



The Holy Quran in Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English Translation: Some Reflective Remarks on its Various Versions

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Abstract

There have been several English translations of the Holy Quran. The earliest English translations of the Holy Quran were produced by certain leading Orientalists. Not adequately well-versed in Islamic studies, their English translations were often biased, hence utterly unreliable. This deficiency inspired Muslims to produce English translations of the Holy Quran. Abdullah Yusuf Ali was one of the early Muslim translators of the Holy Quran. Since his translation came on the market, it has received several editions, versions, and adaptations. The present, library-research paper casts a quick and critical look at Ali's English translation and what others have done on it. It is found out that some of the later-on editions of his translation lack many features of his original work.

Keywords: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, English translations of the Quran, Quran translation, English for Islamic purposes, some reflective remarks.

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Introduction

Great works, oftentimes referred to as classics, receive multiple editions and numerous translations. Various classifications of such great works or classics can be made. Some of them may be regarded as belonging to a certain nation or language, e.g., the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Homer (probably 8th century BC) belong to the ancient Greek language and civilization, and the works of Cicero typify those of the Roman culture and the Latin language. Classics can also be defined in relation to religions. As such, the Holy Bible and *The City of God, On Christian Doctrine*, and *Confessions* of St. Augustine of Hippo (354 –430), or *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) of John Bunyan (1628 –1688) can be regarded as typical Christian classics.

Classics may be of various types. Some classics belong to and resemble a certain nation and its language, thus national classics. Examples of this type of classics are abundant, e.g., the works of William Shakespeare (1564-1616) belong to England, hence English classics, and the works of the contemporary Iranian poet Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Bahjat Tabrizi "Shahriyar" (1285-1367 Sh/ 1907-1988) belong to and portray aspects of the Persian language and culture. In contrast to the former, there are some classics of higher value and status. By this, it is meant what T. S. Eliot refers to as "the universal classic" (1957, p. 55). An instance of this type of classic is the poetical works, particularly the ghazals, of the Persian poet Shams al-Din Muhammad "Hafiz" (d. ca. 792 AH/ 1389). In line with this mindset, it is markworthy to mention the Italian critic Italo Calvino's thought-provoking outline and delineation of the characteristics of classics (Calvino, 1981/ 1986, pp. 125-134). So far just carefully selected human works deserve to be regarded as classics.

In contrast to the above which pertain to human classics, there come Divine works and the works deeply influenced by them. The Holy Quran is an evident instance of Divine texts that deserve to be regarded at least as religious classics. Yes, but still far above it, the Holy Quran deserves to be looked up to as the true arch-classic, roughly the Classic of all classics,



in the whole world, a Divine classic far above and superior to all human classics. In line with the above, and yet far above the aforementioned works that are products of great human minds, the Holy Quran is the intact and authentic Divine Book, hence inimitable in terms of its phonic beauty, semantic sublimity, and profundity of thoughts. No matter how skillful a translator is, his best efforts in translating the words of Allah can never match the exact and intact Word of Allah. This is because the Holy Quran is the Divine Book, and all translations are attempts discharged by ordinary men, however eminent or erudite they may be. The distance between all translations (if they might be called as such) of the Holy Quran and its 'best' translations remains proportionate to the unimaginable distance between Allah as the Creator of the universe and human beings as His creatures.

The world has received the Holy Quran via the Divine revelations that the Prophet Muhammad received from Allah. Despite being the first promulgator and disseminator of the Divine Book, the Arabic style, tone, charm, and flavor of the Holy Quran is very much distinct, hence easily distinguishable, in terms of its phonic sweetness, semantic bountifulness, and intellectual profundity from the words of the Prophet, hence easily distinguishable. Parenthetically, the American sociolinguist Charles A. Ferguson (1921-1998) introduced the term "diglossia" to refer to the linguistic phenomenon where two varieties of the same language, i.e., a High Language (HL) in contrast to a Low Language (LL), are simultaneously in use in certain language communities (Ferguson, 1959). Although Classical vs. vernacular varieties of Arabic may be categorized as HL vs. LL, respectively, hence an instance of diglossia, the reality of the Arabic language is far from this. This is due to the presence and availability of the Holy Quran in Arabic, although its religio-moral scope can never be restricted to Arabs or the Arabic language. For sure, the Holy Quran in Arabic makes and proves the unique and unrivaled instance where the intact Divine Words are available in a human language.

The Holy Quran has frequently been translated into English for



various reasons and purposes. Although the earliest English translations were produced by English-speaking Christians, they were not all meant to convey the lessons inferable from it. With the spread of English among Muslims, many of them discerned how unfair and distorted prove a great majority of those English translations done by leading Orientalists (Turner, 1997, pp. xii-xiii). According to Kidwai, some Orientalists' translations are "the most outrageous ones" (Kidwai, 2013, p. xi). He also refers to the Qadyani translators as people who "do not subscribe to the basic articles of Islamic faith" (Ibid.). Evidently, the translation of the Holy Quran never needs merely linguistic knowledge of Arabic: it requires firm and sincere belief, coupled with scholarly expertise, in the fields of Quranic scholarship plus the knowledge, skills, appreciation, and intelligence to render some of its subtle meanings in translation.

