

## English Translations of the Quran: An Introductory Study

\*Shahid ur Rehman

\*\* Shaheeda Rasheed

\*\*\* Dr. Fazal Ilahi Khan

### Abstract

The tradition of translating the Quran into other languages dates back to the early days of Islam. Like many other eastern and western languages, Quran has long been translated into English. This article presents an introductory study of prominent English translations of the Quran. Depending on the background and perspectives of the translators, it divides these translations into three groups; Muslim's non-Muslim's and infidels' translations. Giving a brief introduction of each category and introducing prominent translations concisely, it concludes that Muslims produced English translations particularly in response to the biased translations of orientalists and other non-Muslims. It ends with the suggestion that Muslim scholars should keep an eye on the new arrivals in the field to respond the new questions raised by orientalists and infidels. It also proposes an encyclopedic work on the subject.

**Keywords:** Quran, translations, English language

---

\* PhD Scholar, AIOU/Lecturer in Islamic Studies, Govt. College 90 SB, Sargodha

\*\*M Phil Scholar Islamic Studies ,BZU, Multan

\*\*\*Department of Islamic Studies Qurtuba University Of science & Information Technology, Dera Ismail Khan

## Introduction

Can the Quran be translated into another language or not? This question has long been debated among Muslim scholars. In the present era, however, it is generally accepted that the translation of the Quran is necessary in order to convey its message to those unfamiliar with the Arabic language. As for the question about first translation is concerned, scholars have traced it in Prophet's time "when the people of *Fāras* wrote a letter to *Salmān Fārsī* to write down *Sūrah Al-Fātiḥa* into Persian language for them." <sup>2</sup> and he translated it and presented it to the Prophet. People of *Fāras* reported to had been recited these translated verses in their prayer, until they became able to pronounce them in Arabic. <sup>3</sup>In addition to these narrations we find people in Bukhāra reciting the Quran in Persian during their prayers, as they were unable to memories the Arabic verses. Imām Abū Ḥanifa gave special relaxation regarding the permissibility of translating the Quran. It has been mentioned that he permitted reciting of *Sūrah Al Fātiḥa* in Persian with no conditions attached, though later he reported to have limited it to those worshippers who, were unable to speak Arabic, and gradually, this became a common rule applicable to other languages. But Abū Ḥanifa took their words back.<sup>4</sup> The tradition of the translation continued. Ibn Shahriyar, a famous 3rd/10th century

---

<sup>2</sup>Muhammad 'Abd al-'Azīm al-Zurqānī, *Manāhil al-irfān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār Ihyā al-Kutub al-Arabiyya , 1953), 2:55.

<sup>3</sup>Abu al-Muzaffar Shahfur Isfarayinī, *Taj al-tarājim fī tafsīr al-Quran Wa al-'ājim* (Tehran: Sazman-e-Amūzish- i-Inqilāb-e Islam 1996), 1:8.

<sup>4</sup>Sultan Valad, *Rabāb Nāmāh* (Tehrān: Muassasah-e Mutali'āt-e Islām! Dānishgāh-e-McGill, 1980), 413-4.

traveler, mentions the existence of a translation of the Quran written in Kashmiri, Sindhi, Multānī languages around 270/883 in his book 'Ajā'b al-Hind."<sup>5</sup>

In European languages, Qur'ānic translations can be seen in Spanish and Polish languages, many centuries ago. The most ancient translation of the Quran relates to Syriac language. Qur'ānic scripts are also found in the old Greece Byzantine Christians books. After Greece, Latin was the language in which next Quran translation was done by non-Muslims. In Latin the translation of the Quran was done in 1411. In Other European languages, the translation of the Quran was done in 1530 in Italian, in 1616 in German, in 1641 in Vilandese, in 1647 in French and in 1648 in English language. A.R Kidwā'ī in "Translating the Untranslatable." has categorized many translations and gave brief introduction. OIC research center has published the World Bibliography of the Translations of the meanings of the Holy Quran in 1986. Different other Bibliographies of translations and other dissertations have been written in this regard. For example Dr. Muhammad Hameedullah gave the list of Translation of the Quran, books and journals about it. Jurjī zaidān, monthly journal al-Hilāl published an index which shows the translation of the Quran and their languages. Muhammad Salim Qāsmī's Urdu book named, "Jā'iza' Tarajam' Qurānī" published from Deoband India in 1968. Quranic translations are more than 300 in Urdu, 92 translations of English, 25 Bengali, more than 100 in Turkish, 149 in German, 13 in China, 13 in Russian, 46 in Latin 36 in Sindhi, more than 100 in Persian and 44 in

---

<sup>5</sup>Abu al-Qāsim Rāfar, *Tarjumah Hā'Urdu-e- Qur'ān-e- Karīm* (Europe: Book House, 1977), 1:519.

