in its various forms: harmonious sounds, graceful behavior, poetic language, and natural splendor:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	می نوش که عمر جاودانی این است خود حاصلت از دور جوانی این است هنگام گل و باده و یاران سرمست خوش باش دمی که زندگانی این است
Transliteration	*Mey nūsh ke 'omr-e jāvedānī īn ast* *Khod hāselat az dowr-e javānī īn ast* *Hengām-e gol o bāde o yārān-e sarmast* *Khosh bāsh damī ke zendegānī īn ast*
Parchizadeh translation (2010, p. 125)	*Carouse for life! For that's the After-Life:* *The only peace you'll find amid the strife!* *It is the time of May, and mates all gay:* *Awhile you merry make, for this is life.*

Youth, blooming flowers, and love represent manifestations of beauty that captivate the observer. The poet infers divine beauty from nature's magnificence, recognizing that the Creator of all such beauty must be absolute beauty. In Persian poetic tradition, the relationship between the Creator and creation is conveyed through metaphors carrying mystical connotations such as nature, intoxication, and wine. After dividing Khayyam's metaphorical wines into three categories—the intoxicant wine, the mystical wine, and the wine of wisdom—Aminrazavi (2005) concludes that "the pedestrian use of wine in the *Rubaiyat*, devoid of any intellectual significance, emphasizes the need to forget our daily suffering. The mystical allusions to wine pertain to a type of intoxication which stands opposed to discursive thought" (p. 126). The metaphor of wine thus conveys Khayyam's message that worldly possessions are fleeting, life will end, and its precious moments should not be wasted. For Khayyam, non-existence has no true reality; instead, the human task is to attain the "pure good," achievable only through engagement with the wines of art, beauty, knowledge, science, and wisdom.

Wine's counterpart, the cup, is another significant metaphor in Khayyam's poetry. "The Cup of Wine" carries deep symbolic resonance, conferring upon Persian esoteric poetry its distinctive spiritual tone. Greenberg (2008) notes that the "cup" (Arabic: *qadah*; Persian: *jam*, *saghar*) symbolizes the mystic's heart, the locus of divine manifestations, while the "cupbearer" (Arabic: *saqi*) stands for God as the source of love, or metaphorically for the Sufi master (p. 565). The jar, likewise, is a central metaphor in Khayyam's poetry, invoked alongside its parts: handle, head, lips, and neck. According to Shokrollahzadeh (2016), Khayyam uses this metaphor to illustrate the process of death and the jar-like composition of human personality (pp. 20–21):

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated, quatrain 12; also authenticated by Gheibi, 2001)	ای دوست بیا تا غم فردا نخوریم وین یکدم عمر را غنیمت شمریم فردا که ازین دیر فنا درگذریم با هفت هزار سالگان سر بسریم
Transliteration	*Ey dūst, biyā tā gham-e fardā nakhorīm* *Vīn yekdam-e 'omr rā ghanīmat shomārīm* *Fardā ke az īn dayr-e fanā dagzarīm* *Bā haft hezār sālegān sar be-sarīm*
FitzGerald's rendering (First Edition, 1859, quatrain 11)	*A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,* *A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou* *Beside me singing in the Wilderness—* *Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!*

Here again, FitzGerald has created an entirely new poem. The Persian original speaks of not worrying about tomorrow and cherishing this moment of life before joining the ancients in death—a philosophical meditation on mortality. FitzGerald transforms this into a pastoral idyll of outdoor pleasure with book, wine, and beloved, charming Victorian poetry, but not Khayyam. Banerjee (2015) explains that terms such as "bread," "beneath the bough," "wine," "book of verse," "wilderness," and "paradise" hold the key to interpreting this quatrain (p. 18). In both general and Sufi poetic conventions, these terms possess spiritual resonances that transcend their literal meanings. Banerjee (2015) interprets the passage as follows: "Withdraw your life force (wine) into the middle of the tree of life (bough), the spine, and bask there in the serenity of inner peace. As sensory turmoil subsides, drink the wine of bliss from the flask of devotion and commune inwardly with the heavenly beloved. In silence, listen, for the singing of blessedness will please every heart's desire with melodies of perfect wisdom" (p. 18).

