

Translating the Holy Qur'an

Is There An Ultimate Translation Of The Qur'an?

The proliferation of translations of the Qur'an in English is remarkable. Generally, no single translation suffices any great work. "Every great book demands to be translated once in a century, to suit the change in standards and taste of new generation, which will differ radically from those of the past" (J.M. Cohen, 1962). The same point is reiterated by Andre Lefevere (1977): "Different ages need different adjustments and translations." These views however do not explain the flood of English translations of the Qur'an in the 20th century. Mary Snell-Hornby (1988) emphasizes the dynamic role of the text and the translator thus: "Furthermore, the text cannot be considered a static specimen of language (an idea still dominant in practical translation classes), but essentially as the verbalized expression of an author's intention as understood by the translator as reader, who then recreates this whole for another readership in another culture. This dynamic process explains why new translations of literary works are constantly in demand, and why the perfect translation does not exist."

Interestingly Sunnis and Shiites, Salafis and Barelvis, Ahmadi Lahoris and Ahmadi Qadiyanis, Christian clerics and Western Orientalists have vied with one another for translating the Qur'an into English. F.V. Griefenhagen (1992:284), in an incisive analysis of the history of English translations of the Qur'an, observes, "Thus, by the 20th century, the translation of the Qur'an into English became the locus of power struggles, not only between Islam and West, but also between orthodox groups within Islam and heterodox offshoots." A bio-bibliographic study of Dr. M. H. Khan (1986) lists 41 English translations of the Qur'an of which 31 are complete ones; Dr. A.R. Kidwais (1988) annotated bibliography contains 35 complete translations of the Qur'an. Significantly, the Indian sub-continental contribution (26 translations in M.H. Khans count) is impressive (see Metcalf 1982:98-216 for reasons). A few more translations have since been added. Paradoxically, despite the multiplicity of Qur'an translations, no translation has attained universal acceptance. In Kidwais opinion, "The Muslim Scripture is yet to find a dignified and faithful expression in English language that matches the majesty and grandeur of the original."

Reviews of specific translations, compilations of translation-errors and articles on general aspects of Qur'an translation (e.g. AL. Tibawi 1962; Daud Raghbar 1963; T.B. Irving 1979; A.R. Kidwai 1985, 1988; Maurice Bucaille 1986; Muhammad Shikhani 1988; Mushirul Haq 1989) constitute the bulk of the Qur'an translation criticism available as of now. Apart from reviews that appear in journals and periodicals (e.g. Hafiz 1930; M.W. Mirza 1962; S.A.W. Bukhari 1979; Arafaque Malik 1980; Mir Najbat Ali 1980; A.R. Kidwai 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1992, 1993, 1994; Asghar Ali Engineer 1998; Abdullah Abbas Nadvi 1989; Khushwant Singh 1987, 1990, 1993 etc), most of the translators make a rapid review of the previous translations (e.g. Hafiz Ghulam Sarwar 1980: vii - xlii, Yusuf Ali 1983: xii-xiii, Arberry 1981; 7-24). Most of these reviews, because of constraints of space and the limited purpose, tend to be somewhat scanty, or sketchy or introductory. Any penetrative and sustained critical analysis is beyond their scope. Moreover, the comments and conclusions are mostly impressionistic and subjective. One comes across warm eulogies like those of Maryam Jameelah (1982:5), "The sweep of eloquence, the virility and dignity of the language (of Pickthall) is unsurpassed in any

other translation," or out rightly dismissive statements like "we may more justifiably call his (Palmer's) translation careless and slipshod" (Yusuf Ali ([1934] 1983:xiii). Not much supportive evidence is given.

A.R. Nykl (1936) lists some errors of Palmer, while A.R. Kidwai (1988) lists those of Arberry. A Discussion of Errors of Yusuf Ali (n.d: iii) by Majlisul Ulama of South Africa is more a critique of "The serious defects contained in the commentary of Yusuf Ali" than of the translation errors as such. In the absence of any standard framework for analyzing the errors, this type of criticism tends to degenerate into mere error-hunting and fault-finding often on arbitrary and flimsy grounds. For instance, A.R. Kidwai (1992:14) points out that Q. Arafats Incorrect Equivalents chosen by Yusuf Ali in His translation of the Qur'an "sets out to find fault" and that "of four hundred alleged incorrect equivalents there is literally not one worthy of serious consideration." Similarly, of Iqbal Hussain Ansaris locating errors in Pickthall, A.R. Kidwai remarks, "On closer examination, neither the number nor the kind of errors is significant: of the 248 alleged errors very few are substantial."

Basim Muftin Badrs critical comparison of six English translations is a step in the right direction, though of single small surah of the Qur'an. It is then clear that not much help is forthcoming for an ordinary reader who has to sift through a maze of translations. No systematic comparative study of the translations in the background of some standard theory of translation has yet been attempted. As A.R. Kidwai has pertinently remarked, "Although there is a spate of volumes on the multi-faceted dimensions of the Qur'an, no substantial work has so far been done to critically examine the mass of existing English translations of the Qur'an."

