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The Western Translations of the Qu'ran: Betraying the Message of Allah

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Abstract

Human science studies agree that throughout the different steps of shaping his social identity, Man is to identify himself by distinguishing it from the Others, and then to shape their identities and translate them. Exchanging ideas and thought regardless the different tongues used has never been, for translators, a perfect task to be proud of. Translation is a finicky job as it has not yet been reduced to strict scientific rules. Such fussy duty is marked by the existence of ethnocentric translators who have always been considered as fingers of suspicion. A good example is the translation of some sensitive scripture as the Qur'an . Aiming to achieve some ethnocentric scheduled desiderata, some translators focus on the target interlocutors, the consumers of the target language and not on the source ones.

This paper attempts to fathom the undergoing extent of the social representation of the others in the target interpretation of the meaning of the Qur'an and to foster adjusting effective communication across-cultures and religions by simply recognizing the others.

Key Words:

Introduction

To translate is "to put into words of a different language" (Webster"s College Dictionary, 2000). More explicitly, to translate is to transport meaning from the Source Language to the Target Language and often, translations are subjected to multiple interpretations. According to Jirí Levý, translation is a decision-making process. There are two types of decisions: one related to the various interpretations of the text in the source language, and the other one related to the diverse possibilities of expression in the target language, basically when dealing with Holy scriptures as Qu"ran or the Bible.

With the rise of Islam in the world arena, Qu"ran is an indispensable aid to understanding the religion of nearly one billion people. The peculiar circumstances of history which brought the Qur'an into contact with the English language have left their imprint on the non-Muslim as well as the Muslim bid to translate it. The Muslim Scripture is yet to find a dignified

and faithful expression in the English language that matches the majesty and grandeur of the original. The currents of history, however, seem to be in favor of such a development. Theoretically speaking ,excellent translators are careful writers,

cautious readers with well developed critical reading skills, and meticulous editing. However, reviewing the existing Qu'ranic translations into English language, we deduce that they have never been for the translators, a task to be delighted with!

Ethnocentrism and the Translation of the Qu"ran

Ethnocentrism is defined as "the tendency to look at the world primarily from the perspective of one"s own culture." A good example of such tendency are the different studies achieved under the fashion of the Exploration of the East since the beginning of the ninetieth century, when Orientalists have tried to explore the Eastern cultural and scientific heritage

aiming to find out some noteworthy aspects of this latter. Their first interest or curiosity was the Qu'ran. The translation of the Qu'ran was ambivalent. This is obvious as the need for translating the Qu'ran arose in those historic circumstances when a large number of non-Arabic speaking people had embraced Islam, and giving new linguistic orientations to the contents of the revelation .

Unfortunately ethnocentrism often entails the belief that one"s own race or ethnic group is the most important and that some or all aspects of its culture are superior to those of other groups. Within this ideology, orientalists and translators who have tried to render the Holy Arabic book into some European languages have translated Qur'an in relation to their own particular ethnic group and culture, especially with concern to language, and religion. Therefore, most of the European translators of the Qu"ran have put less emphasis on verses that deal with worshiping and obedience and more emphasis was put on the verses of proceedings (lawsuits), which deal with jurisprudence, heritage, societal matters as gender, family marriage... etc; those matters and concerns were the core of interest of the European philosophers of that era. A good example was the attention given to the verse of polygamy, Sura 4: 04 "And if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphan girls then marry (other) women of your choice, two or three, or four; but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only or (slaves) that your right hands possess. That the nearer to prevent you from doing injustice" (Muhammad Muhsin Khan and Muhammad Taqi-ud-din Al-Hilali., 1994)

Ethnic strife has dominated the landscape in Ou"ranic translations. Ethnocentric translators have implies betrayed the common moral values of translation as defined by Cecilia Santamarina "Translators have contributed to the emergence of national literatures, the dissemination of knowledge and the spread of religions. Importers of foreign cultural values and key players at some of the great moments of history". Throughout deep analyses of few English translations of the Qu"ran, we dare say that faithfulness has been a rare pearl to unearth among most of the existing translations of this divine Book. The process of rendering meaning of Qu"ran text into English language does not only involve the linguistic portion, but it must consider cultural connotations as well. The translators who should be qualified as cultural mediators, when covering Qu"ranic translation, unfortunately, most of them are not! Each translator has his own mental make-up, his dogmatic presuppositions and his approach to the Quran as well as the background of his translation.