To further strengthen the argument for metaphorical interpretation, consider Khayyam's use of potter imagery, a motif that explicitly connects human fragility with the cycle of existence:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	این کوزه چو من عاشق زاری بوده ست در بند سر زلف نگاری بوده ست این دسته که بر گردن او می‌بینی دستی است که بر گردن یاری بوده ست
Transliteration	*Īn kūze cho man 'āsheq-e zārī būde-ast* *Dar band-e sar-e zolf-e negārī būde-ast* *Īn daste ke bar gardan-e ū mī-bīnī* *Dastī-ast ke bar gardan-e yārī būde-ast*
Literal translation	*This pitcher, like me, was once a lamenting lover,* *Ensnared by the curl of some beloved's hair.* *This handle that you see upon its neck* *Was once a hand that clasped a lover's neck.*

This quatrain exemplifies Khayyam's philosophical anthropomorphism; wherein everyday objects retain the traces of human experience. The potter's vessel becomes a metaphor for the continuity of consciousness and matter, the "fragility of human existence" that demands sensitivity and awareness.

Another quatrain explicitly links wine with knowledge and awakening:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	می نوش که صد هزار خطر از دل تو برد و برهاند ز فکر باطل تو تو بی خبری ز خویش و می‌دهدت هشیاری و می‌کند ز تو به تو
Transliteration	*Mey nūsh ke sad hezār khatar az del-e to* *Barad o barahānad ze fekr-e bātel-e to* *To bī-khabarī ze khīsh o mī-dahadat* *Hosh-yārī o mī-konad ze to be to*
Literal translation	Drink wine, for it removes a hundred thousand dangers from your heart And delivers you from vain thoughts. You are unaware of yourself, and wine gives you Awareness and brings you from yourself to yourself.

This quatrain explicitly frames wine as a vehicle for self-knowledge and awareness ("brings you from yourself to yourself") precisely the opposite of literal intoxication diminishing consciousness.

Historical Context: Wine in Khayyam's Milieu

The historical record provides important context for understanding wine symbolism in Khayyam's work. Beyhaqi (1931) records that Avicenna (Ibn Sina), the great philosopher, and physician who preceded Khayyam by approximately a century, participated in gatherings where wine was consumed—not as mere indulgence, but as part of intellectual discourse (p. 41). As Qazvini (1965) narrates, similar practices occurred with some sultans (pp. 141–142). These historical accounts suggest that for Khayyam's intellectual predecessors and contemporaries, wine could symbolize a space for unfettered inquiry, a nuance lost in literalist readings. Zhukovsky (1898) and Christensen (1927), among early European scholars, questioned the legitimacy of these accounts, while more recent scholarship has examined the broader cultural context of drinking practices in medieval Persian intellectual circles.

In contrast, many Western interpretations, pioneered by FitzGerald and perpetuated by popular translations such as those of Richard Le Gallienne (1897) and Arthur Arberry (1952), portray Khayyam as a hedonist or agnostic figure who celebrates the literal consumption of wine in the company of beautiful companions. Le Gallienne, for instance, rendered quatrains with exaggerated emphasis on sensual pleasure, while Arberry's academic translations, though more accurate, nevertheless framed Khayyam within a skeptical, anti-religious paradigm shaped by mid-twentieth-century secular humanism. Amin Razavi (2005) acknowledges that "many of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, if taken literally, lend credence to this perspective" (p. 6). Thus, research into the theme of wine in Khayyam's poetry must account for the intellectual and philosophical context of his life. Such an approach allows for accurate and faithful interpretation of his symbolic language and helps preserve the integrity of his work through rigorous and thoughtful analysis.

Khayyam's dialect, lexicon, and phrasing are notably simple; yet his poetry conveys cognitively and intellectually significant ideas, an aspect that marks his work as a poetic masterpiece. His key terms, however, are subject to a wide range of interpretations and controversies. Among these, the term "wine" remains particularly challenging. As the consumption of wine is prohibited in Islam, it has inevitably provoked strong reactions from religious conservatives. The Quran states: *"O you who believe, truly intoxicants, gambling, sacrifices made at stone altars, and divining arrows are all impurity from Satan's work. So avoid them so that you may succeed"* (Quran 5:90). In contrast, within Sufi mysticism, "wine" carries profound spiritual meaning, playing a pivotal role in Persian poetry while also generating debate around Khayyam's work.

