

## The uncharted experience of women translators of the Qur'an in Turkey

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### Abstract

The translation of the Qur'an has a long tradition in Turkey. Although it hosts a diverse and rich translational texture, the field is, unfortunately but not surprisingly, governed by an androcentric voice. Women's contribution is considerably weak compared to hundreds of Qur'an translations by men. To this date there are only three translations by women in Turkey. The first was undertaken by Medine Balcı (1991), who avoids guided reading of the Qur'an and opts for interlinear-verbatim translation, the second by Necla Yasdıman (2006), who instrumentalizes the Qur'an as a grammar book for Arabic language instruction, and the third by Ayşa Zeynep Abdullah (2019), who overtly challenges patriarchal biases in the reading of the sacred text. The present study aims to uncover the mechanisms behind the marginalized Qur'an translations by the three women and to give voice to their silenced agency in the field. By comparing and analyzing these unique cases, I outline the particularities of Turkish translations of the Qur'an by women while questioning the feminist agenda (or absence thereof). This uncharted status of Turkish Qur'an translations by women translators reveals how discourse can determine positions and modes of certain translations in a cultural system.

### Keywords

women translators, Qur'an translation, female agency, habitus, Turkey

## 1. Introduction

The divine message of the Qur'an has been circulating across borders and in different societies and cultures since its revelation in the 7th century. Its transfer has been ensured via translation-oriented text production practices ever since. The translation of the Qur'an has long been subject to discussions in different fields such as theology, sociology, translation studies and also, not surprisingly politics, in Turkey, a country with a decisive majority of Muslim population. Some of the most frequently visited issues are: the inimitability of the original, the accuracy or the appropriateness of the translation method used, the personal and professional profiles of the translators and the linguistic peculiarities of Arabic vis-à-vis Turkish (Afsar & Azmat, 2012; Akdemir, 1989; Akpınar, 2011; Durmuş, 2008; Elmalılı, 1960; Rahman, 1988; Saleh, 2003). The long account of Qur'an translation in Turkish, which can be dated back to the 15th century (Wilson, 2014, p. 20), has hosted complex and diverse translational practices and translatorial experiences. Glancing through the available literature on the Qur'an, one can easily notice the striking male presence in the field. It can safely be asserted that male voices determine the tone of the field both in translational, discursive and scholarly areas concerning religious text production, in the Turkish context. The data available in bibliographical studies (see Binark & Eren, 1986; Hamidullah, 1993; Üstün, 2013) on the translations of the Qur'an in Turkey reveal that there are only three women translators of the Qur'an, compared to hundreds of male translators. In this context, women largely remain out of the major scholarship generated by men, and in consequence, androcentric tendencies characterize the field of Qur'anic studies. This paper aims to shed some light on the mechanisms behind translation-oriented religious text production practices by women. However, rather than producing generalized claims about women's translations of the Qur'an into Turkish, I focus on individual case studies and reveal their positionality within their social, political and cultural frameworks (von Flotow, 2000). By marking the distinctive features of each case, I intend to give voice to the hitherto unheard female translators working in the Turkish context and to contribute to the role of women translators of religious texts around the world.

The three Turkish translations of the Qur'an produced by women are *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Kelime Meali* (1991) [The Qur'an and its Word-for-Word Meaning] by Medine Balcı, *Kur'ân Tahlihi: Arapça Gramer Işığında Sözlük-Meal-Tefsir* (2006) [The Analysis of the Qur'an: A Dictionary, Meaning and Exegesis of the Qur'an in the Light of the Linguistics of the Arabic] by Necla Yasdıman, and *İndirilme Sırasına Göre Yüce Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Meali* (2019) [The Qur'an according to the Order of the Revelation and its Meaning] by Ayşa Zeynep Abdullah. The publication dates show that only once every fifteen years a woman's translation of the Qur'an into Turkish appeared, in comparison to the large numbers produced by men during the same period. To introduce their renditions to the Turkish audience, Balcı, Yasdıman and Abdullah present their main motives for translating the sacred text, which includes challenging available translations in order to produce a more accurate rendering of the Qur'an with new perspectives and translation strategies.