The majority of the existing translations of the Qu"ran are marred by numerous mistakes of translation and tend to be a stumbling block for an average reader. This is due to the various tendencies

that motivate each translator"s intention and aim such as: political influence, religious antagonism from both internal or external sides, superficial knowledge of one of two languages (source or target language), being not thoroughly versed in qu"ranic studies mainly the "circumstances of revelation" (asbab an-nuzul) of individual verses, or simply throughout denying the existence of the Others!

1-Political Influence

In political relations, oriental translators of the Qu"ran as activists and politicians have criticized through an egocentric eye other religious or ethnic groups. Such approach to the Qur'an is found in Alexander Ross"s The Alcoran of Mahomet translated out of Arabic into French, by the Sieur Du Ryer...And newly Englished, for the satisfaction for all that desire to look into the Turkish vanities (London, 1649). In translating the Qur'an, the intention of Ross, a chaplain of King Charles I, was: " I thought good to bring it to their colours, that so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou must the better prepare to encounter...his Alcoran.", moreover Ross tried to delude and deceive the readers of his translation by pretending that the Qu"ran was written by Mohammed the prophet of the Turks. As to the quality of the translation itself, Zwemer's remark is quite illuminating: "He (Ross) was utterly unacquainted with Arabic, and not a thorough French scholar; therefore his translation is faulty in the extreme". Zwemer, S.M., Muslim World, V, (1915), p.250.

2 - External and Internal Religious Antagonism

2-A- External Antagonism

Some translators, when shaping the identities of the Others within the source text and deliberately, try to interpret them within the target text, they assign to their own culture, ethnic or beliefs the highest status or value. They consider that whatever they believe is the most appropriate system. Implementing the common translation"s rules which allows the translator to add, adjust and substitute aiming to facilitate comprehension and relying on their personal beliefs and cultures, they have dealt with Qu"ran text as to deal with any literary text and have dared omitting and denying some of the Qu"ranic events. Muhammad Asad in his "The Message of the Quran " (Gibraltar, 1980) denies the occurrence of Qu"ranic events as the throwing of Abraham into the fire, Jesus speaking in the cradle, etc. He also regards Lugman, Khizr and Zulqarnain as "mythical figures" and holds unorthodox views on the abrogation of verses. Putting these blemishes apart, this highly readable translation contains useful, though sometimes unreliable background information about the Qur'anic Suras.

Among the other western translators of the Qu"ran

whose intention was to doubt in the message itself and have assumed that the Qu"ran was revealed only to the Arabian region and not to the entire humanity, aiming to focus on the deep gap - as did the Old Puritans- between a Culture of higher status and an other culture of lower one, George Sale, a lawyer brought out his "The Koran", commonly called The Al Koran of Mohammed (London, 1734).1 Which has been the most popular English translation. His translation abounds in numerous instances of omissions, distortions and interpolations. The recurrent Qur'anic address, Ya aayuhan nas" O Mankind!" is translated as "O people of Mecca" which means that the Prophet Muhammad was sent to preach and guide only his tribe of Mecca!; Ar-Rahman n ir Raheem, is simply rendered as "Most Merciful". Parts of some verses have been altogether omitted, as for example, in Ale-Imran III: 98 is not translated. Sale went on misleading readers of his translation, when translating the verse 28: Surat 34, Saba'" And we have not sent you except as a giver of glad tidings and a warner to all mankind but most of men know not" as following: O prophet, We have not sent thee otherwise than unto all common men". He had also interpolated external words into some verses such as: 143: Surat 1, Albagarah "Thus we have made you a just nation ..." as following: "Thus have We placed you O Arabian intermediate nation"!

