

Western English Translators' Reflections on Quran

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The cosmopolitan nature of the message of Islam requires the circulation of its message across the globe. The Quran is the pristine source of Islamic edifications; its propagation demands the translation into different languages of the world. Islam and Muslims have a long history of relations with the West; the westerners got the first appearance of Islam in the very early phase of Islam and the interaction in the later centuries demanded the necessity of the translation of the scripture of Islam in the European languages. This paper deals with the English translators reflections on the Quran. English translations established a peculiar picture of Islam in the West. This paper intends to trace that image and its impact on the western mind through the different English translations of the Quran, for this very purport only the views and perceptions of the translators will be presented; the linguistic merits and demerits of their translations will not be discussed in this paper.

Introduction

The Quran is the final Divine message of the Lord of all the worlds. The Quran is preserved and secured from every distortion and contamination¹ by Allah Almighty. This is the only Divine Scripture available in its pristine form as it was revealed upon the last messenger and apostle Muhammad (S.A.W). The dissemination of its message is granted by Allah Himself.²The translation of the Quran is a well-kenned and paramount topic in the sphere of today's Quranic studies. The translation of the Quran is the first resource towards which non-Arabic verbalizer magnetizes to understand the message of Islam. Nevertheless, it is an incontrovertible fact that Muslims do not consider the translation as par with the Quran itself.³Since, the Quran was revealed upon the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) in the Arabic language, henceforth, any translation would be considered to impart and convey the construals of the Quran, for a word in Arabic language contains multiple denotements and a translator would have no cull left except to select one meaning out of multiple possible construals.⁴Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall states this fact in the preface of his translation of the Quran as such, "The book is rendered here almost literally and almost every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is

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not the Glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Koran__ and peradventure something of the charm__ in English. It can never take the place of the Koran in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so.”⁵

The first translation of the Quran that appeared in the West was a Latin translation by Robert Ketenensis of Chester, Hermann of Dalmatia and two other associates consummated in 1143 and it remained as a main translation available in Europe for the five centuries. Moreover, this translation played the role of a resource for the further translations in other European languages. Thus, first English translation was produced by Alexander Ross and published from London in 1649; it was predicated on a French translation (L'Alcoran de Mahomet) by Andre du Ryer rather on the Arabic language. These early translations were rigorously misconstrue, faulty and marred with omissions, commissions and transpositions; they simply aimed at confuting Islam.⁶

Western English Translations in Chronological Order

Apart from the above mentioned translations, afterward a series of English translations commenced to come forth, they are as such:

In 1734 George Sale translated the Quran under the title of, '*Koran, commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed, tr. into English immediately from the original Arabic; with explanatory notes, taken from the most approved commentators. To which is prefixed a preliminary discourse*', published by C. Ackers, its latest edition published in 2009.

In 1861 John Rodwell wrote the translation with the title '*The Koran*', released from London.

In 1880 E.H. Palmer produced the translation with a 2-Volume edition; he was entrusted to produce the new translation of Max Muller's Sacred Books of the East series.

In 1930 Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall wrote the translation with the title '*The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*'.

In 1937–39 Richard Bell prepared the translation, '*The Qur'an: Translated, with a Critical Re-arrangement of the Surah*', Published by Edinburgh University Press.

In 1955 Arthur Arberry's translation appeared with a title '*The Koran Interpreted*'.

In 1980 Muhammad Asad translated the Quran under the title ' *The Message of the Qur'an*'.

In 1985 Dr. Thomas Ballantyne Irving / T.B. Irving (Al Hajj Ta'lim Ali Abu Nasr) produced the translation entitled; '*The Qur'an: The First American Version*', published by Published by Amana Books, Brattleboro, Vermont.

In 1992 Dr. T. B. (Thomas Ballantyne) Irving (Al Hajj Ta'lim Ali Abu Nasr) prepared the translation, '*The Nobel Qur'an*', published by Published by Amana Books, Brattleboro, Vermont.

In 1997, a translation by three American women converts entitled '*The Holy Qur'an*', published by Saheeh International, the Dar Abul Qasim Publishing House, Saudi Arabia.