The study begins with a critical study of each translation and focuses on distinctive features such as methods of translation, personal and professional habitus (Bourdieu, 1996) of each translator as well as their discourse on their renditions of the sacred text. It continues with a comparison of the three translations vis-à-vis their positionality in the wider context of Qur'an translations in Turkey. The mechanisms that contribute to the scarcity of women translators of the Qur'an in Turkey are then discussed, with a particular attention to the framing references of being a woman in the field of Qur'an translations.

## 2. Unveiling the women translators of the Qur'an in Turkey

Except for brief introductory passages available on publishing houses' websites, it is almost impossible to find any information about the three women, who have so far translated the Qur'an into Turkish. It is my contention that they do not receive the attention they deserve, considering the challenging and significant work they have undertaken in a male-dominated Muslim country. In what follows, I first introduce their different stories, then I analyze and discuss their translations.

### 2.1. Medine Balcı (1959-): The first woman translator of the Qur'an into Turkish<sup>1</sup>

Medine Balcı was born in Erzincan in 1959. She grew up in a devout and intellectual family. Her first teacher was her father, who taught her how to read the Qur'an and also the fundamentals of Islamic practices. She only received formal education at primary school level. Afterwards, her further education mainly consisted in private tutorials by eminent Islamic scholars of her time. In her own words, she was lucky to be accepted as a disciple of Fahreddin Dinçkol<sup>2</sup>, who had a great impact on her. Balcı began to receive systematic Islamic education in 1971 under the guidance of Dinçkol, and simultaneously continued her Arabic education via private courses. At present, Balcı leads a reclusive life, with no presence on digital platforms, and devotes all her time to her students and continues to study the Qur'an (M. Balcı, personal interview, May 25, 2020).

With her work *Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Kelime Meali* (1991) [The Qur'an and its word-for-word meaning], Medine Balcı became the first woman to translate the Qur'an in Turkey. Balcı defines her rendition as the natural outcome of her educational process rather than a pre-planned project. In other words, she did not intend to produce a Qur'an translation and to publish it. She began to prepare her word-for-word rendition (which she defines as *kırık meal*<sup>3</sup>) to help her father understand the Qur'an better. After a while, she began to give Islamic lectures to women in her entourage (i.e. people who heard her name and came from different parts of Istanbul to attend her lectures). It was there, she deeply felt the need for a well-prepared and systematic Qur'an translation. Thus, she decided to produce a more comprehensive verbatim translation with annotations for her students, to be used in her lectures (again, with no intention to publish, as she stresses). The diversity of her new students required more in-depth research in the field. In this regard, Balcı lists a few sources that she used in her translation process. She refers to a work by Fikri Yavuz (1924-1992) on the Qur'an and states that she also benefited from approximately fifteen already available Qur'an translations. Besides, she emphasizes the fact that her work was an individual and not a collaborative project, and that she did not receive any professional help from others. She insists on the importance of Arabic-Turkish lexicons for a verbatim translation, and she narrates her arduous research in lexicons when she could not be sure of a translation equivalent and preferred not to consult other Qur'an translators. Sometime after completing her translation and sharing it with her students, she decided to publish her work to make sure that more people gain access to it. In her opinion, her work was her duty, as a Muslim believer, in an attempt to challenge some of the Qur'an

<sup>1</sup> All the information given in this section is based upon the personal interview I conducted on 25 May 2020 in a private setting with no digital recording (due to her request to do so).

<sup>2</sup> Fahreddin Dinçkol is a prominent Islamic figure in the 1970s who is well-known as the imam of the Princess Islands.