Feeling uncomfortable with Sale's work, J.M. Rodwell, Rector of St. Ethelberga, London, issued his translation entitled *The Koran* (London, 1861). As an academic, his translation seemed to be more objective. Even though, Rodwell is guilty of having invented the socalled chronological Sura order of the Qur'an. Nor is his translation free from grave mistakes of translation and his own fanciful interpretations in the notes Suffers from a number of mistakes of mistranslation and misinterpretation. For example, (al-Mudathir :39) is translated as "they of God's right hand", (al-Kauthar :2) as "Pray therefore to the Lord and slay the victims". Explains the use of the word abd (al-Alaq:10) in the Qur'an thus: "Since it was the slaves who had embraced Islam, the Qur'an uses this expression".

Arberry"s The Koran Interpreted (London, 1957) no doubt stands out above the other English renderings by non-Muslims in terms of both its approach and quality. Not altogether free from omissions and mistranslations. For example al-Anfal 8:59 is rendered as: "And thou are not supposed that they who disbelieve have outstripped Me" whereas the correct translation would be: "Let not those who disbelieve deem that they have escaped Me". *An-nabi-ul Ummi* is mistranslated as "the Prophet of the common folk". Other instances of mistranslation are: *Ale-Imran* 3:43; *Nisaa* 4:72, 147 and 157; *Mai'da* 5:55; *A'raf* 7:157; *al-Sajdah* 32:23; *al-Anfal* 8:59 and *Yunus* 10:88, etc.

Nonetheless, it is not altogether free from mistakes of omission and mistranslation, such as in *Al Imran* 111:43, *Mary; be obedient to thy Lord, prostrating and bowing before Him.* (That is of the tidings of the Unseen, that We reveal to thee; for thou wast not with them, when they were casting quills which of them should have charge of Mary; thou waste not with them, when they were disputing.) ...111* They will not harm you, except a little hurt; and if they fight with you, they will turn on you their backs; then they will not be helped.

Nisa' IV: 72 : Some of you there are that are dilatory; then, if an affliction visits you, he says, "God has blessed me, in that I was not a martyr with them., 147 Those who believe, and then disbelieve, and then believe, and then disbelieve, and then increase in unbelief - God is not likely to forgive them, neither to guide them on any way, and 157 and for their saying, "We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God" - yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them. Those who are at variance concerning him surely are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of surmise; and they slew him not of a certainty - no indeed; God raised him up to Him; God is All-mighty, All-wise. Ma"ida 5: 55 and 71, An"am 6: 20, 105, A"raf 7: 157, 158 and 199, Anfal 8: 17, 29, 41, 59, Yunus 10: 88, Hud 11: 30 and 46 and Yusuf 12: 61 They said, "We will solicit him of our father; that we will do.".

N.J. Dawood is perhaps the only Jew to have translated the Qur'an into English. Available in the Penguin edition, Dawood"s translation, The Koran (London, 1956) is perhaps the most widely circulated non-Muslim English translation of the Qur'an. Dawood, N.J., The Koran (London, 1956). 11 edns. An Iraqi Jew. Speaks of the influence of Jewish and Christian teachings on the Prophet and condemning the traditional Sura order follows the chronological Sura order. Marred by serious mistakes of translation "bani Adam" (al-Araf 7:31) is rendered as children of Allah (correct translation is "children of Adam"), in Al-Baqarah 2:191 "al fitnatu ashaddu min al qatl(i)" is mistranslated as "idolatry is worse than carnage" (correct translation is "oppression is worse than slaughter").

2-B- Internal Antagonism:

Even amongst the Muslim translations, some are representative of the strong sectarian biases of their translators.

2-B-1- The Qadiyani Translations:

A very known example is the Qadiyani movement. The Qadiyani translators have been actively engaged in translating the Qur'an, Apart from English, their

translations are available in several European and African languages. They are guilty of misinterpreting several Qur'anic verses, particularly those related to the Promised Messiah, his miracles and the Qur'anic angelology. Their considerable translational activities are motivated by the urge to proclaim their ideological uniqueness.