French language. Other than these famous languages of the world there are other 115 languages in which the Quran is translated. <sup>6</sup> The very first Translation in Latin language was occurred in 1242. And after the invention of publishing technology it was published in 1543 from Basal. It is said that the second translation which better than former, was published from Padua in 1698 by Morocci. After this many translations came into market in Italian and French languages. Mr. Andre Du Ryer presented this first translation in 1647." <sup>7</sup> In English the very first translation of the Quran was from French instead of Arabic directly. It was published from 1648 to 1688. It is probably based on French translation of Mr. Andre Du Ryer (*L'Alcoran de Mahomet*) by Alexander Ross in 1649. The second translation was of George Sale in 1734.

From the long tradition of English translation of the Quran, this article presents an introductory study of prominent English translations. These translations can be divided into different groups depending on the background and perspectives of the translators. Here we have tried to study them in three groups: Non-Muslim's translations, Muslim's translations and Infidel's translations.

### **1. Non-Muslim's translations**

These translations have some common features like errors of the language, anti-Islamic behavior which can be shown mostly in their introduction, text and appendixes. As to the translation itself, they abound in numerous

---

<sup>6</sup>Dr. Muhammad Hameedullah, "*Tarajam- e-Quran- e-Majeed*," Monthly Ma'arif 'Azam Garh 142, no.5 (1988): 379-391.

<sup>7</sup>Mofakhar Husain, *English Translations of the Holy Quran* (Singapore: Toppan Company, 1998), 31.

instances of omission, distortion and interpolations. At many places they give their own interpretations and notes which are far from real Islamic teachings. Here is a brief introduction and analysis of prominent non-Muslim's English translations.

### **Alexander Ross**

"The base of this translation was on the first French translation of Du Ryer. Ros' translation is considered the very first translation and Mofakhar says that it is concealed that who is the author of this English translation. But it is famous with the name of the Ross and it has become the main source for many years for English translations.<sup>8</sup> It has many errors of the language also but the main thing is its anti-Islam behavior which can be seen in its introduction, text and appendix.

### **George Sale**

An advocate translated the Quran which he named as 'The Koran, commonly called The Al Koran of Mohammed' which was considered the most authentic translation of the Quran. Before translating the Quran he added a preliminary discourse of 145 pages in which he discussed Islam, Prophet of Islam, different Islamic laws etc. He showed his aggression against Islam at many places.

### **J. M. Rodwell**

Rector of St. Ethelberga, London, was dissatisfied with Sale's work, translated the Quran titled 'The Koran (London, 1861)'. It is also full of flaws and serious mistakes which he deliberately committed against The Prophet and the Quran in his preface.

### **E. H Palmer**

---

<sup>8</sup>Husain, *English Translations of the Holy Quran*, 36.

"He was a Cambridge scholar and he was handed over the duty of translating the Quran for Max Muller's sacred Books of the East series. So he translated the Quran which was titled 'The Quran', appeared from London in 1880. It is full of mistakes, omissions and mistranslations which had been pointed out by different researches.

### **Richard Bell**

He was a famous orientalist who wrote the translation of the Quran. His Arabic language was very good because he was a reader of Arabic language in University of Edinburgh and the title of his translation is 'The Quran'. It was published from the same university London in 1939. Like Sale he thought that Muhammad was the author of the Quran.<sup>9</sup>

### **Colin Turnerr**

"Turner's translation is one of the latest translations. His full name is Colin Turner and he is the faculty member of University of Durham (U. K). Title name of this translation is A New Interpretation which, was published in 1997 in bulky volume. He has a rich vocabulary of the words so; he frequently gives many meanings of one word. The translator remained the member of the faculty, named, study of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.<sup>10</sup>

### **Arthur John Arbery**

He was an acknowledged orientalist and scholar of his age. He was the Professor of Arabic language in two famous universities; university of

---

<sup>9</sup> W. M. Watt, "The Dating of the Quran: A Review of Richard Bell's theories." *JRAS* (1957): 46-56.

<sup>10</sup>Dāoūd M Nasemī, "A Thematic Comparative Review of Some English Translations" (PhD thesis, the University of Birmingham, 2008), 36

London and Cambridge. The title of his translation of Quran is 'The Koran Interpreted' which was published from London in 1957. It is not free from mistakes. Many examples can be seen.

## **2. Muslim's translations**

Some worthy scholars not only produce precise edition of the translation but also refute the orientalist and infidels like Abdul Mājid Daryābādī, Muhammad Asad etc. Here is a brief introduction and analysis of the Muslim's translations.

