

Book Review

Reading Modern Trends in Qur’anic Translations by Abdur Raheem

Kidwai, *God’s Word Man’s Interpretations:*

A Critical Study of the 21th Century English

Translations of the Qur'an, Viva Books: New Delhi, 2018.

Abdur Raheem Kidwai (a renowned Professor of English; Director of K. A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies, and UGC Human Recourse Development Centre at the Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India), in the present book under review, critically evaluates 32 selected English translations of the Qur’an published between 2000 and 2017. He is a prolific writer, and he has produced more than 30 books ranging from English literature to Islamic studies. He has extensively written on the Qur’anic Studies especially his critical analysis of English translations of the Quran is commendable.

The book begins with a “foreword” which is worth reading. Here the author gives a brief, but a useful introduction about the history of the English translations of the Qur’an besides he succinctly presents the weaknesses and strengths of these translations. He emphasizes that earlier the Orientalist scholarship dominated the field of the Qur’an translation, but now, he says the trend has drastically changed as Muslims are tremendously contributing towards the Qur’an translations, which is commendable. Since, out of 32 translations presented in the book, only three are written by the Orientalists, and 1 by a Qadyani scholar. Kidwai clarifies that a reader should not take each translation as final and for granted. The translation works of Muslim scholars are not free from grave errors and wrong information because some translations present “pernicious ideological presuppositions”, poor representation, plagiarism, sectarianism, grave misinformation, misperception and distortion, and thus misleading and deluding the common readers (p. xiii).

Kidwai further asserts that the Orientalists’ erroneous and insidious outlook is discernible in some translations produced by Muslim scholars, for their dismissive of the divine nature of the Qur’an, and the Prophet’s integrity. He further writes that these translations by persons bearing Muslim names are more damaging and precarious than those by Qadyanis’ and Orientalists’ (p. xv). In addition, a few Orientalist translations project as if the Qur’an demonize non-Muslims, such ideological presuppositions, Kidwai argues, further “exacerbate the regrettable divide between “us” (the West) and “them” (Muslims) (p. xii).

Notwithstanding, Kidwai says that there are some positive changes in translation works in terms of comparative religions. It is a welcome initiative towards location common features among different religion to foster mutual understanding and harmony. Equally important is the true representation of meaning and message of the Qur’an in easy and chaste English by a few Muslim scholars. For convenience, I would briefly explore under different categorization the trends in translation works Kidwai presented in the book.

Orientalist Trend:

Kidwai evaluates three Orientalist translations of the Qur'an: 1) Thomas Cleary's *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (2004); Alan Jones' *The Qur'an Translated into English* (2007); and A. J. Droge's *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation* (2014). According to Kidwai, Jones' and Droge's translations dominantly reflect the Medieval anti-Islam discourse. They discredit the authenticity of the Qur'an. Jones makes all efforts to frame and allege the Qur'an as "patently polemical" (p. 27); lack of originality as it borrowed from the Judeo-Christian tradition (p. 28); and possess many limitations: stylistic and subject matter. While Kidwai rejects evidently Jones prejudice and shortsightedness about the Qur'an, states that Jones rather emulates his Orientalist predecessors' baseless discourse. Droge's translation is fairly a good over Jones, for Droge does not question the originality of the Qur'an (p. 109). However, Droge's also claim in the Qur'an has a problematic text, posses many lacunae, obscurity, and uncertainty of meaning. Kidwai presents all instances of what Droge attempted to distort the meaning of the Quranic verses. Further, Orientalist allegation about the "order and compilation" of the Qur'an have remained one of their main topics of discussion. Like Alan Jones, Kidwai argues, Drodge is not new to the allegations, for he reproduces the narratives of his Orientalist predecessors.

In a radical departure from the dominant trend of Orientalist exposition of the meaning and message of the Quran, Thomas Cleary in his translation, presents Islam and the Qur'an as Muslims believe (p. 5). For Kidwai, Cleary neither questions the originality of the Qur'an nor links it with the Judeo-Christian sources. Kidwai expresses appreciates Cleary for exploring common things between Islamic and Buddhist tradition in his translation. Kidwai admires Cleary for producing such a timely contribution.