Muhammad Ali's The Holy Qur'an: English Translation (Lahore, 1917) marks the beginning of this effort. Similar distortions mar another Qadiyani translation by Sher Ali, The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text with English Translation (Rabwah, 1955). Published under the auspices of Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmud Ahmad, second successor of the "Promised Messiah" and head of the Ahmadiyyas, this oft-reprinted work represents the official Qadiyani version of the Qur'an. Unapologizingly, Sher Sher Ali refers to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as the "Promised Messiah" and mistranslates and misinterprets a number of Qur'anic verses. Muhammad Ali denies the occurrence of some miracles such as the gushing forth of twelve springs as a result of the Prophet Moses" striking his staff (al-Baqarah II:60), angelhood of Harut and Marut (al-Baqarah II:102), Jinns listening to the Qur'an (al-Jinn LXXII:01) and the stoning of Abraha's army to death by the birds (al-Fil CV:3)

Zafarullah Khan's The Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation (London, 1970) ranks as another notable Qadiyani venture in this field. Like other Qadiyanis, Zafarullah too twists the Qur'anic verses to imagine that the door of prophethood was not closed with the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.b.h). An obtrusive view upon the Qur'anic text is found in the many Qadiyani translations, too: No wonder, then that these ventures are far from being a just translation, replete as they are with frequent transpositions, omissions, unaccountable liberties and inexcusable faults.

2-B-2 – Shiite Translations:

After the death of the prophet (p.b.b.h), two main conflicting views have dominated the Muslim community, and which have come to be later known as the Sunna and Shia. Different scholars of both sides have struggled since ages to weaken their "rivals" or to enlighten people about their own beliefs and sometimes their political usurped right!

Ali, S.V. Ahmad, The Holy Qur'an with English Translation and Commentary according to the version of the Holy Ahlul Bait. With special notes from Ayatullah Agha Haji Mirza Mahdi Pooya Yazdi (Karachi, 1964). Vindicates on the authority of the Qur'an itself such sectarian doctrines of Shias as Imamat, Muta'a (temporary marriage), the nomination of Ali as the Prophet's successor, *Taqqiyya* (hiding the faith), Tabarra (cursing), and mourning in the month of Muharram. Invectives used against both the Umayyad and Abbasid rulers. Strongly refutes the

view that the Shias believe in the alteration (*Tahreef*) of the Qur'an. Shia doctrines are fully reflected in accompanying commentaries. M.H. Shakir, Holy Qur'an (New York, 1982); Syed Muhammad Hussain at-Tabatabai, al-Mizan: An Exegesis of the Qur'an, translated from Persian into English by Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran, 198~). So far five volumes of this work have been published.

Some Shiite scholars share the same idea of altering and tampering with Qu"ran itself! In one of their books, written within the third century, the verse 33: al-Imran "Allah chose Adam, Nuh (Noah), the family of Ibrahim and the family of "Imran" above the Alamin (mankind and jinn) (of their times) " is altered, and there are missing words which are "... the family of Muhammad..."; another misinterpretation of Qu'ran is the verse 43: Az-zukhruf "so hold you (o Mohammed) fast to that whish is revealed to you .Verily, you are on the straight path", proclaiming the immamat of the Imam Ali; the straight path has been interpreted as: the Imam Ali. (Athaalibbi, Beirut Edit.), The verse 90: al Baqara "how bad is that...grudging (baghian) that..." meaning : against the Imam Ali! (Albaidhaoui, 2008)

Strong displeasure and irritation against most of the Companions of the prophet such as Abu Baker, Omar and Othman have always been the main topics of debates among the Shiite bias. Moreover, some verses have been interpreted towards this bias such as: verse 82: al Anaam " It is those who believe and confuse not their belief with Zulm (wrong i.e. worshiping others besides Allah), for them only there is security and they are the guided ", In this verse, according to the Shiite doctrine, the One who confused his belief with Zulm is of course the 1st Caliph Abubaker, and because so he did not deserve to be the Caliph of the Prophet! El Makamani mentioned this supplication "May Allah bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad and Curse the two Idols (Abou baker and Omar) of Kureish, the tyrants, and their two daughters "!