The responsibility to use one's best talents and efforts to convey the teachings of the Holy Quran inspired many Muslims to produce their own renditions, if not translations per se, of the Holy Quran. Such was Abdullah Yusuf Ali's desire to render the Quranic teachings "in a fitting garb in English" (Ali, Preface to the first edition, 1934; repr. Qatar ed., 1946, p. iii).

Less than a century ago, Abdullah Yusuf Ali expressed a great desire for the English language. Long before English was recognized as the international language, in fact, a true lingua franca of the world, he acutely discerned the capacity of English to be globally an efficacious vehicle for conveying the Quranic messages to the world. It was in line with this global need that Ali spoke of his desire "to make English itself an Islamic language" (Ali, Preface to the first edition, 1934; repr. Qatar ed., 1946, p. iv). Yet, it is still unknown how much successful he was in practicalizing his correct desire. ²

². However inspiring and thought-provoking, the idea of "Islamic English" was later on taken up by some other Muslim thinkers, e.g., Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (1986) where he defines it as "the English language modified



A widespread phenomenon in the world of English translations of the Holy Quran is numerous translations, reprints, and sub-editions of major translations produced. Parenthetically, Kidwai holds that there have been "around 70 complete English translations of the Holy Quran" (Kidwai, 2013, p. xi).³ This is suggestive of the attention the Holy Quran receives both from English-speaking/ reading Muslims as well as those non-Muslims who are keen to learn about Islam as asserted in the Holy Quran.

Such has been the case with Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English translation which has received multiple reprints, imprints, versions, and editions. This is a mark of its popularity. The present paper deals with certain aspects of subsequent minor revisions done by others on an English translation, with specific instances taken from his English translation.

Yusuf Ali's Life

Abdullah Yusuf Ali was born in Bombay, British India, in 1872 and died in London in 1953. From a religious point of view, he was first a member of the Shii Ismailis; however, he, later on, changed his religious orientation and joined the Sunni camp, hence especially favored by Sunnis.

While a great majority of his Shii Ismaili relatives were active tradesmen, he decided to make a scholar. Hence, he continued his studies. He first received a bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of Bombay in 1891 at the age of 19 and was awarded a scholarship to pursue his studies at the University of Cambridge where he pursued his postgraduate education in English literature and law.

to enable it to carry Islamic proper nouns and meanings without distortion, and, thus, to serve the linguistic needs of Muslim users of the English language" (Ibid., p. 7). Yet, still no serious or major attempt has been made to delineate the idea, its scope, and the features it would embody.

³. For a critical assessment of English translations of the Holy Quran, see Kidwai (2011).



Abdullah Yusuf Ali's political leanings were different from many other Indian intellectuals who favored the independence of India. Politically, he was mainly concerned with maintaining the Britisher's supremacy, hence his predilections and leanings towards the Britishers' legacy and customs.

While still in England, he got married to at least two British women one after another. Deplorably, none of his British wives remained loyal or faithful to him. In his married and family life, he experienced marital breakdown and sheer frustration. His second wife and children disfavored him and expelled him from home. Finally, he died in a street corner in London, with none to claim his dead body.

There are various short accounts of his life that deserve careful scrutiny. Although he passed away and was buried in the Brookwood Cemetery in London, it is indicated in a short life of his, as indicated in the Amana Corporation edition of his English translation, that he "died in Lahore in 1948 A. C. 1367 A. H." (Ali, trans., *The Meaning of the Holy Quran*, 1412 A. H./ 1992 A. C., p. viii). As such, it remains not only questionable but also unanswerable how he died in Lahore but his body was taken to London for burial.

His works

Abdullah Yusuf Ali tried his hand at developing other works. They include such titles as *Muslim Educational Ideals* (1923), *Fundamentals of Islam* (1929), *Moral Education: Aims and Methods* (1930), *Personality of Man in Islam* (1931), and *The Message of Islam* (1940). For sure, his English translation of the Holy Quran brought him much fame; he won supreme and great renown for his masterpiece.

Background and Literature Review

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's life and English translation of the Holy Quran have been studied by some scholars. Upon searching in the Internet, some of noteworthy works pertaining to him and his translation are listed here. His biography is available in Sherif (1994), El-Khatib (2009), and Aziz (2010). Some of the critical appraisals of Ali's translation may be found in these



works: Azmi (2007; Arabic edition, 2009), El-Khatib (2009, 2014), Jeffery (1940), and Qadri and Shah (2021).⁴

The Present Study

The present work aims to pay tribute to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a renowned Indian Muslim translator of the Holy Quran into English. Although never a Quran exegete per se, his English translation contains exegesis-like footnotes, all geared to major Sunni expositions and commentaries on the Holy Quran. His methods of Quran translation and the noteworthy sources, including both wordbooks and exegeses, he enlisted in the beginning of his work signal a method that was followed by other Quran translators. Moreover, with the coming of age of several other translations, the method he adopted in separating translations of the verses from exegetical expositions is still adoptable, as some other Quran translators did so.