<sup>3</sup> Kırık meal is quite a common practice in Qur'anic training in Turkey, in which each word in an ayah is matched with the corresponding Turkish word. In this practice, the Qur'an is analyzed at word level and the reader is encouraged to decipher the meaning of the relevant verses by comparing the Arabic words with their Turkish equivalents.

translations of her time, which she accuses of distorting the meaning of the sacred text. On this point, Balcı (1991) provides an explanation for her preference for an interlinear-verbatim translation, in the preface of her translation (p. 2). She states that, despite its non-fluency in the target language, a verbatim translation is a safeguard against inaccurate interpretations of the Qur'an.

Interestingly, Balcı personally funded the publication of her translation without relying on any publishing house or receiving financial support from private or public institutions. She also comments on the reception of her work among Islamic circles and mentions few instances when she presented her translation to Islamic scholars and religious leaders at the time. She happily recalls their positive reception of her work. The fact that she felt the need to get her translation reviewed by them and her emphasis on their approval can be interpreted because of the authorial androcentrism dominating religious text production practices in Turkey. It should be noted that, in the interview I conducted, Balcı seemed proud about being a woman translator of the Qur'an, but she did not express any concerns about male dominance in the field of Qur'an translations in Turkey either. Despite the uniqueness her case, Balcı speaks about herself with utmost modesty. As a productive author with more than thirty books in the field of theology, she is aware of the opportunities she had compared to the women of her generation, and she seems to shy away from taking any pride in her contribution. At the end of her interview, she pointed out that men and women are equal before God, which, from a feminist perspective, makes her case more intriguing.

## 2.2. Necla Yasdıman (1962-): The most visible woman translator of the Qur'an in Turkey?

Necla Yasdıman was born in Bursa in 1962 and received a formal education. After finishing high-school, she attended the Faculty of Theology at Ankara University. She subsequently completed her MA and PhD in theology and held various positions within the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs. Yasdıman continues her professional life as a faculty member at İzmir Katip Çelebi University, in the department of Arabic Language and Literature.

Besides holding a PhD in the field of Islamic studies, Yasdıman's active engagement in language teaching determines her role both as an instructor and as a translator. In 2008, she founded an educational institute called 'Cemre Eğitim Kurumları', which delivers Arabic language courses. Her first books, entitled *Arapça Öğreniyorum* [I am learning Arabic] (1997) and *Adım Adım Kur'an Dili* [Step by Step the Language of the Qur'an] (2001), are used in this institution as course books. One can safely state that Yasdıman's primary motivation was language teaching rather than producing works specifically for Qur'anic studies. In her work, the grammatical structure of the sacred text is prioritized, the original is divided into sections and presented as a book. Yasdıman's subsequent work on the Qur'an entitled *Kur'ân Tahlili: Arapça Gramer Işığında Sözlük-Meal-Tefsir* (2006) [The Analysis of the Qur'an: A Dictionary, Meaning and Exegesis of the Qur'an in the Light of the Linguistics of the Arabic], on the other hand, appears in several volumes and provides an elaborate analysis of the sacred text. It includes the translation and exegesis of the Qur'an accompanied by a lexicon of Arabic terms. Clearly, it is an arduous and comprehensive study. Besides, Yasdıman (2006) dedicates her translation to women who conduct scholarly research in Turkey despite all the difficulties and disadvantages they face (p. 3). What is more, Yasdıman's involvement in Qur'an translation is not limited to the written medium. She makes use of contemporary technological advances in the field of multimedia and offers Arabic learners a CD containing exercises on the grammatical structure of the Arabic language used in the Qur'an.