### **Muhammad Abdul Hakim Khan**

Abdul Hakim Khan translated the Quran titled 'The Holy Quran'. He, while, translating the Quran, added short notes and brief explanation which are authentic and taken from the traditions of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ). It was appeared in Patiala in 1905. In this translation contradictory views and history had been carefully avoided. It was the very first work which had the Arabic text. At that time there were no authentic and reputed Islamic scholars who translated the Quran, therefore for that time this translation had a very high status among the scholars.<sup>11</sup>

### **Mirza Abdul Fazal**

The first edition was with an Arabic text. He published two more editions but without the Arabic text. The latest edition had the sūrahs in traditional order. He refuted the missionary views by quoting references from the Bible also.

### **Hairat Dehvii**

---

<sup>11</sup>A.R Kidwāī, "A survey of English translations; translating the untranslatable"

*The Muslim World Book Review by Islamic Foundation, (1987) : 76.*

Hairat Dehlvi's translation titled 'The Koran' appeared in 1911. This was the response of the works of the orientalist like Sale, Ross, Palmer and William Muir.

### **Nawāb Abdul Malik Hasan**

Nawab Abdul Malik Hasan was a student of English literature and was well aware of Arabic literature. He, by the inspiration of Mawlānā Shibli Nomānī started the translation work but passed away before its completion.

### **Hāfiz Ghulām Sarwar**

It started with the detail of previous English translations of The Holy Quran with summary of each Sūrah. Sarwar was well versed with Arabic language. He tried his best to present an accurate translation.<sup>12</sup>

### **Pickthall**

M. M. Pickthall was a converted Muslim. His translation of the Quran was a notable work in the list of the precise translations. The title is 'The meaning of the glorious Quran' (London, 1930). Although it is written in old English which is difficult but it is his masterpiece because he provided brief notes where a reader wants. Thus it has become the most read translation among the Muslims. That was the first time when the Muslims can present their English translation to others due to its accuracy and precision.<sup>13</sup>

### **Abdullah Yousaf Ali**

That was the second precise translation of the Quran written by Abdullah Yousaf Ali. He was a civil servant. Basically he was not a scholar; he

---

<sup>12</sup>Mofakhar, *English Translations of the Holy Quran*, 47.

<sup>13</sup>Nasemī, "A Thematic Comparative Review of Some English Translations", 33.

copied many notes from the Muslim commentators of the Quran. But in aggregate his translation is a distinguished work in English language.

#### **‘Abdul Mājīd Daryābādī**

It was published first time in Lahore. Daryābādī had good command on English language. His prominent peculiarity was his comparative study of religions. He added many brief notes where needed. T. B Irving comments that is clear but he finds it hard to work with because of its arrangement.<sup>14</sup> Nadvi says: "this translation and its commentary is unique and most dependable among many other English translations attempted so far."<sup>40</sup>

#### **Muhammad Akbar**

First time, Muhammad Akbar translated Urdu *Tafhīm al-Quran* of Syed Abū al-‘Alā Mawdūdī. As for as the English language of Muhammad Akbar is concerned, it is not as good as other renowned translators have. But Mawdūdī’s style of translation is in fact, interpreting the Quran in easy language which attracts the reader towards the message of the Quran.

#### **M Asad (Leo Pold)**

"Muhammad Asad is a converted Muslim. His old name was Leopold Weiss which was changed after accepting Islam as Muhammad Asad. He has written many books on various topics related to Islam, but his masterpiece is his translation of the Quran named 'The Message of Quran'. It is very fine, precise and accurate except some of his own views about the Night Journey, Ghosts (*Jinn*), Abraham and fire, Jesus speaking in childhood and reality of miracles. He has discussed his views in detail

---

<sup>14</sup>Mofakhar , *English Translations of the Holy Quran*, 47.

in appendix of his translation. Zamkhsharī is the main source of his explanations.<sup>15</sup>

### **T. B. Irving (Taleem Ali)**

T. B. Irving was an American Muslim who wrote the translation of the Quran titled 'The Quran'. It was published in 1985 and called first American version. It is the one of the latest major English translations. Irving used very lucid and fine English which attracts the Americans. He also used the latest idioms which are not commensurate with the original style and temperament of the Quran. However, it is not free of mistakes.

### **Saheeh International**

"That translation is very good in term of language and simplicity. Basically translation of Taqiuddin Hilālī and Mohsin Khan is the main source of this translation. The main difference is the clarity of the language and erasing parenthesis and shifted them in footnotes. In later print there is no name mention as a translator but in first print the name Um Mohammad was given as its translator.<sup>16</sup>

### **A Collective Work (Translation): The Holy Quran with English Translation**

---

<sup>46</sup> Nasemī, "A Thematic Comparative Review of Some English Translations", 49.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammed Samiulah, *Quran, the final scripture* (California:1981),261-268

This is the effort of four translators belongs to Turkey and attached with famous universities in teaching department of Arabic and Islamic Studies."<sup>17</sup>All the translators divided their work to themselves Sūrah wise. Nurettin accomplished first eight Sūrah and Taufik completed from nine to twenty Sūrah. Ali translated from twenty one to thirty nine and Mahmud forty to one hundred fourteen. It is not a simple translation but have explanatory notes. It was published from Istanbul in 1992.

