An Overview of Qur'ān Translations by the Orientalists

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Abstract

The Qur'ān is the holy book of Islam, the world largest religion of practicing followers. It enjoys a pivotal the position in forming ideological, practical and devotional life of the Muslims. Though it is untranslatable as per Muslim Orthodoxy, its message can be rendered into the languages other than Arabic. The Orientalists were attracted to translate it as early as 12th Century AD and the very first translation of the Qur'ān into any Western language was done into Latin in 1143 AD by Robert of Ketton since then it has been translated multiple times into multiple languages. The first English translation was rendered in 1649 AD by Alexander Ross based on a French translation of Andre du Ryer followed by many others till now. The present paper seeks to have an analytical overview of the Qur'ānic translations by the Orientalists particularly English translations.

Keywords: Translations of Quran, Orientists, overview

Introduction

A very strong view regarding the initiation of Orientalism as a movement is that it was founded with the translation of the Qur'ān into Western languages. The motive behind translating the holy book of Islam into the important western languages especially into English was primarily to defend Christianity and to defame Islam. After studying the translations done by the earlier westerns, one can easily conclude that these people tried their hard to present the Qur'an in a distorted form under biased missionary and imperialistic purposes. They declared the Holy book of Islam as authored by Muhammad (PBUH), the Prophet of Islam, and contained a lot of rude and blasphemous contents. "Non-Muslims in the west were first

interested in Qur'an translations and printing the Qur'an for polemical and perhaps for imperialistic reasons, and used their translations to contest Islam by the way of reason. Refutations of the Holy Qur'an are found included in the first translations. The Latin translation of Ludovico Marracci is in fact entitled 'Refutation of the Qur'an'.

The majority of these first translations are presented under such titles as "Mohammad's Qur'an", "Qur'an of the Turks" or "Books of the Turks'Prophet".[1] "Christian missionaries have been the most active non-Muslim translators of the Qur'an. As already noted, origins of this inglorious tradition may be traced back to the anti-Islamic motives of the missionaries. Small wonder, then that these ventures are far from being a just translation, replete as they are with frequent transpositions, omissions, unaccountable liberties and unpardonable faults."[2] "The first translations to English were not undertaken by Muslims' but by Christians who sought to debunk Islam and aid in the conversion of Muslims to Christianity".[3]

"The first translation in any western language was done in Latin in 1143 A.D by Robertus Ketenesis at request of Peter the venerable, Abbot of Cluny. This translation could not be printed before it was recommended by Martin Luther in 1543 A.D." [4]

"His version was entitled Lex Mahumet Pseudoprophete ("The law of Mahomet the false prophet"). The translation was made at the behest, abbot of Cluny, Peter the Venerable currently exists in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal in Paris. According to modern scholars, the translation tended to "exaggerate harmless text to give it a nasty or

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[1] Ekmelddin, World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an, p. xxxiv

[2] Kidwai, A.R., Translating the Untranslatable: A survey of English translations of the Qur'an

[3] khlaleel Mohammed, Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an, Middle East Quarterly, Spring 2005, vol. xii, no. 2, pp. 58-71

http://www.meforum.org/717/assessing-english-translations-of-thequran 10/17/2014

[4] Ekmelddin, World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an, p.xxxv

licentious sting" and preferred improbable and unpleasant meanings over likely and decent ones. Ketenensis' work was republished in 1543 in three editions by Theodore Bibliander at Basel along with Cluni corpus and other Christian propaganda. All editions contained a preface by Martin Luther. Many later European "translations" of the Qur'an merely translated Ketenensis' Latin version into their own language, as opposed to translating the Qur'an directly from Arabic. As a result early European translations of the Qur'an were erroneous and distorted. [5]

The French translation made by Andre du Ryer, printed in 1647 was also an important translation because it fathered many other translations of other languages including English. The first renown English translation is not direct from Arabic rather from this French translation.[6] Ekmeleddin points out that the information of the translations in European languages should be revised because both the Muslims and Europeons have been in contact for a long time. “This late start is especially surprising when we consider that contact between Muslims and Europeans in Andalusia in the Occident and in Asia Minor in the orient started in the eight century A.D. There is certainly a need to review what we know about the first translations in European languages and examine the oldest manuscripts in order to verify this information.” [7]

The Very First Translations of Different European Languages:

(i) Latin:

The first translation of the Holy Qur’an in Latin was made in 1143 A.D. by Robertus Ketenensis at the request of Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny. This translation could not be printed before it was recommended by Martin Luther in 1543A.D.