In 2000 a translation produced by a translating committee consisted of American Muslim writer Uthman Hutchinson, and Mostafa al-Badawi inclusive of Cambridge professor Timothy Winter entitled '*The Majestic Qur'an: An English Rendition of Its Meanings*', published by Starlatch Press.

In 2003 translations by an American Muslim convert, NooruddeenDurkee came forth with the title '*The Tajwidi Qur'an*'.

In 2004 Dr. Thomas Cleary translated the Quran with a title '*The Qur'an: A New Translation*'.

In 2007 a team of EdipYuksel, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban, and Martha Schulte-Nafeh rendered the translation of the Quran entitled '*The Quran: A Reformist Translation*'.

In 2007 Alan Jones produced the translation with the title '*The Qur'an*'.

In 2010 the American Muslim writer Yahiya Emerick rendered the translation with the title '*the Holy Qur'an: Guidance for Life*'.⁷

Alexander Ross's Views about Quran

Alexander Ross translated the Quran into English in 1649, as he was not well-versed in the Arabic language; therefore, he made this translation out of French translation of 'Andrew Du Ryer's 1647 French *Qur'an*'. This translation introduced the Quran first time to the English speaking world, and for a century it remained the only translation available in the English language.⁸

The intention of his translation can be discerned by the title of the book, '*The Alcoran of Mahomet Translated out of Arabique into French... newly Englished for the satisfaction of all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities*'. He makes it clear to the

Christian reader that his aim to translate the Quran is "I thought good to bring it to their colours, that so viewing thine enemies in the full body thou mayst the better prepare to encounter, and I hope to overcome them".⁹

He reflects his views about the Quran in these words:

"...Thou shalt find it of so rude and incongruous a composure, so farced with contradictions, blasphemies, obscene speech, and ridiculous fables, that some modest, and more rationally Mahometans have thus excused it; that their Prophet wrote an hundred and twenty thousand' sayings, whereof three thousand only are good, the residue (as the impossibility of the Moones falling into his sleeve the Conversion and' Salvation of the Devils, and the like) are false and ridiculous...Such as it is, I present it to thee, having taken the pains only to translate it out of French, not doubting, though it hath been a poyson that hath infected a very great, but most unsound part of the Universe, it may prove an Antidote, to confirm in thee the health of Christianity."¹⁰

He supports the views akin to other orientalist that Quran is the authorship of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). Ross's reflection on the Quran is a materialization of the temper that was holding in the West of his time.

George Sale's Discourse on Quran

George Sale by profession a Lawyer presented his English rendering of the Quran in 1734. R.A. Davenport in the biography of Sale indicates that he was not proficient in Arabic language. Mr. Dadichi was his guide in the Arabic language.¹¹ Sale's translation chiefly predicated upon Marracci's Latin translation of the Quran; moreover, his sources are secondary, which he himself acknowledges that he suffered no chance to consult the public libraries and throughout his undertaking he consulted the commentary of Al-Beidawi and Gospel of St. Barnabas.¹² This translation was indited with a purely missionary intention. The popularity of the translation can be valued through its further translations in Dutch (in 1742), German (in 1764), French (in 1750), Russian (in 1792), and Bulgarian (in 1902) and Swedish (in 1814) languages. The original English translation has appeared in more than hundred and twenty editions.¹³

He describes about his principles of the translation that sometime he had to recede the literal meaning of Arabic language, he exalts

himself in rendering the construal of the Quran proximate to the pristine text, for it was no facile a task to present the rendition of such a great book in the style of modern composition. In inditing the notes or comments, he adapted the style to give only the concise explication and for the most arduous passages of the Quran he presented the views of approved commentators of the Quran.¹⁴