Historical Context and Interpretive Debates

Despite Islam's prohibition on drinking wine, certain historical groups did not strictly observe the ban and devised rituals or arrangements for its consumption. Some reports indicate that a small number of Sultans and intellectuals occasionally partook in wine while simultaneously performing acts of worship. According to Beihai (1931), this practice was present during Avicenna's lifetime (p. 41), and, as Qazvini (1965) narrates, it occurred with some Seljuk sultans (pp. 141–142). Scholars including Valentin Zhukovski (1898) and Arthur Christensen (1927) have questioned the legitimacy of these accounts, while others such as Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob (1979) have examined the broader context of drinking practices. Such historical occurrences may have contributed to misinterpretations of quatrains in ways contrary to Islamic rites. Furthermore, expecting absolute adherence to religious laws is unrealistic; human nature encompasses imperfection, and individual transgressions do not necessarily reflect the established conventions of a religion.

In Khayyam's quatrains, "wine" metaphorically refers to spiritual experiences that affect the Sufi soul in a manner analogous to the effects of physical wine on the mind. Other Persian poets have employed "wine" similarly. Elahi Ghomshei (2006), for instance, presents a poem by Sheikh Baha Amili (1547–1621 AD) as an example:

> *Master! Give a glass of that spiritual wine,*
> *To ease me, for a moment, from the dark veil;*
> *At the pub, the ascetic sees the red face of wine,*
> *To you, such a Muslim face: I hail.* (p. 5)[1]

Amin Razavi (2005) notes that from Ibn al-Farid's *Wine Ode* (*Al-Hamriyah*) to Hafiz, most Sufi poets employed wine symbolically to represent divine ecstasy (p. 128). However, interpreters such as Abbas Kayvan Qazwini (nineteenth century) and more recently R.C. Zaehner (1961) have attempted to impose literal, hedonistic interpretations on Khayyam's quatrains, occasionally seeking to align his views with Zoroastrian thought. The nineteenth-century scholar Abbas Kayvan Qazwini, for example, advanced a mystical interpretation of Khayyam, while more recent commentators such as the Indian scholar R.C. Zaehner have emphasized possible Zoroastrian influences. Such readings risk confining Khayyam within narrow ideological frameworks. In pre-Islamic Persian belief, wine held ritual significance; Weir (1926) notes that if Khayyam's references to wine are taken literally, some might classify him within a Zoroastrian context (p. 34).

Distinguishing Khayyam's Usage from Sufi Mysticism

The relationship between Khayyam's wine symbolism and Sufi mysticism requires careful conceptual precision. While Khayyam employs terminology familiar from Sufi discourse—wine, cup, tavern—his usage differs from that of dedicated Sufi poets such as Attar or Rumi in several significant respects. For Sufi poets, wine consistently symbolizes the ecstatic experience of divine union, and intoxication represents annihilation in God (*fana'*). Khayyam's wine, by contrast, more often serves philosophical and existential purposes; it represents clarity of perception, liberation from dogmatic thinking, and conscious engagement with life's transience. When Khayyam writes of intoxication, he typically means freedom from the intoxication of worldly concerns and religious hypocrisy, not absorption in the divine. This distinction is crucial. Khayyam appropriates Sufi vocabulary but deploys it within a rationalistic, skeptical framework that questions metaphysical certainty rather than celebrating mystical union. His wine awakens the mind to life's mysteries, standing in full accord with the Quranic injunctions to think and reflect upon all aspects of existence.

[1] Translated from Persian by the author.

The poetry of Khayyam and other mystical poets frequently reflects divine guidance: *"I only have one piece of advice for you: stand for Allah, pursue truths individually and in pairs, and then reflect"* (Quran 34:46). In mystical literature, spiritual intoxication symbolized by wine draws attention to God, integrates His name into the heart of *dhikr* (remembrance), and unites the individual with the divine by setting aside all else. Spiritual wine represents deep devotion, aligning life with divine commands, and constant remembrance.