There have been some limitations for developing the present work. Overwhelmed by a torrent of many other academic obligations and missions, an unsurmountable hindrance remains the unavailability of several good and insightful works whose titles one may find in a search in the Internet, but their full texts are hard to obtain.⁵ Albeit these problems,

⁴ . This is just a sample of English works done on Ali's English translation. It can be surmised that quite many other works could have been written on it in other languages, e.g., Arabic, Urdu, and Persian, to mention just a few languages.

⁵ . It is really a deplorable situation that many fine English works can hardly be obtainable in a city like Qom where has long been the hub of Shii Islamic religious scholarship. With the exception of just a few places, fine English sources are really very hard to be located. Hence, any hardworking scholar must have either his or her own private library or have friendly relations with any other researcher whose private library contains just precious and priceless jewels of profound scholarship. In addition, severe, and at times brutal, sanctions add insult to injury. Scholars are the first victims of such sanctions.



it is hoped that the present work may shed light on an old English translation that still draws many enquirers toward itself.

His Translation of the Quran

Regarding his English translation of the Holy Quran, he certainly accomplished it out of faith, the subject of the present paper. Parenthetically, it is recorded that he was successful in memorizing the Holy Quran when he was still a young man. It was his special attention to the Holy Quran that inspired him to learn how to speak in Classical Arabic with ease. Besides Arabic and English, Ali knew Persian, French, and Latin, too.

Before getting profoundly involved in his English translation of the Holy Quran, it sounds questionable, if not suspicious, why his Quran translation has been overlooked by other big names in the field of Quran translations in English. Just an example will suffice. Arthur J. Arberry (1905-1969) does not mention Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation in the Introduction to his own English translation of the Holy Quran, published as *The Koran Interpreted* (Arberry, 1955, pp. 11-17; 1964, p. x). One can hardly admit that Arberry might have been incognizant or simply heedless of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English translation of the Holy Quran. As expected, Arberry's academic meticulousness, exactitude, and high stature certainly led him to Abdullah Yusuf Ali's work. Whether stemmed from any deliberate negligence or from any other motif, it remains questionable, if not admissible, why Arberry manifests this kind of intentional prejudice, mere ignorance, or simply negligence with regard to a Quran translation work accomplished by a Muslim scholar.⁶

⁶. It is expected of any conscientious academic to take pride in rendering any humble service to the Holy Quran and to refer to it in his or her own record of great achievements. This is missing from Arberry's autobiography (1960: 233-256), nor is his biography, however brief, included in Bosworth (2001), Netton (2010), and Leaman (2006).



Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English translation of the Holy Quran came out in several parts over the years 1934-38, published in two volumes by Muhammad Ashraf in Lahore in 1938. (Clark, 2010, p. 42) He revised his own translation in the years 1939-40. (Abdullah Yusuf Ali in Wikipedia). In its subsequent editions, it has been published as a single-volume work. Later on, various editions of his works appeared, all done by others. Below there is a short list of some editions of his English translation of the Holy Quran. For a short list of various editions, adaptations, and sub-editions of Ali's English translation, take a glimpse of the References, part [2].

Not all subsequent editions of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation are the same. Granted that he added a poetic introduction to his own translation in 41 cantos to his 1934 edition, preserved in the Qatar edition of 1946, this is missing from the following editions: King Fahd Complex (Medina, 1989), Wordsworth (2000), and Matarji (2000).

Foresightedly, Abdullah Yusuf Ali added several useful additions to his own translation masterpiece. They are 6,310 explanatory notes, 300 running notes in poetic form, and fourteen appendixes and indexes. (Abdel Haleem, 2004, p. xxviii) He also added a humble poetic conclusion in six cantos and a L'Envoi, dated 1937. They are all missing from the Wordsworth edition (2000), and also from that of Matraji (2000). Ali's explanatory footnotes are also very much reduced in number in the Matraji edition (2000). Deplorably, these useful additions are absent from the version edited by Razwy (2000). In this respect, the Razwy (2000) and Wordsworth (2000) editions are devoid of the helpful supplementary materials, yet Wordsworth (2000) seems more faithful to the original translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali. Razwy (2000) gives a list of the changes made in the text.

There are some lexical and phrasal changes in the subsequent editions of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation. The versions published by King Fahd Complex (1989), Amana Corporation (1992), and Matraji (2000) incorporated some textual changes, ranging from changing "God" to "Allah" to other manipulations in the footnotes. Granted that for various



semantic and theological reasons, Allah is not substitutable and replaceable by God, in other cases a translation must appear as it was published. Even if it might seem necessary to make some changes in it, further supplementary notes can be added up to an already received work.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation has been used for developing a Quran-oriented concordance. There is at least one Quran-oriented concordance, in fact, a much extended and elaborated index of the concepts and references indicated in the Holy Quran. This is the book developed by Mohammad Imran Erfani (2004). The purpose has been to assist those Muslims who do not know Arabic, nor have any expertise where to check in the Holy Quran for specific pieces of information.

Conclusion

To sum up, Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English translation deserves being published as it was originally presented by him. Any further correction or addition must appear in the guise of a series of supplementary notes. That Ali's rendition has received so much attention indicates that the readership of the Quran in English is always and globally on the increase.

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