### **Zafar Ishaq Ansari**

Dr. Zafar Ishaq Ansari translated Mawdūdī's "*Tafhīm ul Quran*" in English. It is the translation with Arabic text. Its style is good and easy for the readers to be comprehended.<sup>18</sup>

### **Mufti Taqī Usmani**

Complete (8 Volume Set): it is published from Karachi. In fact, Molvī Muftī Shafe presented his famous *Tafsīr Ma'arif ul Quran* in Urdu language. Later on his son Mufti Taqī Usmanī presented this tafsīr in English to facilitate English readers.

### **Mufti Naeem : An English Translation**

Mufti Naeem from Pakistan translated the Quran with commentary and it was published from Lahore in 2006. It is in lucid English language. He followed the orthodox' views."<sup>51</sup>

### **3. Infidel's translations**

If any of the Qur'ānic translation cannot fulfill the basic requirement, it is not included in Muslims' translations. Some translators of renegade groups use abusive or blasphemous language against the basic beliefs of

---

<sup>17</sup>Samiulah, *Quran, the final scripture*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Samiulah, *Quran, the final scripture*, 38.

Islam especially Qadianis are mistranslating the Quran to prove their infidel beliefs. Some other sects are also proved their beliefs instead of describing the intent and direct meaning of the Quran. So, they are included in this list.

### **Muhammad Ali**

He is Qādiānī translator and he used this medium to propagate the views of his group, therefore, his translation is full of blunders. He misinterpreted many Qur'ānic verses, especially those verses which are linked to the Promised Messiah, their miracles etc. Another Qādiānī translator Sher Ali wrote his translation and it was published from Chanab Nagar (Rabwah) in 1955. It was financially supported by Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmud Ahmad; second head of Qādiānīs group. He misinterpreted several verses and defamed the real picture of Islam and propagated his views which were contradictory to the views of Islam."<sup>19</sup>

### **Ghulam Sarwar (Qādiānī)**

He is also Qādiānī translator who translated the Quran to propagate his group's view. It is the mixture of translation and commentary. Like his other fellows he also misinterpreted the Qur'ānic verses.

### **Sher Ali**

This is the official Qādiānī translation of The Holy Quran. It represents the Qādiānī doctrine only blindly. Misinterpretation and missing of many verses from translation are found in this translation. It is on the footsteps of Muhammad Ali Qādiānī.

### **Zafrullah Khan**

---

<sup>19</sup>Nasemī, "A Thematic Comparative Review of Some English Translations", 46.

Like other Qādiānīs Zafrullah also translated the Quran in his own style. It was published from London in 1970. He twisted the Qur'ānic verses as he wished. He preached that that the door of Prophethood was not closed with the arrival of Muhammad. There are some other translations of this group which are available in market to vilify Islamic views and personalities.

### **Rashad Khalefa**

This translation is notorious due to his dishonesty and prejudice about Islam, Quran and the last Prophet. His translation is full of deviations and blasphemy. He has removed many verses from the Quran to prove his own theories. In verse 33:40 he has not accepted the last Prophethood and he has not of the view of the validity of the *Hadith* and *Sunnah* as source of law. He mistranslated many verses which have been confirmed by many reviewers including Kidvā'ī.<sup>20</sup>

Some other names of the translators of this category are: S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali, Salahuddin Peer, Malik Ghulam Farid (Qadyani Translation), Saeed A. Rizvi, Mahmood Yusaf Zayed, M. Sarwar Sheikh, M. Shakir, Edip Yuskel and Others: Quran, A Reformist Translation and Tahereh Saffarzadeh.

### **CONCLUSION**

English translations of the Quran were produced by three categories of the people; Muslims, non-Muslims and infidels. Muslims produced English translations when they found that non-Muslims translators initiated English translations with the aim of defaming Islam by misinterpreting and mistranslating the Quran like George sale and other orientalist.

---

<sup>20</sup> Nasemī, "A Thematic Comparative Review of Some English Translations", 217.

Arabic is not easy to translate into English due to the richness of Arabic and its literary elegance and when we translate the Quran, this difficulty increases many times due to the literary elegance, eloquent and oratory of the Quran. Therefore very few English translations are accurate like the translation of Abdullah Yousaf Ali, translation of M.M. Pickthall and translation of Abdul Mājid Daryābādī. There is still need to write precise and accurate translation of the Quran and to keep eye on the new arrival of English translations and prepare ourselves to give answers of new questions raised by orientalist and infidels. There should be an encyclopedia of English translations which have detailed analysis of each and every English translation with its merits and demerits.