Qadyani Trend

Qadyani's have produced more English translations of the Qur'an than Muslims have. With a perverted mission, Qadyani translations are more harmful than Orientalists. Kidwai says that after 1971, Qadyani produced only a single English translation: *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation* (2005) by Omar and Amatul Rahman. However, Kidwai clarifies that this is actually an English version of the original in Urdu by Hakim Nooruddin (1841-1914)—head of Qadyanis after Mirza Ghulam Qadyani. Kidwai briefly evaluates the translation and puts that the editors, apart from concealing their Qadyani identity and affiliation, have done "gross misrepresentation" of the meaning and message of the Qur'an; it rejects "miracles and the existence of angels, jinn and the joys of Paradise" (p. 17). Lacking in any distinctive feature, Kidwai writes "the only noteworthy aspect of this English translation is twisting the Quranic message peculiar to Qadyani belief.

Sectarian and Deviated Trends

In this categorization, Qur'an translations of sects like Shia and Barelvi, and other modern deviated groups and individuals such as Feminists and Pseudo-Muslim Orientalists are evaluated and discussed.

The Qur'an with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation (2004) by Ali Quli Qarai, an Iranian Shia scholar, according to Kidwai, is a “balanced and moderate on sectarian issues” as compared to the earlier translations of Shia scholars. For Qarai neither uses derogatory remarks on the prophet's companions: Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman (RA), nor he twists the meaning of some Qur'anic verses to the Shia presuppositions. However, Kidwai points that Qarai resorted, in his explanatory nodes, to the typical Shi'a ideology central to this sect (p. 14).

In the Feminists trend, Laleh Bakhtiar—an Iranian-American Muslim writer— has written *The Sublime Qur'an* (2007). However, according to Kidwai, her translation lacks originality and has numerous mistakes. Moreover, neither the title and nor the subject matter deliver what it promises to. The translation corroborates the Western feminists' outlook coupled with Orientalist misinformation and misperception of the meaning and message of the Qur'an. Bakhtiar's tall claims of maintaining for the first time consistency and reliability, Kidwai proves, are marred with her heavily borrowings from Arberry's translation (p. 33). Kidwai concludes that the translation does not contribute even an iota to the field.

Another translation, *The Glorious Qur'an* (2011) is the English rendering of Tahirul Mohammad Qadri's Urdu, Irfan al-Qur'an. Interestingly, Kidwai devotes more space (pp. 75-82) to Qadri's explanatory translation of the Quran. Moreover, labeling it sectarian may offend the adherents of Barelvi fellow Muslims. Kidwai takes great pains, meticulously analyses and explores both its negative and positive sides. On the negative side, Qadri's work is marked by interpolation, mistranslation, and perplexing and confusing viewpoints on mysticism and saint veneration; contains scientific jargon projecting the Qur'an a scientific book, and to name a few. Kidwai cites numerous examples of Qadri's translation representing a particular mindset away from Jumhur. Nonetheless, Qadri's work has many good features: presentation in good English; paraphrase-like translation makes it easy to understand; deriving guidance for the current issues and challenges mentioned (but not discussed) in his index such as jihad, terrorism, human resource, environment, minority rights, peace, dignity of women are commendable. Kidwai writes that had Qadri discussed the modern issues it would have been a great contribution to the field.

As mentioned there are other deviant and more pernicious translations by some scholars bearing Muslim names, attempted to distort the universal message of the Qur'an for their particular interests. For example, *The Qur'an: A Reformist Translation* (2007) by Edip Yuksel et al.; *Qur'an Translation: The Last and Most Modern Translation of the Quran* (2013) by Ijaz Chaudry; and *The Qur'an: A Journey* (2016) by Kader Abdolah.

