

BOOK REVIEW

God's Word, Man's Interpretations: A Critical Study of the 21st Century English Translations of the Qur'ān, by Abdur Raheem Kidwai, New Delhi: Viva Books in association with K.A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 2018, Paperback, xvii + 178pp

The huge amount of research done in the field of Qur'ānic studies particularly in the 21st century is a positive sign, for it shows on the one hand, the eternal significance of the Qur'ān and its message and on the other, the increasing attention of the academic experts of the Qur'ān globally. Historically, Orientalists had an undisputed monopoly over the subject, producing a plethora of translations of the Qur'ān and its interpretations in English. A clear manifestation, in this regard, is that up to 1900 all the translations of the Qur'ān were produced by the Orientalists. However, of late, the trend has fairly reversed in favor of the Muslims who are now showing a keen interest in the Qur'ānic studies and thus making a substantial contribution to the field. Muslims from Middle East to Malaysia and those settled in the West and from other areas across the globe seem to be engaged in expanding their knowledge and understanding about various sensibilities and sensitivities related to the subject and thereby expose the threatening designs of Orientalists. Empirical data support this statement. For example, out of total 40 translations produced in the 21st century only 4 are by non-Muslims and the rest 36 by the Muslims alone.

Further, among other centres operating globally that promote Qur'ānic studies and encourage and support the scholars in the field, K.A. Nizami Centre for Qur'ānic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University deserves a special mention. Dedicated to promote Qur'ānic studies and doing a commendable job, the Centre has been training a group of young Qur'ānic scholars who are displaying their capacities to the fullest through their scholarly works to take the field to further heights. In this regard, among others, Tauseef Ahmad Parray, Ziauddin Malik, Hamid Ekram, Ubaid Wafy, and Sajid Shaffi stand out.

Professor Kidwai, besides being Professor of English, is also the Director of K.A. Nizami Centre for Qur'ānic Studies at the Aligarh Muslim University. Being the author of more than 36 books covering various literary topics and with a teaching experience of around 40 years, Professor Kidwai is a renowned Qur'ānic studies expert and a prolific writer and reviewer of English translations of the Qur'ān. *God's Word, Man's Interpretation: A Critical Study of the 21st Century English Translations of the Qur'ān* is Prof. Kidwai's latest publication. Being a significant contribution that critically analyzes various 21st century English translations of the Qur'ān, the book, in essence, is the continuation of Professor Kidwai's earlier academic endeavors that extends his critique by 'cover[ing] most of the translations published between 2000 and 2017' (p. xii). Aimed at critically assessing the English translations of the Qur'ān and the main contours of and shifting trends in the field of Qur'ānic studies, this work, as highlighted by the author, is an addendum to his two previous works: *Bibliography of the Translations of the Meanings of the Glorious Qur'ān into English: 1649-2002* and *Translating the Untranslatable: A Critical Guide to 60 English Translations of the Qur'ān* (p. xii).

Organized into 32 main chapters, the book also contains a comprehensive "Preface" that spells out the objectives of the book, a much needed "Appendix," that presents a critical, nuanced examination of the Orientalist Enterprise *vis-à-vis Tafṣīr* Studies, and a rich "Bibliography" that lists about more than 290 entries. In the Preface, the author underscores that, out of their baleful design and to serve their own objectives, how the message of the Qur'ān is misrepresented and misinterpreted particularly by Orientalists, Qadyānīs, or other sectarian zealots (p. xi).

The main body of the book makes a thorough yet comprehensive and critical assessment of 32 English translations of the Qur'ān—28 by Muslim scholars of all shades of opinion and 4 by non-Muslim scholars. The best part of the book is that it brings to light both strong and weak points of all these translations in terms of their quality and right or wrong presentations of things Qur'ānic. Throughout the book, Professor Kidwai has remained impartial in his approach while examining various translations. From sectarian zealots among the Muslims to Orientalists and Qadyānīs, no one has escaped from the author's objective analysis, rather, merits and demerits of their translations are described according to their objectives, quality, content, style, and subject matter.

Without taking sides with anyone, here are some of the examples illustrating the unbiased approach and analysis of the author. In *The Qur'ān Translated into English* (2007) by Alan Jones, the author finds the return of the regrettable Islam-bashing approach of the Orientalists to misrepresent the words and message of the Qur'ān. While following the footprints of earlier Orientalists, Jones questions about the originality, style, and Surah order of the Qur'ān, asserting that it is actually the plagiarized version of the Bible. For instance, he unabashedly raises his objections about the originality of the Qur'ān in his opening note on the contents of the Qur'ān, quoted by Professor Kidwai, arguing that: "In fact, Old Testament stories, often in a guise somewhat different from that in the Bible, dominate much of the narrative that occurs in the Qur'ān" (p. 28). Professor Kidwai shows with examples how the work of Jones conjures up the image that the Qur'ān lacks proper style, order, and coherence (pp. 29-30) and that its message is extremely polemical, frequently demonizing the non-Muslims (27-28).

Likewise, in the case of A. J. Droge's *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (2014), the author excellently shows how Droge because of his ideological presuppositions and ulterior design makes negative remarks on the authenticity of the Qur'ān such as: "It is a problematic text, teeming with lacunae, obscurity, and uncertainty of meaning, and marred by 'later additions, glosses, and insertions'" (p. 106). Professor Kidwai however, notices that unlike other Orientalists, Droge's work does not incessantly harp on the Judaeo-Christian origin of the Qur'ān. Therefore, his comments on the nexus between the Qur'ānic discourse and the Judaeo-Christian tradition are not only objective but also symbolize the freshness of perspective (p. 109).