Rubaiyat's philosophical reading presents the "wine of wisdom" as the genuine path to spiritual fulfillment. This aligns with Socratic philosophy, which regards virtue as the highest form of enjoyment (Babaei, 2013, p. 144). Tabatabaei (1991) emphasizes that understanding Khayyam through his scientific and literary works, rather than through literalist or skeptical interpretations of his quatrains, provides a more reliable perspective (p. 57). Khayyam often likens his poetry to wine, suggesting that reading it can bring inner peace and alleviate anxieties regarding mortality.

Khayyam's poetry elicits varied reactions. Some readers appreciate his metaphorical "wine," while others, particularly religiously conservative audiences, interpret it literally and resist it. Scholars, however, recognize Khayyam's wine as a call to intellectual awakening and spiritual reflection. Durant (1950) observes that, although contemporaries labeled Khayyam a "disappointed philosopher, atheist, and materialist," he was an unparalleled scholar in astronomy and philosophy, a freethinker tempered by prudence, and a venerator of independent thought (p. 322). Nowotny (1996) stresses that understanding poetry requires consideration of both the poet's intellectual background and the semantic richness of the text, since a single word may carry multiple connotations (pp. 158–162). For instance, Shah Nematullah Vali's poetry uses wine metaphorically to signify divine reflection rather than literal intoxication:

> *In the bowl of our eyes, you can find a cup full of water;*
> *Take a glass of wine; you will find water and bubbles.*
> *In the corner of the tavern, you will see a carefree Rind,*
> *Sitting drunk with lovers, ruined and spoiled.*[2]

In Persian-Islamic literary culture, wine also represents spiritual love and devotion, *Kharabat* symbolizes the place of remembrance, and the devout act of worship reflects full submission to God. Khayyam similarly equates the cup with the body and wine with the spirit, exploring philosophical questions about life, death, and divine connection (Seyed Gohrab, 2012, p. 15). Sufi metaphors equate wine with spiritual intoxication or *dhikr*, enabling the practitioner to transcend the ego and experience divine love (Greenberg, 2008, p. 656). Spiritual wine elevates the individual above mundane concerns, contrasting with physical intoxication, which may limit or degrade human potential. Khayyam's wine, therefore, provides existential guidance, encouraging immersion in wisdom and spiritual insight (Aminrazavi, 2005, pp. 128–129; Elahi Ghomshei, 2006, p. 5). According to Khayyam, time brings shame to those who dwell in sorrow and longing. He advises his audiences to cherish their life before death shatters it, like a stone breaking fragile glass:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	ایام زمانه از کسی دارد ننگ کو در غم ایام نشیند دلتنگ می خور تو در آبگینه با ناله چنگ زان پیش که آبگینه آید بر سنگ
Transliteration	*Ayyām-e zamāne az kasī dārad nang* *Kū dar gham-e ayyām neshīnad deltang* *Mey khor to dar ābgīne bā nāle-ye chang* *Zān pīsh ke ābgīne āyad bar sang.*

[2] Translated from Persian by the author.

Translation	*The days of time disgrace the moan,* *Of sitting in sorrow for days flown,* *Drink your wine to the whine of music,* *Before your glass slips on the stone.*[3]

As Khodadadi and Joudavi (2015) observe, Khayyam is acutely aware that the most devastating affliction a human being can endure is "disappointment," a recurring theme subtly permeating several of his quatrains (p. 6). Consequently, the joy he advocates serves as a means to set aside melancholy and gain inspiration to continue living an ordinary life (Khodadadi & Joudavi, 2015, p. 6). Rather than expressing despair overtly, Khayyam often weaves existential anxiety into reflections on the impermanence of life, the futility of worldly pursuits, and the unpredictability of fate. In this manner, his poetry transcends mere hedonism or skepticism and captures the profound emotional and philosophical weight of human disillusionment.

Khayyam is neither the first nor the last poet to urge readers to enter the domain of wisdom, metaphorically expressed as "wine." For example, Attar of Nishapur (Chapter 44, No. 62, n.d.) encourages seizing the moment and recommends mystical wine and love as paths pursued by the pure-hearted:

Persian original	مائیم به میخانه شده جمع امشب داده به سماع مطربان سمع امشب برخاسته ازدو کون و خوش بنشسته با شاهد و با شراب و با شمع امشب
Transliteration	*Mâ'im be mey-khâne shode jam' emshab* *Dâde be samâ'-e motrebân sam' emshab* *Bar-khâste az in do konun o khosh neshaste* *Bâ shâhed o bâ sharâb o bâ sham' emshab*
Translation	*Assembled in the tavern we tonight,* *Listening fully to the minstrel tonight,* *Arisen from two universes, sat well,* *With beloved, wine, and candle tonight.*[4]