Compared to Balcı, Yasdıman's perspective on Qur'an translation is very different. Indeed, her translational practice is intertwined with her profession as an Arabic instructor. Yasdıman has

a personal website<sup>4</sup> and a YouTube Channel, which makes her more visible than other women translators of the Qur'an. However, one should note that her visibility is a consequence of her dual professional engagement. In fact, it is more as a language teacher than as a Qur'an translator that Yasdiman has acquired the recognition she enjoys. It is possible that Yasdiman deliberately instrumentalizes her translation of the Qur'an in order to promote Arabic language education in Turkey. Besides, the fact that she is commissioned by a professional publishing house (i.e. DDY, primarily known for coursebook publications for theology faculties) supports her position as the second translator of the Qur'an into Turkish. To sum up, Yasdiman is a captivating example of a practical woman who translated the Qur'an for educational/pedagogical purposes.

### 2.3. Ayşa Zeynep Abdullah (1974-): The last and most enigmatic woman translator of the Qur'an in Turkey

Ayşa Zeynep Abdullah was born in 1974 and the name is a pseudonym. Her real identity remains enigmatic. Her theological education was provided by her father, who is a theologian<sup>5</sup>. No information is available concerning her formal education in Arabic and Qur'anic studies. She does not reveal the motives behind her decision to use this specific pseudonym, but one can easily notice the Islamic reference of the names (i.e. Ayşa, Zeynep and Abdullah<sup>6</sup>)

The reluctance to reveal information about the translator due to security concerns is expressed in the interview (Abdullah, 2019b). Indeed, Abdullah (2019b) claims that she was afraid that certain radical Islamic groups might hurt her or her family. Moreover, her parents and her children were against the publication of the translation because they did not approve of her translational decisions. As a result, she took the decision not to publish her translation under her own name, avoiding personal attack from outside and even from within her family. She also adds that another key reason for remaining anonymous (for which she is criticized) was the choice she made in her translation, entitled *İndirilme Sırasına Göre Yüce Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Mealî* (2019a) [The Qur'an according to the Order of the Revelation and its Meaning]. As the title clearly suggests, the translator followed the chronological order of revelation rather than the order in the established original. In the preface, Abdullah (2019a) explains that the alteration in the order of the ayahs makes them more understandable because they are placed in their temporal and spatial context (i.e. the period when and where the ayahs were revealed) (p. 4).

Abdullah's popularity does not only stem from the enigma surrounding her translation. She is also presented as the first woman translator of the Qur'an into Turkish (Abdullah, 2019b), which is inaccurate. The under-voiced and un-politicized discourse of the former two female translators (i.e. Balcı and Yasdiman) seems to have left the stage empty for their successors. The interviewer refers to her translation of the Qur'an as the first to be undertaken by a woman in Turkey, and the translator proudly agrees (Abdullah, 2019b). One might find this hardly surprising, given that the previous two translators remained largely invisible<sup>7</sup>. However, this does not necessarily mean that Balcı and Yasdiman are not well-known among certain sects

<sup>4</sup> Necla Yasdiman's personal website is <http://www.neclayasdıman.com>.

<sup>5</sup> This information is provided by Abdullah herself in the interview (17 October, 2019) which was published in a website titled as "eşitlik adalet kadın platformu" [platform of equality, justice, woman].

<sup>6</sup> Ayşa and Zeynep are names of Prophet Mohammad's wife and daughter respectively, and they are frequently preferred in Islamic circles to name newborn girls. Abdullah means 'servant of Allah' and is also the name of Prophet Mohammad's father.

<sup>7</sup> On this point, it should be repeated that the visibility Necla Yasdiman enjoys indeed derives from her recognition as a promoted Arabic instructor rather than as a woman translator of the Qur'an.

and Islamic circles in Turkey. The ignorance or denial of the former translations was probably due to promotional concerns. That is to say, the focus on 'being first woman translator of the Qur'an' is motivated by marketing strategies and financial gains. However, Abdullah still deserves to be given credit for being the first woman translator of the Qur'an with feminist agenda, since she places being a woman translator at the core of her translational discourse.