By contrast, *The Qur'ān: A New Translation* by Thomas Cleary reflects, according to Professor Kidwai, a clear departure from his predecessors and their Islam-bashing mission. While addressing to non-Muslims, Cleary says that for them "one special advantage in reading the Qur'ān is that it provides an authentic point of reference from which to examine the biased stereotypes of Islam to which Westerners are habitually exposed" (p. 5). Besides removing suspicions about the Divine origin of the Qur'ān, Cleary's translation very often draws a novel comparison on a wide range of topics and themes between Islam and Buddhism, and reveals a number of common things between the two traditions, and thereby opens a new ground for Inter Faith dialogue and relations (p. 8).

One of the biggest challenges for the Muslims has been to produce English translations of the Qur'ān that present true meaning and message of the Qur'ān in a language which is simple and easy to understand and consequently address some of the burning issues that emerged because of modernity and Westernization. Regarding this, the English translations of the Qur'ān by Mustafa Khattab, Ahmad Zaki Hammad, and Tarif Khalidi truly do well not only in exposing Western intellectuals and their fraudulent designs but also in providing an effective antidote to the Muslims fearing to be swept down by the powerful currents of Godless Western modernity. They are remarkable translations which according to Professor Kidwai include a number of extremely helpful and reader friendly features and also “stand out for contextualizing the meaning and message of the Qur'ān for today's readers who mired in the turbulent modernity and Westernization yearn for Divine guidance for leading life” (p. 128).

While critically evaluating other contributions, Professor Kidwai points out by referring to various passages how various translators of the Qur'ān are involved in the obnoxious practice of using material from earlier works and thus miserably fail to show any regard for intellectual property rights. For example, translations of Vickar Ahamed (2005), Leila Bakhtiar (2007), Sharif Chaudhary (2010), Peachy and Johani (2012), and Jibouri (2014) very heavily draw, sometimes *ad verbatim*, on earlier works of M. M. Pickthall, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, and A. J. Arberry respectively.

Professor Kidwai's work is a fine assessment of various translations of the Qur'ān produced recently which evaluates the depth of the translators' scholarship, ideological slants, and their impact on how they present the meaning and message of the Qur'ān to the readers. This commendable work is a valuable reference work for both scholars and students of Qur'ānic studies in particular.

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21st Century Qur'ānic Studies in English: A Bibliography, by Sajid Shaffi, New Delhi: Viva Books in association with K. A. Nizami Centre for Qur'ānic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, 2018, Paperback xiv + 248pp

Sajid Shaffi, a budding Qur'ānic researcher at the Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, has produced his enviable bibliography *21 Century Qur'ānic Studies in English: A Bibliography*. This Bibliography brings into sharper light the knowledge and understanding of the Qur'ānic studies and some of the fresh developments by listing the latest publications in the field.

The work lists all the latest developments in the field of Qur'ānic studies ranging from English translations and books to book chapters, articles, theses, and book reviews on the Qur'ān that have appeared between 2000 and 2017. In order to maintain the reader friendly nature of his work, which is both apt and appreciable, the main body of the work is divided into five major parts. They are preceded by, a concise and enriching "Foreword" (pp. ix-xi) by Professor Kidwai and "Preface" (pp. xiii-xiv) by the author which delineates the significance as well as structure of the book, followed by some reader-friendly contents as the "List of Selected Journals" (pp. 213-214) and "Author Index" (pp. 214-229). In the "Foreword", Professor Kidwai emphatically points out the importance of a bibliographical work. Besides being a treasure house of hard information, a Bibliography, he states, "projects for a discerning eye the main contours, emerging trends, thrust areas and geo-political dimensions of the area of study under discussion" (p. ix).

The author in Part-I rightly begins with providing bibliographical details of 45 complete English Translations of the Qur'ān. In order to steer clear of any ambiguity, Sajid Shaffi has decided against listing incomplete translations of the Qur'ān in this section (p. 3). This is followed by Part-II that covers information about 400 books produced on the Qur'ān. Without randomly placing this material, Shaffi has painstakingly categorized it according to the issues they deal with and has therefore divided this part into further seven sub-sections which are Introducing the Qur'ān, Art of the Translation, Interpreting the Qur'ān, Qur'ānic Themes, Comparative Religions/Scriptures, Contemporary Issues, and Miscellaneous.

The bulk of entries are covered in Part-III of the book that lists 1200 journal articles and book chapters. Following the same pattern and methodology of sorting out the material as in Part-II, this section of the

book is further divided into 14 major headings and some of them into sub-headings. Part-IV covers Book Reviews on Qur'ānic Studies and Part-V various PhD and Masters Dissertations on the Qur'ān. All the five parts are complemented by significant data in the form of *Reference Works on the Qur'ān*.

The division of the entries according to particular themes and sub-themes reflects consistency and systematic approach followed by Shaffi which is commendable. This work, for this and other several remarkable features will, undoubtedly prove useful for researchers and students of Qur'ānic Studies primarily because it serves as what Professor Kidwai calls "a treasure house of hard information" (p. ix). More importantly, the author has identified as well as placed everything and anything scientifically, making thus the tracking down process very simple and easy and in it lies the originality and indispensability of Shaffi's work.

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