He has composed a detailed preliminary discourse on the Quran in which he discusses sundry topics pertinent to Quran, e.g. the connotations of the word 'Quran', different appellations of Quran, division of the Quran, designations of chapters, the verses of the chapters, no of verses and no of words and letters of the Quran, the inditement of Bismillah afore commencement of the chapter, beginning of the chapters(Surahs) with the Arabic alphabets, the language and the elegance of the language of the Quran, etc.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning here that he compares all the topics of the Quran with the earlier scriptures, it is his concrete perspective that Quran is predicated upon the earlier scriptures, though he is discombobulated at many places while discussing the above mentioned topics, during his discourse at several places he is compelled to accolade the ingenuity of the Quran but he makes the haste to confute and faint the marks of his veneration. Sale depicts the style and language of the Quran in such words: “---where the majesty and attributes of God are described, sublime and magnificent ; of which the reader cannot but observe several instances, though he must not imagine the translation comes up to the original, notwithstanding my endeavours to do it justice.”¹⁶ Here, Sale is left with no alternative but to accept the Quran as inimitable. George Sale is standing in the same words of the orientalist, who refutes the divine nature of the Quran and consider it the work of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).¹⁷

John Rodwell's Perception on Quran

Rodwell produced his translation in 1861, with a title, 'The Koran: translated from the Arabic, the Surahs arranged in chronological order, with notes and index'. In writing his rendition, he was greatly influenced by Muir and Noldeke. The distinctive feature of his translation in comparison to other English translations lies in the presentation of Quranic Surahs in the chronological order.¹⁸ Rodwell states that the Surahs in the original Arabic Quran are arranged by Zaid bin Sabit without adhering to any

particular system of arrangement except, that he and his coworkers placed the longest Surahs before the short Surahs. Zaid did not make any attempt to develop connecting link among the adjacent verses or to create the sequence among the verses.¹⁹ The difference of the expression in Makki and Madni Surahs is explained with discernment that when the Prophet's position transformed from admonisher and persuader to legislator and warrior, the poetic style of Quran gave the way to prose; thus, he (the Prophet) defended the charge of being a poet.²⁰ Rodwell traces the Prophet's mental growth and the style of composition of the Quran through the repetition of the historical events in the Quran.²¹ While making an attempt to proclaim that the Quran is derived from the early divine scriptures, he had to admit the plain fact that Prophet had no access to the earlier Christian or Jewish scriptures, he states it as such, "It should also be borne in mind that we have no traces of the existence of Arabic versions of the Old or New Testament previous to the time of Muhammad."²² He offers eulogy to Quran for the perception of Divine nature in these words, "It must be acknowledged, too, that the Koran deserves the highest praise for its conceptions of the Divine nature, in reference to the attributes of Power, Knowledge, and universal Providence and Unity that its belief and trust in the One God of Heaven and Earth is deep and fervent..."²³ Rodwell considers the Quran as the reservoir of energy for the actions and undertakings of Muslims, "It is due to the Koran, that the occupants in the sixth century of an arid peninsula...in the seventh century, the northern coasts of Africa, and a large portion of Spain in the eighth, the Punjab...the simple shepherds and wandering Bedouins of Arabia, are transformed, as if by a magician's wand, into the founders of empires, the builders of cities, the collectors of more libraries than they at first destroyed...And thus, while the Koran, which underlays this vast energy and contains the principles which are its springs of action..."²⁴

E.H. Palmer's Views on Quran

E.H. Palmer engendered the English rendering of the Quran in 1880 with a 2-Volume edition. He starts his discourse on the Quran by such words, "BEFORE entering upon an intelligent study of the Qur'ân it is necessary to make oneself acquainted with the circumstances of the people in whose midst it was revealed..."²⁵

Like his predecessors, he deems the descending of the revelation on the Prophet and appearance of an angel in the cave of Hira an outcome of epilepsy and hallucination.²⁶ As far as the using of Christian and Jewish scriptures as the source of Quran is concerned; he says, "there is not the least evidence in support of the accusation made against Mohammed by Christian writers, that the greater part of his revelations were due to the suggestions of a Christian monk".²⁷ He proclaims about the status of the Quran as the codification of conduct, that the Quran is "not a formal and consistent code either of morals, laws, or ceremonies". He refutes the conception that the Quran in its current form was arranged by the Prophet himself, because at the time of his demise no collected copies of the Quran were existed.²⁸ Palmer talks about the topics of Makki and Madni Surahs, literal meanings of the word Quran, placing the alphabets afore the Surahs, Asma al Husna, the feeling of the Unity of Allah, a dialect of the Quran and the division of verses and Rukus in the Quran, but to a great extent, his perception with regard to these issues is no more but the imitation of earlier translators, especially of George Sale. Contrary to his predecessors, he asserts that the language of the Quran is "noble and forcible, but it is not elegant in the sense of literary refinement"²⁹. So far the translating the Quran is concerned in the English words he puts forward, that "To translate this worthily is a most difficult task. To imitate the rhyme and rhythm would be to give the English an artificial ring from which the Arabic is quite free...I have translated each sentence as literally as the difference in structure between the two languages would allow, and when possible I have rendered it word for word. Where a rugged or commonplace expression occurs in the Arabic I have not hesitated to render it by a similar English one, even where a literal rendering may perhaps shock the reader".³⁰ Thusly, it exposes the distorted style of transformation that contain so missions and commissions.³¹