In addition to that, *Taqqiyya* (hiding the faith) is one the principle beliefs of the Shiite in behaving, interpreting the verses of the qu'ran and in dealing with Others, "nine-tenths of the religion Islam is *Taqqiyya* (hiding the faith) and no one can be said a Muslim, if he refutes *Taqqiyya* (Killianni, V II, 217-221); incredibly, that means nine-tenths (9/10) of the religion is telling lies!

An other Islamic movement "Salafi" which is basically known in Gulf and within other Arabic countries, has its recent own translation. Al-Hilalai, Taquiuddin and Khan, Muhammad Muhsin, Explanatory English Translation of the Meaning of the Holy Qur'an (Chicago, 1977). It is, in fact, a summarized English version of Ibn Kathir's exegesis, supplemented by al-Tabari's, with comments from Sahih al-Bukhari.

Both the translators have been introduced as Salafi (traditional followers of the way of the prophet). The translation is intended to "present the meanings of the Qur'an which the early Muslims had known".

3-Superficial Knowledge of the Arabic Language

In addition to the sectarian biases, ignoring Arabic language is another main cause which has contributed in misinterpreting and misunderstanding the deep meaning of the Holy Islamic Scripture, mainly among those who haven"t any obnoxious bias against it. Most of the translations abound in numerous instances of omission, distortion and interpolations because of ignorance of Arabic language or because of translating Qu"ran based on another translation written in another European language like Latin, French or German. Exception can be set aside for Allamah Nooruddin, who spent many years in the Arabian desert learning to obtain the requisite feel of the language of the Holy Qur'an. He lived in the Holy cities of Makkah and Madinah and among the Arab Bedouins of Hijaz, to learn the classical Quranic Arabic. He was able to feel, hear, read and write classical Arabic. His poetry and prose were superb. He had not only collected and consulted the previous commentary of the Holy Quran, but had also gone back to the oldest and most reliable Arabic lexicons and poetry of pre-Islamic era, to ascertain the real classical and root meaning of the Arabic words used in the Holy Qur'an.

Arabic is the most efficient language, especially when it comes to the precise statement of laws. Since the Quran is a Statute Book, it was crucial that such laws must be clearly stated. Allah chose Arabic for the Qu"ran because of the obvious reason that it is the most suitable language for that purpose. Arabic is unique in its efficiency and accuracy. For example, the word "they" in English does not tell you if "they" are males or females. In Arabic there is a "they" for the males, "HUM," and a "they" for the females, "HUNNA." For two females, instead of "these" or "those" there is "HAATAAN" and for the two males "HAATHAN." This feature does not exist in any other language in the world. I came to appreciate this efficiency of the Arabic language when I translated, for example, 2:228. This verse enjoins the divorcee to give up her own wishes to divorce her husband, if she discovers that she is pregnant, and the husband wishes to reconcile - the welfare of the child takes a priority. The efficiency of the Arabic language was extremely helpful in stating this law. Any other language would have made it almost impossible to point out whose wishes are to be superseded. The word "Qaalataa" of 28:23, for example, translates into four English words: "the two women said." Such is the efficiency of the Arabic language.

4-Ignorance of the Circumstances of Revelation :

Any novice learner of translation courses knows that before translating any text, one has to analyze the text, i.e. to identify its purpose, its message, and the author"s intention. In so doing, the translator tries to answer the following questions: When was the text written? (different times have different cultural influences); Where was it written? Who is it written for? (the ultimate goal is to reach the target audience). The same idea is shared with Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who points out: "Every linguistic utterance, including divine revelations, must adapt itself to the cultural horizon of its audience to be intelligible at all; later readings of these texts must therefore be based on an understanding of their historical milieu of origin".