(ii) Spanish:

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[5]Fatani, Afnan, “Translation and the Qur’an”, in Leaman, Olover, the Qur’an: An Encyclopedia, Great Britain: Routledege. pp. 657-669

[6] Kidwai, Translating the Untranslatable

[7] Ross, The Al-Coran of Mahomet, 1949, p. fy2

The first translation in Spanish was published in Madrid in 1844 A.D. It was translated by De Jose Garber de Robles.

(iii) Italian:

The first translation in a modern European language was the Italian version of Andrea Arrivabene, published in 1547 A.D.

(iv) German:

The first German translation was made by Soloman Sehliweigger and printed in Nurenberg in 1616 A.D.

(v) French:

Andre du Ryer, a Frenchman who lived in Istanbul and Egypt for a time, made a direct translation of the Holy Qur'an from Arabic. The translation was known as "alcoran de Mahomet" and published in Paris in 1647 A.D.

(vi) English:

The first English translation of the Holy Qur'an was made by Alexander Ross, based on the French translation of du Ryer. It was printed for the first time in London in 1648 A.D.[8]

The history of the translation of the Qur'an throws ample light on the fact that the Muslims tried their best to render the Qur'an into a number of languages to serve the people newly converted to Islam and to convey the message of the Qur'an even to the non-Muslims. On the other hand, orientalists and missionaries also rendered it under their own mission mainly refuting the Islamic teachings and under imperialistic purposes. Then Muslims girded up their loins to defend the Qur'an and Islam and translated the Qur'an into English in order to present its meanings accurately. Whatever the purpose behind, the Qur'an was studied and translated at a large scale and became one of the most translated books in the world. This service of the Qur'an is going on till the date and the Qur'an is being translated into almost all the languages of the world

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[8] Ekmeleddin, Ihsanoglu, World Bibliography of translations of the meanings of the Holy Qur'ān: printed translations 1515-1980, Istinbul: The research center for Islamic history, Art and culture(IRCICA), 1986, pp. xxix-xxxvi

English Translations of the Qur'an by the Orientalists:

English belongs to Europe and the translations of the Qur'an into English have much to do with other European languages especially Latin and French because the first reknown English translations of the Holy Qur'an are based little or much on the translatory works done in Latin and French languages. So, it seems appropriate that before starting discussion of the English translations, Latin and French translations on which two major early English translations were based should be introduced.

English Translations by the Orientalists:

Usually Alexander Ross' translation published in 1949 is regarded as the first English translation of the Qur'an. But the edito of World Bibliography indicates. "It is notable that the oldest printed translation in English recorded in our bibliography is a selection printed in London in 1515 under the heading "Here begynneth a alytell treatyse of the Turkes law called alcoran. And also it speketh of Machamet to Nygromancer". This 61 page translation and introduction is an indication that the interest in Islam in England, though limited, started earlier than in many other European countries." [9]

But a complete and widespread translation is that by Ross.

The Alcoran of Mahomet by Alexander Ross, 1649, London:

As noted before, Alexander Ross did not translate the Qur'an directly from Arabic but from a French translation done by Andre Du Ryer. This French translation was not up to mark rather it was full of blunders. George Sale, a famous orientalist and translator of the Qur'an remarks about this French translation as. "Du Ryer's performance is far from being a just translation; there being mistakes in every page, besides frequent mistranslations, omissions and additions, faults.'[10]

When the work by Du Ryer is itself full of blunders, how the translation of it is accurate. The intention behind this translation is revealed

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[9] Khaleel Mohammad, Assessing English translations of the Qur'an

[10] S.M. Zwemer, Translations of the Qur'an, The Moslem world, 1915/Borrmans, Mauris, "Ludovics Marachi et sa translation Latin du coran" [Lodovico, Marrachi and its Latin translation of the Qur'an]. Islamochristiansa, (in French)(80), 2006,pp.73-86

clearly from the title set by Ross. Though the translation served to introduce the scripture of Islam to the English speaking world and for nearly a hundred years was the only translation available, yet it has played a destructive role in spreading false concepts about Islam. The title of the translation reads as, 'The Alcoran of Mahomet translated out of Arabic into French, by the Sir Du Ryer ….And newly Englished, for the satisfaction for all that desire to look into Turkish vanities'.