Marmaduke Pickthall's Approach to Quran

This is the first English translation of the Holy Quran in the English language which is given by a Muslim convert. Pickthall is of the opinion that no Holy Scripture can be portrayed in true letter and spirit by a someone who disbelieves its message. He considers it the rendering of the meaning of the Quran because it cannot be

translated into another language.³² He has set about to select the best fitting words for the translation, however, he says that it is just a rendering of the meanings in English; the outcome is not the Quran in Arabic language.³³ The Quran was recorded in the life of the Holy Prophet and Abu Bakr and Caliph Usman compiled and circulated it in the same form as it was arranged by the Prophet himself.³⁴ Pickthall says about the arrangement of verses and surahs, "The arrangement is not easy to understand... verses of Madinah revelation are found in Meccan surahs... But the arrangement is not haphazard, as some has hastily supposed. Closer study will reveal a sequence and significance..."³⁵ As for the style of Quranic language matters, he states that Arabic language contains a very vigorous rhythm, when a peculiar sound that resorts the rhythm produces; afterward a strong pause occurs and the verse ends naturally though the subject matter perpetuates, endeavor to engender such rhythm in English will have an antithesis effect.³⁶

Pickthall is the exponent of the universality of the message of the Quran and assumes it a light house of guidance for the whole mankind, for the Quran endures the witness of the truth that is present in all the religions and substantiates that truth.³⁷

A. J. Arberry's Interpretation of Quran

Arthur Arberry's translation appeared in two volumes in 1955 with a title '*The Koran Interpreted*'.³⁸ In 1964, it was republished by the World Classics by Oxford University Press. He concedes orthodox Muslim believe as it is adopted by Marmaduke Pickthall that Quran is untranslatable. That's why he entitles his translation with the phrase '*The Koran Interpreted*'.³⁹ This attribute of the Quran is ignored by the earlier translators; therefore their translations turned out 'dull and flat' in comparison to pristine Arabic Quran. It should be comprehended with clarity that Quran is neither poetry nor the prose, rather a distinct combination of both.⁴⁰ He considers the Quran is consisted of a unified message, he says, "...the message itself, being of the eternal, is one message in eternity, however heterogeneous its temporal expression may be appear to be. There is a repertory of familiar themes running through the whole Koran; each Sura elaborates or adumbrates one or more-ofen many-of these".⁴¹ He has no doubt regarding the preservation of the Quran, he holds the view that the Quran printed in the twentieth century is

the same to the Quran that was authorized by the caliph 'Uthman' more than thirteen centuries ago.⁴² Unlike to other translators of the Quran from the West, he concedes that the Quran was received by the Prophet in a 'supernatural' mode.⁴³ He states it as such: "for I do not doubt at all that the Qur'ân was a supernatural production, in that it bears all the marks of being the discourse of exaltation".⁴⁴ Arberry considers the Quran as the fountainhead of Islamic teachings which affected the Muslim scholarship throughout the Islamic history and gave rise to a new civilization. It deserves to be widely recognized and well comprehended in the West.⁴⁵

This translation provided a paradigm shift and a breakthrough in the scholarly cognizance of the West towards the Quran. This may be considered an attempt from the western mind to understand the Quran from the Muslims point of view.