Yuksel's translation, according to Kidwai, is "grossly atrocious breed of English translations of the Qur'an" (p. 42). For it attacks Islam within, vehemently discredits Hadith, Sunnah; makes blasphemous claims and slanders Sahaba (companions of the Prophet). It is a scandalous translation which surpasses its predecessors in a despicable attempt to attack Islam. Similarly, Chaudry's translation also echo the scandalous claims as made by the founder of Qadyani faith, Mizra Ghulam Qadyani: claims to be God's messenger; attacks and distorts the meaning and message of the Qur'an (p. 103). The translation is no more than, in Kidwai's words, "a pathetic, vile work, abusing the rubric of an English translation of the Qur'an" (p. 105). In a similar vein, nay a step ahead, Abdolah ascribes Qur'an's authorship to Prophet Muhammad, and attributes the Qur'an as Muhammad's prose, language, and recitation (p. 123). His translation is filled with slanderous allegations to Prophet Muhammad's sexual perversity—a dominant theme of medieval Christian polemicists. Kidwai further says that this trend of ideology by Muslim bearing names is credited to Rashad Khalifa (1935-1990), an Egyptian apostate who gained notoriety with his writings, particularly his clam of the presence of a mathematical structure in the Qur'an based on number 19 (p. 103). Kidwai's extensive expertise in critically evaluating the Orientalist English literature, which dehumanizes Islam and Muslims, has helped him with an ease to locate Orientalist's fallacious attempt in their Qur'an Translations.

A Welcome Trend

Kidwai views that some recent translations of the Qur'an are remarkable in that these present, in chaste and easy to understand English, the true meaning and message of the Qur'an. Among others, Ahmad Zaki Hammad's *The Gracious Qur'an: A Modern-Phrased Interpretation in English* (2007) and Mustafa Khattab's *The Clear Qur'an: A Thematic English Translation of the Message of the Final Revelation* (2012) are worth to mention. While exploring the salient features of Hammad's work, Kidwai says that what makes his presentation unique is "his elucidation of the meaning and significance of each Quranic Surah title", coupled with his elegant and reader-friendly; modern phrased interpretation in lucid, idiomatic English which everyone loves to read (p. 36). Kidwai is of all praise for Hammad for brining such a wonderful translation, which so well caters the needs of English speaking people.

In a similar view, Kidwai lauds Khattab for bringing out a useful and timely translation, particularly for his "laudable concern to address the issues agitating the mind of the present day Muslims, especially those settled in the West" (p. 132). Making things clear, Kidwai briefly compares Khattab's translation of some Qur'anic verses with other translations and aptly shows that Khattab has a distinctive feature in all respects.

Another translation of great importance in modern times, according to Kidwai, is Tarif Khalidi's *The Qur'an* (2008). Together Kidwai commends these three English translations and recommends that out of more than 90 complete translations which he has critically evaluated in his lifelong endeavor, "these three stand out for contextualizing the

meaning and message of the Qur'an for today's readers who mired in the turbulent modernity and Westernization yearn for divine guidance for leading life" (p. 128). This is an interesting conclusion. Kidwai wants common people to invigorate the true spirit of the Qur'an in their lives; and do not be the victims of the pernicious ideology of all those who attempt to present and interpret the Qur'an as per their desires and interests.

Since the Qur'an is central to Muslim faith, the central miracle of Islam, for this miracle of the Divine Word is actualized again and again in different forms. Therefore, there have been many deliberate attempts in the past, and continue to surge to attack and blemish this central miracle, the Quran vis-à-vis interpolation, misinformation, misperception, misinterpretation for varied reasons.

Due to space constrains, it was not possible to delineate each single translation Kidwai discussed in the book. However, one could not find any mention of Taqi Uthmani's *The Quran: With English Translation* (2017). Nevertheless, Kidwai presented both merits and demerits of each English translation nicely and astutely that indirectly guides its readers the different trends the Qur'an translation offers the world over. An appendix and a valuable Bibliography at the end of the book further add its importance. It will surely be an indispensable book for all those interested in the Quranic Studies. Kidwai deserves deep gratitude for bringing out such a wonderful book. Equally, Viva books in association with K. A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies, Aligarh, also deserve appreciation for publishing the book.

Reviewed by **Muhammad Yaseen Gada** (Ph.D), Lecturer of Islamic Studies at the Govt. Degree College, Ganderbal, Jammu and Kashmir, India.

Email: myyaseenm2@gmail.com