Kidwai remarks, "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 be better prepare to encounter...his Alcoran.'

In the same rabidly anti-Islamic vein are the two appendices in the work entitled as (a) 'A Needful Caveat or Admonition, for them who desire to know what use may be made of or if there be danger in reading the Alcoran' (pp. 406- 20) and 'The Life and Death of Mahomet: the Prophet of the Turks and author of the Alcoran' (pp. 395-405)." [11]

He gives blasphemous remarks in the caveat as, "If you will take a brief view of the Alcoran you shall find it a hodgepodge made up of these four ingredients:

1- Of contradictions
2- Of blasphemie
3- Of Ridiculous fables
4- Of lyes [12]

In the light of aforesaid facts, it is concluded that the translation by Ross is full of flaws representing the missionary bias and seems to be under a fear that Islam may shake the established Christian faith in the west. 'He was neither proficient in Arabic nor was he well versed in French'. [13]

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[11] Abdel Haleem, The Qur'an: A NewTtranslation, London: Oxford University Press, 2004) p.xxvii

[12] Ekmeleddin, World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an, p.xxxv

[13] Ekmeleddin, World Bibliography of Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'an, p.xxxvi

Commenting on the earliest translations of the Holy Qur'an, Dr. Sultan Shah concludes his discussion as: "The three earliest translations of the Holy Qur'an in European languages Latin by Robert of Ketton, French by du Ryer and English by Ross had influence on the later orientalists. These were considered the primary sources of knowledge on Islam for a long time as there were no alternatives in these languages. These translations were characrised by prejudice of the translators and inaccuracy. Relying on the inaccurate information provided by them, their successors intensified the hatered in the minds of western readers."[14]

The Koran, Commonly Called the Al Koran of Mohammed, by George Sale (1734) London.

The title also reads "Translated into English from the original Arabic with explanatory notes taken from the most approved commentaries". This was the first English translation direct from Arabic with a long introductory portion called Preliminary Discourse. "It has been the most popular English translation. Sale's exhaustive 'Preliminary Discourse', dealing mainly with Sira and the Qur'an, betrays his deep hostility towards Islam and his missionary intent in that he suggests the rules to be observed for 'the conversion of Mohammedans'. As to the translation itself, it abounds in numerous instances of omission, distortion and interpolations."[15]

More than one effort, were done to translate the Qur'an into English before Sale like Ross. But Sale has been given much importance. "Of these, Sale was probably the most important because he wrote a detailed critique about earlier translations. His work became the standard reference for all English readers until almost the end of the nineteenth century. However, his work was limited by his lack of access to public libraries forcing him to rely only upon material in his personal collection. While Sale gave the impression that he based his translation on the Arabic text,

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[14] Shah, Muhammad Sultan, Dr. The Earliest Translations of the Holy Qur'an: Latin, French and English, Islamabad: The Islamic Quarterly, vol. 57, no. 1, p. 69

[15] Kidwai A.R, Translating the Untranslatable:A Survey of English Translations of The Qur'an

others have suggested that he relied on an earlier Latin translation. Sale did not insert verse numbers into his work, nor did he insert footnotes or other explanations. The result, therefore, is a work that is extremely difficult to comprehend."[16] The popularity of the translation by Sale may be determined from the fact that it 'has gone through some 123 editions and the latest edition appeared in 2008. In the eighteenth century alone, four additional editions and in nineteenth century, well over sixty." [17]

But now it has lost its popularity and Arberry's is considered the best work among the orientalists.

In the title of the translation, Sale has claimed that 'with explanatory notes taken from the most approved commentaries' but the reality is entirely different and the scholars of the relevant field have proved that the notes are mainly based on the notes mentioned by Marracci in his Latin translation of the Qur'an. Prof. Dr. Sultan Shah remarks as, "Some western scholars have alleged that Sale based his translation and commentary on the Latin translation by Marracci ……. This has not been alleged by any Muslim but, rather, by a western scholar named Sir Edward Denison Ross, who has furnished an introduction to Sale's translation. He concludes with the following remarks,

"A comparison between the two shows that so much had been achieved by Marracci that Sale's work might almost have been performed with a knowledge of Latin alone. As far as the quotations from Arabic authors I do not wish to imply that Sale did not know Arabic, but I do maintain that his work as it stands gives a misleading estimate of his original researches, and that his tribute to Marracci falls far short of his original indebtedness."[18]

Prof. Dr. Sultan Shah as well as many other critics has highlighted his erroneous approach with missionary intention in his article.