Khayyam joins Attar in a similar quatrain:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	من بی می ناب زیستن نتوانم بی باده کشید بار تن نتوانم من بنده آن دمم که ساقی گوید یک جام دگر بگیر و من نتوانم
Transliteration	*Man bī-ye mey-e nāb zīstan natavānam* *Bī-bāde keshīd-e bār-e tan natavānam* *Man bande-ye ān damam ke sāqī gūyad* *"Yek jām-e degar begīr" o man natavānam*
Parchizadeh translation (2010, p. 135)	*Without the best of boozes wash, I can't!* *Oh! No! Sustain this rotten tosh; I can't!* *I love the time Saqi takes up the call:* *"Now take your last!" and I say: "Gosh! I can't!"*

Both poems emphasize the value of wine as a symbol while following distinct stylistic and intellectual orientations. The first reflects Attar's mystical language, whereas the latter captures Khayyam's unique literary voice. Each underscores perception and divine knowledge through the

[3] Translated from Persian by the author.
[4] Translated from Persian by the author.

use of metaphorical language. In this context, wine signifies ultimate enjoyment and serves as a call to embrace the present. Terms such as wine, cup, cupbearer, and tavern recur in Attar's poetry and in the works of numerous Sufi mystics, including Rumi and Sanai. However, while Attar remained associated with the spiritual tradition, Khayyam's work has often been misrepresented, portraying him as a literal drunkard. This distortion, shaped by FitzGerald and other Orientalist translators including Rückert, Nicolas, Le Gallienne, and Toussaint, resulted in significant translational manipulation that obscured the original meaning of his quatrains.

Sufis often describe their spiritual state as being in "the tavern of the ruin," a metaphor illustrating the soul's humble submission before God. Noorbakhsh recounts an anecdote about Bayazid Bastami: when asked by a visitor whom he sought, the visitor replied, "I want to see Bayazid," to which Bayazid responded, "I last heard from him a few years ago" (1982, p. 144). Immersion in God's memory meant complete unawareness of the self; the mystic perceives only God in every direction (Noorbakhsh, 1982, p. 144). Worshippers and ascetics perceive themselves as insignificant and humbled in God's presence; just as light dispels darkness, the life of one engaged in *dhikr* is believed to dissolve entirely in the divine.

Understanding Persian literature's figures of speech and nuanced expressions requires specialized training and cultural immersion. Superficial translations often fail to convey the intended concepts or the semantic richness embedded in the original text. Dadkani, Shahnavazi, and Murad Zehi (2019) note that the *Rind* of Hafez functions as a spiritual guide: the "tavern" in Persian poetry is not a literal place for wine drinking, just as mystical wine does not derive from grapes. Effective scholarly communication demands careful attention to such subtleties (2019, pp. 6–7). Furthermore, Khayyam's true critique lies not in opposing religious doctrines themselves but in challenging the lack of integrity among those who exploit religious authority for personal gain. His poetry condemns the hypocrisy of such individuals, who often compromise ethical values to pursue self-serving objectives. Accordingly, Khayyam censures alleged scholars who possess only a limited understanding of genuine religious teachings, as reflected in his quatrains:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	تا چند اسیر عقل هر روزه شویم در دهر چه صد ساله چه یکروزه شویم در ده تو به کاسه می از آن پیش که ما در کارگه کوزه گران کاسه شویم
Transliteration	*Tâ chand asire aghle har ruzé shavim?* *Dar dahr che sad sâlé, che yek ruzé shavim?* *Dar deh, to be kâse mey az ân pish ke mâ* *Dar kârgah-e kuzehgarân kâse shavim.*
FitzGerald translation (2005, p. 48)	*How long, how long, in definite pursuit* *Of this and that endeavor and dispute?* *Better be merry with the fruitful grape* *Than sadder after none, or bitter fruit.*