Muhammad Asad's Views about Quran

Asad originally belonged to Austria, by profession; he was a journalist, after a long investigation and spending a lot of time in the Islamic East, he embraced Islam.⁴⁶ He wrote a translation of the Holy Quran by the name of 'The Message of the Quran' in 1980. He made an attempt to present his rendition in modern English while avoiding unnecessary 'archaisms'.⁴⁷ In summation to the translation, he has added appropriate notes in which he chiefly relied on the commentary of Muhammad Abduh.⁴⁸ Asad expresses the effect of Quran on the entire human race in the realms of religious, social and cultural impacts; he believes that no other sacred scripture has left such indelible remarks on the human civilization other than the Quran. Its world view not only threw off the Arabian Peninsula, but also got across in the other regions of the globe. He thinks that it was the vigor of the culture produced by the Quran that it bore on the mind of Europe in the medieval ages and paved a way for the 'age of science'.⁴⁹ The Muslims seeks guidance in the moral aspect and looks into it for their worldly ambitions and the salvation of hereafter, with equal veneration, this very aspect of Quran put the mind of a westerner into fix, who studies it through the available translations, where a believer who finds the charm in the reading of Quran in Arabic, a western man complains an incoherence⁵⁰, he states it in such words:" In short, the Westerner cannot readily accept the Qur'anic

thesis that all life, being God-given, is a unity, and that problems of the flesh and of the mind, of sex and economics, of individual righteousness and social equity are intimately connected with the hopes which man may legitimately entertain with regard to his life after death. This, in my opinion, is one of the reasons for the negative, uncomprehending attitude of most Westerners towards the Qur'an and its teachings".⁵¹ The Quran should not be studied as a compilation of individual 'injunctions and exhortations' rather, it should be betoken as a unified whole in which every verse has the inner bearing for the other, its idea should be grasped by a correlation of verses and by using cross-references that 'always subordinating the particular to the general and the incidental to the intrinsic'.⁵²

Asad's endeavor is praiseworthy in the scope of translation; however, he departs from the traditional Muslim point of view in his commentaries, especially when he speaks of miracles. Thus his commentary on the message of the Quran may be ascribed as a 'rational'.⁵³

T. B. Irving's notion about Quran

T. B. Irving an American Muslim produced the English translation of the Quran with a title, '*The Qur'an: The First American Version*' in 1985.⁵⁴ He intends to produce a translation for the new generations of Americans for Muslims and non-Muslims both and to accomplish his task; he applied the contemporary American English idiom in order to render a new smell to the translation.⁵⁵ He starts his introduction by presenting the Ijaz of Quran in the term of its 'inimitability'. He affirms the fact that Quran is kept up and reliable, therefore, it helps as a yardstick to understand the relations between Islamic Middle East and the West irrespective the ideas of 'social scientists or theologians'.⁵⁶ Equally for the placement of the Quran is seen, he deems that the chronological order of the Quran may be helpful to know about the deputation of the Prophet and the traditional order is helpful to see the message of Quran.⁵⁷ Quran is a book of principles which does not proceed into the minute details; moreover, it incorporates a message and an ideology carried by a messenger.⁵⁸ Quran is a living book that makes it untranslatable, because every time a translator finds new meanings to interpret this Glorious book.⁵⁹

This translation possesses the linguistic accuracy problem and its subtitle, 'The First American Version' is controversial too as it imparts the sense that Quran has several versions.⁶⁰

Conclusion

It is concluded that the very first purpose of translation of the Quran by non-Muslim western intelligentsia was to understand Muslims' mindset and psyche to fortify western colonial imperialism. The political needs compelled them to understand the theological background of behavior of Muslims towards west. Secondly, the orientalist had tried to pose the impression that the Quran is the book of Muhammad (s.a.w.) and the most deceitful way to present their ideas is "appreciating mode". They admire the magnificent language of the Holy Prophet (s.a.w.) but intention is to deny that the Quran is a divine book. Thirdly, their translations are also infected with the linguistic inaccuracy. No evidence could be traced out that any orientalist has studied and translated the Quran considering that Islam might be a true revealed religion and Quran is the true and final book of Allah. Nevertheless, these translations paved a path for the propagation of Islam in the West, since; western mind confer with the scripture of Islam for the first-hand knowledge of Islam.

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