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[16] Khaleel Mohammad, Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an

[17] Shah, Muhammad Sultan, A Critical Analysis of the Qur'anic translation by George Sale, The Islamic Quartarly: vol. 54, p, 102,103

[18] Shah, Muhammad Sultan, A critical Anlysis of the Qur'anic Translation by George Sale, p. 108

Nevertheless, it has been the standard reference for the next 200 hundred years and still in print today, with release of a recent 2009 edition.[19]

The Koran by Jhon Meadow Rodwell 1861, London:

"Dissatisfied with Sale's work, J.M. Rodwell, Rector of St. Ethelberga, London, produced his translation entitled *The Koran* (London, 1861). Apart from hurling all sorts of wild and nasty allegations against the Prophet and the Qur'an in the Preface, Rodwell is guilty of having invented the so-called 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."[20]

The Qur'an by Edward Henry Palmer, 1880, London:

"A Cambridge scholar was entrusted with the preparation of a new translation of the Qur'an for Max Muller's Sacred Books of the East series. Accordingly, his translation, *The Qur'an*, appeared in London in 1880. As to the worth of Palmer's translation, reference may be made to A. R. Nykl's article, 'Notes on E.H. Palmer's *The Qur'an*', published in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 56 (1936) pp. 77-84 in which no less than 65 instances of omission and mistranslation in Palmer's work have been pointed out."[21] Dr. Sultan Shah has pointed out to his distortions and omissions dividing his criticism into the following parts : ' Entire verses omitted, parts of verses left out, skipped words, mistakes of pronouns, wrong numbering of verses.'[22]

The Qur'an Translated with a Critical Rearrangement of Suras by Richard Bell, Edingburgh, 1937-39:

"Richard Bell, Reader of Arabic, University of Edinburgh, and an acknowledged Orientalist produced a translation of the Qur'an with special reference to its *Sura* order, as is evident from the title of his work, *The*

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[19] English Translations of the Qur'an, Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, Early translations, 25-3-2015

[20] Kidwai, A.R, Translating the Untranslatable

[21] Ibid

[22] Shah, Muhammad Sultan, Dr. A critical study of E.H Palmer's translation of the Qur'an, Hamdard Islamicus, April-June 2012, vol. xxxv, No. 2, pp. 15-18

Qur'an translated with a critical rearrangement of the Surahs. In addition to describing the Prophet as the author of the Qur'an, Bell also believes that the Qur'an in its present form was 'actually written by Muhammad himself'. In rearranging the Sura order of the Qur'an, Bell, in fact, makes a thorough mess of the traditional arrangement and tries to point out 'alterations, substitutions and derangements in the text."[23]

The Koran Interpreted, by Arther Jhon Arberry, London 1955:

Kidwai remarks about Arberry's translation as, "A.J. Arberry, a renowned Orientalist and Professor of Arabic at the Universities of London and Cambridge, has been, so far, the latest non-Muslim translator of the Qur'an.

Arberry's The Koran Interpreted no doubt stands out above the other English renderings by non-Muslims in terms of both its approach and quality. Nonetheless, it is not altogether free from mistakes of omission and mistranslation, such as in Al' Imran III:43, Nisa' IV: 72, 147 and 157, Ma'ida V: 55 and 71,An'am VI: 20, 105, A'raf VII: 157, 158 and 199, Anfal VIII: 17, 29, 41, 59, Yunus X: 88, Hud XI: 30 and 46 and Yusuf XII: 61."[24]

This is the only translation done by the orientalists which is acceptable to the Muslims because to the Muslims it was Arberry whose intention was righteous while translating the Qur'an. He has given due reverence to the Holy Scripture of Islam. His translation is not a perfect one like others even by Muslims but he has tried to remain faithful throughout. Dr. Sultan Shah concludes his article 'Arthur' John Arberry as an interpreter of the Holy Qur'an' with the following words, "He was different from his predecessors because he neither adopted chronological order of the Qur'an nor have any negative angenda in his 'The Koran Interpretted'. His renderings of some verses can be criticized but his intension should not be objected. As an interpreter of the Qur'an he would always be remembered not only in the West but also by the scholars of the