It is difficult to categorize Khayyam as belonging to any single sect, given the multiplicity of ideas and layered meanings present in his poetry. Scholars including the Iranian literary historian Badi'ozaman Foruzanfar (1968) and the British Orientalist Edward Denison Ross (1898) suggest that he incorporated Sufi terminology in a satirical or parodic context. When Khayyam employs the terms "wine" and "love," they initially appear metaphysical in nature:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated)	می می خورم و مخالفان از چپ و راست گویند که می مخور که دشمن دین است چون من دانم که می چو دشمن دین است بنوشم خون دشمن خود حلال است

Transliteration	*Mey mī-khoram o mokhālefān az chap o rāst* *Gūyand ke "may makhor ke doshman-e dīn ast"* *Chon man dānam ke mey cho doshman-e dīn ast* *Benūsham khoon-e doshman-e khod halāl ast*
Shah translation (2004, p. 59)	*I drink wine, and my opponents from left and right say:* *'Drink not wine, for it is the first foe to the Faith.'* *Since I know that wine is foe to the Faith,* *By God let me drink—the blood of the enemy is lawful to me!*

Scholars including Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1976), Robert Graves and Omar Ali-Shah (1967), Anthony Burgess (1968), Henri Massé (1937), Valentin Zhukovski (1898), and Arthur Christensen (1927) have provided various readings of Khayyam, ranging from mystical to skeptical interpretations. Abbas Kayvan Qazwini, a nineteenth-century scholar, authored two mystical essays on the *Rubaiyat* (cited in Aminrazavi, 2005, p. 135). Consequently, Khayyam's quatrains contain protest-like elements, criticizing individuals who profess religiosity but act hypocritically. While ordinary wine is prohibited by his faith, Khayyam employs it metaphorically to highlight the greater moral failings of some ostensibly pious individuals. This metaphor does not indicate that Khayyam himself was gluttonous or habitually drank wine:

> *Despite the fact that wine is banned by creed,*
> *I long to taste it, cure for sores I need;*
> *I do adore it, would you know the cause?*
> *So that from bloated pride I may be freed.* (Govinda Tirtha, 1941, p. 254)

Jalaluddin Rumi, an eminent thinker and poet, serves as a comparative benchmark for understanding Khayyam's relationship to mysticism. Both poets employ expressions with Sufi connotations, including metaphors such as "a cup of wine," "the ruin," "light sleep," "the blood of the heart," "the snare," "the lips," "the tip of the curl," "the world of dust," and "me and you" (Weir, 1926, pp. 32–33). However, the divergence between them illuminates the distinctiveness of Khayyam's usage. Khayyam omits phrases such as "mirror," "ecstasy," "society," "solitude," "zikr," "dance," "asceticism," "Kaaba," "inquirer," and "certainty"—terms central to Sufi poetry that convey specific mystical concepts within the tradition of Rumi and his school. More significantly, the *function* of shared terminology differs fundamentally. For Rumi, wine and intoxication consistently point toward divine union and the obliteration of self in God. For Khayyam, these same terms serve to illuminate the human condition—the limits of knowledge, the certainty of death, the hypocrisy of the pious, and the value of conscious presence. While Rumi immerses himself in the inner world of mystical experience, Khayyam's quatrains oscillate between life and death, focusing more on the present than the past or future (Noorbakhsh, 1982, pp. 147–148). This is not to deny mystical elements in Khayyam, but to insist on precision; his is a philosophical mysticism grounded in rational inquiry, not the ecstatic mysticism of the Sufi orders:

Persian original (Gölpınarlı-authenticated, quatrain 12; also authenticated by Gheibi, 2001)	ای دوست بیا تا غم فردا نخوریم وین یکدم عمر را غنیمت شمریم فردا که ازین دیر فنا درگذریم با هفت هزار سالگان سر بسریم
Transliteration	*Ey dust, biyâ tâ ghame fardâ nakhorim,* *Vin yek dame 'omr râ ghanimat shamarim.* *Fardâ ke az in deyre fanâ dargozarim,* *Bâ haft hezâr sâlegân sar be sarim.*
Tajvidi translation (1960, p. 106)	*Ah! My Beloved, fill the Cup that clears* *Today of past Regrets and future Fears;* *Tomorrow? Why, tomorrow I may be* *Myself with Yesterday's seven thousand years.*

Despite the variegated nature of his metaphorical themes, Khayyam adheres to a path of wisdom that shares certain preoccupations with Sufism while maintaining a distinct philosophical orientation. The imperative to seize the present, from a Sufi perspective, does not entail indulgence in literal inebriation or association with ignorance—practices deemed sinful in both Sufi doctrine and Khayyam's poetry. Rather, Sufi's emphasis on the present moment cultivates an acute recognition of time's value and precludes its dissipation in ignorance or negligence. In this regard, Khayyam's counsel converges with ethical principles of mindful living and spiritual awareness, even as his philosophical framework remains conceptually distinct from that of the Sufi tradition proper.