As it would not be possible to include all the English translations in a comprehensive research work, many translations may be excluded on the basis of the following criteria:

1. All incomplete translations e.g. Muhammad Abdur Rahman (1926), Dr. S.N.A. Jafari (1935).
2. All selections from the Qur'an e.g. Stanley Lane-Pool (1979 rpt), Thomas Cleary (1993) etc.
3. All translations not done directly from the Arabic original i.e. translations of translations e.g. Alexander Ross (1649), Muhammad Muradpuri (1980) etc.
4. All revisions carried out by anyone other than the translator (e.g. M.Y. Zayid).
5. Translation of commentaries e.g. Taq-ul-din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1978) which is "a summarized version of Ibn Kathir, supplemented by At-Tabri".
6. Works which are conceived primarily as commentaries in English of which the translation is merely incidental e.g. Abdul Majid Daryabadi (see Kidwai 1994:47).
7. Translations which are of just historical interest e.g. Abdul Hakim Khan (1905), Mirza Abdul Fadl (1915) etc.
8. Translations thought to have drawn heavily from other translations and lacking in originality, e.g. M.H. Shakir (1982), the Zidans (1991).

Criteria (1) and (2) ensure equal footing; (3)-(5) emphasize the individual responsibility of translator by eliminating any intervening hand or language; (6)

ensures that the translation of the text remains the focal point even without the complement of commentary; (7) helps in dropping inconsequential translations; (8) is useful to leave out duplicating material. A.R. Kidwai opines that M.H. Shakirs translation is "an example of blatant plagiarism in that about 90% of this English translation has been verbatim copied from Muhammed Ali Lahoris English translation of the Qur'an." Similarly, according to A.R. Kidwai, in the Zidans translation, "passage after passage appears with a sprinkling of adaptation, to have been lifted from Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation of the Qur'an".

The number of translations that remain even after the application of the above criteria is still too large to handle. Therefore, some more translations e.g. A.R. Tariq and Z. Gilani, H.A. Ali, M.M. Ahmad, which are unlikely to contribute substantially to a detailed discussion of the subject, may also be dropped. The following 13 translations may however serve the basis for such a detailed discussion:

Translators Name Year of publication

1. **George Sale 1734**
2. **Rev. J. M. Rodwell 1861**
3. **E. H. Palmer 1880**
4. **Maulana Muhammad Ali 1917**
5. **Mohammed M. Pickthall 1930**
6. **Abdullah Yusuf Ali 1934-37**
7. **Richard Bell 1937**
8. **Arthur J. Arberry 1955**
9. **N. J. Dawood 1956**
10. **Muhammad Asad 1980**
11. **Ahmed Ali 1984**
12. **Thomas B. Irving 1985**
13. **M. M. Khatib 1986**

It is true that the potential for the production of translation is virtually unlimited; yet, there are restrictions which limit the basic types of translations. As Andre Lefevere remarks, "After all, if one is faced with an original work of literary art, one can translate it, because of the very nature of linguistic and literary conventions, only in a limited number of ways." The selected translations can therefore be expected to be sufficiently representative of the different trends in the field of the Qur'an translation.

Is the study to be conducted from an exclusively literary angle or purely linguistic angle or from both? As Roman Jakobson observes, "A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and non-conversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms." Nida espouses the valid stand that translation is both an art and a science: "Though no one will deny the artistic elements in good translating, linguists and philologists have become increasingly aware that the processes of translation are amenable to rigorous description." A comprehensive study then should include both the linguistic and the literary aspects of translating.

When the source text (i.e., the Qur'an) is one and same, hypothetically speaking, there should not be much room for variations either between a particular translation and the

original or between the different translations except for minor changes of no great importance. Yet it is found that there are significant and momentous differences, which cannot be accounted for without referring to the role of the translator, the problems of translation, the principles and procedures of translating and the issues of style. The suitable theory of translation in the light of which such a penetrative investigation can be conducted is to be chosen from among the various theories of translation.

The study should make a critical comparison of the selected English translations of the Qur'an, firstly, with the Qur'an in Arabic and, secondly, among the English translations themselves. The object of the study should not, however, be to arrive at any hierarchical ranking according to some perceived merits of the chosen translations. The real aim is to examine the adequacy of a translation, to answer the basic question: "What is a good translation?" Andre Lefevere states that this question "can only be answered if one compares as many types of translations as possible: the descriptive approach is, indeed, a valuable starting-point, but it should be complemented by a critical evaluation." The same method should be adopted in such a study.

Some of the specific issues to be addressed are:

1. Whether the translation is done on sound principles and procedures of translating.
2. Whether the translation is manipulative, biased or interested.
3. Whether the translation reflects the grammatical, referential and connotative meanings of the source text.
4. Whether the translation is designed to perform the informative, expressive and imperative functions of the source text effectively.
5. Whether the additions, omissions, and alterations, if any, are obligatory or optional, justified or unjustified.
6. Whether there are any errors, and if so, of what kind.
7. Whether the translation takes care of the stylistic concerns at the levels of diction, syntax, discourse and rhetoric.

To sum up, the study should propose

- to describe, analyze and examine the principles, methods and procedures of translating the Qur'an.
- to identify, describe and explain the problems of translating the Qur'an into English.
- to identify, describe and account for the differences in the translations.
- to identify, describe and account for the errors of translations.
- to examine the role of the translator.

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