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[23] Kidwai A.R, Translating the Untranslatable:A Survey of English Translatios of The Qur'an

[24] Ibid

East and his translation would be regarded as an authoritative version of the Muslim Scripture among the English speaking Westerners."[25]

Khaleel Mohammad appreciates his work as, "His title, *The Koran Interpreted*, acknowledged the orthodox Muslim view that the Qu'ran cannot be translated, but only interpreted. He rendered the Qur'an into understandable English and separated text from tradition. The translation is without prejudice and is probably the best around. The Arberry version has earned the admiration of intellectuals worldwide, and having been reprinted several times, remains the reference of choice for most academics. It seems destined to maintain that position for the foreseeable future."[26]

The Koran, by N.J. Dawood, London 1956:

N.J. Dawood native Iraqi Jew translated the Qur'an into English and was published by Penguin classics. He is the only Jew orientalist of Asia to translate the Islamic scripture. His main aim was to render the Qur'an into simple and modern English. But unfortunately he could not depart from Jewish bias. The critics view his translation as:

(i) A.R Kidwai:

"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. The author's bias against Islam is readily observable in the Introduction. Apart form adopting an unusual Sura order in his translation, Dawood is guilty also of having mistranslated the Qur'an in places such as *Baqara II*:9 and *A'raf VII*:31, etc."[27]

(ii) Abdel Haleem:

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[25] Shah, Muhammad Sultan, Dr., Arthur John Arberry As an Iinterpreter of the Holy Qur'an, p. 9-10

[26] Khaleel Mohammd, Assessing English translations of the Qur'an

[27] Kidwai, A.R., Translating the Untranslatable: A Survey of English Translations of The Qur'an

"In the following year (I956), N. J. Dawood produced his translation for Penguin Bolls. His stated aim was above all to make the language modern and readable, and he certainly succeeded in this, when one compares it with the translaions available at the time. However, from the beginning his translation was seen to take too many liberties with the text of the Qur'an and to contain many inaccuracies, as was immediately pointed out by reviewers; moreover, many Muslims were deeply offended by the way he translated key terms and by some of the notes to the translation."[28]

The first edition of the Dawood translation rearranged the chapters (suras) into more or less chronological order, but later editions restored the traditional sequence.[29] With the passage of time the interest of the western scholars in translating the Qur'an began to die because their missionary spirit was weakened and a number of translations by the Muslims flooded the market. As a result only a few translations by the Orientalists appeared after Arberry and N.J Dawood had rendered the Qur'an into English. But they have not caught the market to an adequate extent. A couple of them are going to be introduced briefly in the following lines.

The Qur'an: A New Translation, Thomas Cleary, 2004:

Dr. Thomas Cleary is a well-known California based translator of numerous Buddhist works. He based his translation on an earlier, partial translation, which was highly praised by the famous American Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf.[30] 'He holds Ph. D. in East Asian languages and civilization from Harward University'.[31]

The Qur'an, Alan Jones, Oxford, 2007:

This translation was done by Dr. Alan Jones a retired Oxford University lecturer and Arabist. It was published by Gibb Memorial Trust in November, 20, 2007.[32]

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[28] Abdel Haleem, The Qur'an: A New Translation, p. xxviii

[29] English Translations of the Qur'an, Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia, 25-3-15

[30] English translations of the Quran, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ 15/4/2015 2

[31] Thomas Cleary, http://www.Islamicbookstore.com, 25-3-2015 3

[32] The Qur"an-Alan-Jones, www.amazon.com/, 26-03-15

There are some incomplete English translations of the Holy Qur'an by the western scholars. They are given below:

Incomplete Translations:

(i) "Selections from the Qur'an": 1843. By Edward William Lane (1819-1876)

(ii) "Extracts from the Coran in the original: with English Rendering." By Sir William Muir (1819-1905)

(iii) "The Koran: selected Suras: by Arthur Jeffery (1892-1959)

Conclusion

Comparatively, later on published translations by the orientalists are better in both the scholarly approach and intent behind. Yet it is very difficult for anyone to be objective while translating. So their translations are replete with flaws, omissions, distortions, mistranslation as well as misconception. Where these translations brought about the introduction to Islam good or bad there in the West, they caused the Muslim scholars to put their effort in order to defend the Qur'an, Islam and the Prophet of Islam. For this they adopted translating the Qur'an into English faithfully as one of ways of defense.