Conclusion

The symbolic significance of wine in Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* emerges as a profoundly multifaceted literary device, whose depth cannot be captured through a singular interpretive lens. From literal indulgence to spiritual elevation, from philosophical skepticism to existential rebellion, wine functions as the central metaphor through which Khayyam articulates his worldview—one that simultaneously embraces the fleeting joys of existence while challenging rigid dogmas of religious orthodoxy. Far from promoting hedonism or irreligion, Khayyam's wine frequently serves as a metaphor for higher awareness, spiritual awakening, and intellectual liberation. Within the mystical framework of Sufi poetics, wine symbolically resonates with themes of divine love, though Khayyam's deployment of this symbolism serves distinct philosophical purposes. In philosophical and existential readings, it becomes a tool to question metaphysical certainty and highlight the limits of human knowledge, reflecting a temperament aligned more with contemplative realism than nihilism. Khayyam's repeated invocation of wine must therefore be read not as an endorsement of literal intoxication but as an urgent call to awaken the soul, confront societal hypocrisies, and live consciously in the present moment. His quatrains remind readers that life is fragile and transient, and that meaning, if it is to be found, must be sought here and now, in beauty, love, wisdom, and self-awareness. In doing so, Khayyam aligns himself with the core ethical concerns of Persian philosophical and poetic traditions, even as he questions their more dogmatic expressions. However, the Western reception of Khayyam—exemplified by the translations of FitzGerald, Rückert, Nicolas, Le Gallienne, and Toussaint—has contributed to a persistent misreading of his poetic project. By reducing the rich metaphysical connotations of wine to a mere celebration of sensual pleasure, such interpretations have obscured the spiritual and intellectual complexity of Khayyam's thought.

As this study has demonstrated, however, Khayyam's quatrains are deeply embedded in the linguistic, cultural, and philosophical traditions of Persian literature, where metaphor functions not as ornamentation but as revelation. By grounding analysis in a clearly defined corpus of authenticated quatrains (following Gölpınarlı, Zarrinkoob, and Gheibi), and by engaging directly with Persian originals alongside English translations, this study has sought to restore the interpretive integrity of Khayyam's symbolic language. In this context, Khayyam's wine is not simply a drink; it is the wine of wisdom, the wine of resistance against hypocrisy, and the wine of the soul's longing for truth amid uncertainty. It invites readers to engage in critical reflection, pursue authenticity over conformity, and seek solace not in dogma but in the mindful appreciation of life's transient moments. Hence, Khayyam's enduring relevance lies in the tension he cultivates between doubt and faith, freedom and fate, celebration and resignation. His poetry continues to resonate across cultures and centuries because it dares to ask fundamental human questions with elegance, irony, and unwavering honesty. By re-engaging with the cultural and philosophical context of his verses, scholars and readers are invited not merely to decode symbols but to partake in the deeper wine of Khayyam's thought—a wine that awakens rather than intoxicates.

This study contributes to our understanding of Khayyam by highlighting the centrality of metaphorical interpretation grounded in authenticated texts, thereby providing a framework for future research. Scholars may build upon these insights to explore comparative studies of symbolic imagery in Persian and other literary traditions, examine the intersection of philosophy and poetry in pre-modern Persian texts, or investigate the reception of Khayyam's metaphors in cross-cultural contexts. Moreover, this research encourages a re-examination of Western translations and interpretations, emphasizing the need to situate Khayyam within his original cultural, philosophical, and intellectual milieu. Such avenues promise to deepen our comprehension of his work and illuminate the enduring significance of metaphor in literary, philosophical, and spiritual discourse.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Declaration of AI Use

Any AI-assisted tools, if used, were limited to language editing. No AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings. The author(s) assume sole responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and final content of the manuscript.

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