Islamic exegesis is acutely interested in the Qur'an's historicity and in identifying the "occasions of revelation" (asbâb al-nuzûl) of individual Qur'anic verses or sections. The Qur'an is thus viewed not only as a source of supra-historical norms, but is also treated as a highly situated text inextricably linked to the cultural and religious background of 7th-century Arabia.

In this case, I mention the following example to assert the importance of this Qu"ranic field of study, which will help any translator to make out and achieve his translation: 2: 60 "Recall that Moses sought water for his people.

We said, "Strike the rock with your staff." Whereupon, twelve springs gushed out there from. The members of each tribe knew their own water. Eat and drink from Allah"s provisions, and do not roam the earth corruptingly." and in the verse: [7:160] We divided them into twelve tribal communities, and we inspired Moses when his people asked him for water: "Strike the rock with your staff," whereupon twelve springs gushed out therefrom. "Dr khalifa translation.

Relying on the occasions of revelation, the translator can distinguish clearly between the two Arabic words "Infajarat (2:60) and Inbajassat (7:160) translated into the same English word: gushed out! which is a wrong translation; unfortunately the majority of the Qu"ran translators did not pay attention to that .Dr Samarai points out that "the occasions of revelation state that the context of the first word shows that Allah was speaking highly of the children of Israel, hence water gushed out (in great quantity) but within the second verse the context shows that Allah was blaming the children of Israel, because they took the calf, as an idol, for worship after had escaped from the Pharaoh, instead of worshiping Allah, because of that when his (Moses) people asked him for water, the twelve springs well up (in small quantity) which is less than gushing out.

CONCLUSION

Any translator is considered as an importer of foreign cultures and key player in the unfolding of intellectual history, his translation represents the bridge that brings together cultures in this ever globalizing world. Within this growing trend in its different representations, the translator's subjectivity, whatever is his opinion, should not be a stumbling block in achieving the dream of recognizing the Others, admitting their intellectual heritage, their human rights, in brief: their Existence.

With the rise of Islam in the Western and in the Far Eastern worlds, Qu'ran is an imperative key to fathom out the religion of nearly one billion people, and to find out accurate possibilities of overcoming the mutual indifference and antagonism of Qur'anic interpretations conducted around the globe. Although the vast majority of the translations are useful in providing background information to the non-Arabic reader of the Qu'ran around the world, they are pitiably poor and uninspiring. It has been obviously proved that the Qu'ran as a miraculous Scripture is not an easy book to translate, interpret or at least to understand!. The much-needed translation of this Holy Book has to be achieved under the auspices of a reputable academic staff that includes:

Islamic scholars (mastering the original text), Western scholars (part of the target audience), translators, linguists, historians (due to the necessity of such a historical contextualization of the Qur'anic revelation), and preferably an literary academic (because of its musicality, the Qur'anic recitations quietness down the mind and soothes the soul).

Any translation or interpretation of its meanings should choose the one that suits most the general Quranic principles and rules, not a meaning that contradicts them and betrays our objectivity. Since There is no change in the linguistic side of both languages, however the change is in our perception of things surrounding us, and in our interpretation of the Others.

Key words

Bias: A strong feeling in favor or against one group of people, or one side in an argument, often not based on fair judgment.

Chaplain : A priest who is responsible for the religious needs of people in a prison, hospital, or in armed forces etc.

Imamat: A strong belief of an extreme Shia doctrine that the Imam is the highest religious reference. If he wants to perceive all what the angels, prophets and messengers know, he will. He is able to predict the moment of his death, but more than that, he can choose the fit moment!

Polygamy: The custom of having more – three wivesthan one at the same time

Qur'an"s historicity: The historical milieu within which it was first revealed along the 23 years of revelation.

Source Language : The text in the original language.

Target Language: The language into which the text will be translated.

Vanity: Behavior or attitudes of people with too much pride in one"s own appearance.

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