

**PROBLEMS OF RECREATING RHYTHM AND
MELODY IN POETIC TRANSLATION: A STUDY OF
OMAR KHAYYAM'S RUBAIYAT AND THEIR
ENGLISH RENDERINGS**

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Abstract: *The translation of poetry presents a unique challenge due to the need to preserve both semantic meaning and aesthetic form. Among the most difficult elements to reproduce are rhythm and melody, which are deeply embedded in the phonological and cultural systems of the source language. This paper investigates the problems of recreating rhythmic and melodic structures in the English translations of Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat, with particular reference to Edward FitzGerald's version. Using a comparative qualitative methodology, the study analyzes selected quatrains in terms of meter, rhyme, and sound patterns. The findings demonstrate that complete formal equivalence is unattainable due to systemic linguistic differences between Persian and English. However, translators employ adaptive strategies to achieve functional poetic equivalence. The paper proposes a balanced approach to poetic translation that integrates semantic fidelity with aesthetic compensation.*

Keywords: *poetic translation, rhythm, melody, Rubaiyat, Omar Khayyam, equivalence, adaptation, prosody*

Introduction

Poetry translation occupies a central yet problematic position in translation studies. Unlike prose, poetry combines meaning with formal features such as rhythm, rhyme, and sound harmony, which together create a unified aesthetic effect. Reproducing this effect in another language is inherently difficult, as these features are language-specific and culturally conditioned.

Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* serves as a particularly valuable case for examining these issues. The quatrains are composed in a highly regulated metrical system and follow a distinctive AABA rhyme scheme. Their musicality is essential to their artistic impact. However, when translated into English, these features often undergo significant transformation.

This study aims to identify the principal challenges involved in recreating rhythm and melody in poetic translation and to evaluate the strategies used by translators. It also seeks to contribute to the theoretical discussion by proposing a model that balances form and meaning.

Literature Review

The question of equivalence has long been central to translation theory. Early scholars such as Eugene Nida distinguished between formal and dynamic equivalence, emphasizing the importance of producing a similar effect on the target audience. Later, Peter Newmark highlighted the tension between semantic and communicative translation, particularly in literary texts.

In the context of poetry, André Lefevere argued that translation inevitably involves rewriting, shaped by cultural and ideological factors. James Holmes further classified poetic translation strategies, including mimetic, analogical, and organic approaches.

Recent studies have shifted towards a functional perspective, focusing on how translators recreate the aesthetic experience rather than replicate formal

structures. This shift is especially relevant for the translation of the *Rubaiyat*, where strict formal imitation often proves impractical.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach. Three quatrains from the *Rubaiyat* are selected and analyzed alongside their English translations by Edward FitzGerald.

The analysis focuses on:

- **Meter** (syllabic vs. stress-based patterns)
- **Rhyme scheme**
- **Phonetic devices** (alliteration, assonance)
- **Semantic shifts**

The aim is to identify patterns of transformation and evaluate their impact on the poetic effect.

Analysis and Discussion

Example Analysis

Persian (transliterated):

Biya ta gol barafshanem va mey dar saghar andazim

Falak ra saqf beshkanim va tarhi no darandazim

FitzGerald's version:

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,

A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou

Rhythmic Transformation

The original Persian employs a quantitative meter based on syllable length, producing a fluid and balanced rhythm. In contrast, FitzGerald uses an iambic pattern typical of English poetry. While this creates a natural rhythm for English readers, it does not replicate the original metrical structure.

Melodic Adaptation

The Persian version relies on internal harmony and vowel patterns, contributing to its musicality. FitzGerald compensates for this loss by introducing alliteration (“Book,” “Bough”) and rhythmic regularity.

Semantic Shift

A significant shift in meaning is evident. The original emphasizes transformation and renewal, while the English version presents a more hedonistic and romantic image. This demonstrates the translator’s prioritization of aesthetic coherence over semantic precision.

Key Challenges

1. Prosodic Incompatibility

Persian and English operate on fundamentally different prosodic systems. This makes direct reproduction of rhythm impossible.

2. Rhyme Constraints

Maintaining the AABA structure often requires lexical compromises, which may distort meaning.

3. Cultural Nuances

Symbolism in Persian poetry does not always have direct equivalents in English, affecting both meaning and tone.

4. Translator’s Subjectivity

The translator’s artistic vision plays a decisive role, often leading to reinterpretation rather than faithful reproduction.

Proposed Model for Poetic Translation

Based on the analysis, this paper proposes a **balanced compensation model**, which includes:

- **Selective preservation** of key formal elements
- **Aesthetic compensation** through alternative sound devices
- **Controlled semantic flexibility** to maintain coherence
- **Target-oriented readability**

This model prioritizes the overall poetic experience rather than strict formal equivalence.

Conclusion

The study confirms that recreating rhythm and melody in poetic translation is an inherently complex task shaped by linguistic, cultural, and artistic factors. The case of Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* illustrates that complete equivalence is unattainable. However, through adaptive and creative strategies, translators can produce works that resonate with target audiences.

Ultimately, successful poetic translation should be evaluated not by its fidelity to form alone but by its ability to evoke a comparable aesthetic response. Future research may expand this analysis by incorporating a wider range of translations and applying quantitative methods to prosodic features.

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