Unlike, Balcı and Yasdıman, Abdullah (2019b) claims her right and position as a woman translator of the Qur'an and voices her criticism of the dominance of male translators and religious scholars even on issues that particularly concern women. She defines her rendition as a challenge to gender inequality and presents her choice to change the order of the surah as an example of her feminine perspective, which had an impact on her reading of the sacred text (Abdullah, 2019b). However, this feminist rhetoric she voiced in her interview is not reflected in the preface of her translation. Intriguingly, there is no reference to or mention of the gender of the translator in the long introductory paragraphs by Abdullah (2019a, p. 4). The reason for this is not given, which leaves one wondering whether it was the translator's personal choice, or a decision taken by the publishing house. However, where the accuracy of her translation is concerned, Abdullah's boldness is remarkable. She explains that her work is a culmination of reading all the available Qur'an translations and finding the best meaning through her own understanding, comparative readings and crosschecking her translation. This process helped her to understand the message sent to the believers and gave her the motivation to help others read in the same way (Abdullah, 2019b).

Furthermore, the publication process of her translation is narrated with a clear emphasis on the difficulties and challenges she faced to get her translation published. Abdullah (2019b) contents that no publishing house in Turkey would dare to publish a Qur'an translation by a woman translator. As a result, she did not even approach any of them and self-funded her translation. Funding her translation privately, according to her, allowed her to keep her identity secret, while expressing her understanding of the Qur'an *ad libitum* as a woman without any intervention from conservative and male dominated institutions controlling Qur'an translations in Turkey. Finally, Abdullah's choice to keep her identity secret and her bold discourse on Qur'an translation with a clear focus on her gender makes her case worth analyzing in this study.

### **3. A comparative analysis of the translational practices and translatorial profiles of Balcı, Yasdıman, and Abdullah**

The cases of Balcı, Yasdıman and Abdullah have appeared as borderline instances uncovering the mechanisms behind the Qur'an translation practices conducted by women translators in Turkey. Each case proved to be representative of different underlying ideologies and modes of translation with varying temporal and spatial frameworks that govern the translation processes.

Probably, the most suitable word to describe the three cases discussed above would be 'diverse'. Balcı, Yasdıman and Abdullah have different educational backgrounds shaped by either formal or non-formal/private education. The level of their competence in Arabic is also determined by their different circumstances. Indeed, Balcı's informal education in Arabic and Islamic sciences seems to have directed her Qur'an translation towards conventional approach (I should note, here, that conventional refers to the established methods such as interlinear-verbatim translation – *kirik meal* — frequently used in Qur'an translations in Turkey). Yasdıman's formal education, on the other hand, seems to have steered her towards the pedagogical areas, as a result, she has produced a Qur'an translation which is also used as a grammatical exercise book for Arabic learners. The last woman translator of the Qur'an, Abdullah, in comparison, refers to other areas of social sciences in her discourse on the Qur'an translation, which raises the question whether she did receive any formal education in any of these scholarly fields.

The publication of the first woman translator of the Qur'an into Turkish was in the early 1990s, which is quite late considering the long history of Qur'an translations in the Republican Turkey dating since the 1920s. The non-existence of any female translator before that time requires further research on the political, social and cultural structure of Turkey (which is beyond the scope of this study). However, it is safe to say that the 1990s was a turning point in Turkish history, witnessing the rise of various Islamic movements in the political and cultural arena as well as new forms of social life and opportunities especially for the women (Göle, 2000). In this regard, it is possible that the enriching Islamic revival of the decade might have had an impact on the publication of Balcı's Qur'an translation in 1991. The following two translations were published in the new millennium. The 2000s witnessed greater advancements in the printing press and an increase in the number of publishing houses with different areas of interest. This might have eased the path for Yasdıman (2006) and Abdullah (2019a) to publish their Qur'an translations.

Balcı's translation published in 1991, gave women access to the male-dominated field of Qur'an translation in Turkey and lifted the veil of silence, but one might rightfully wonder, to what extent? There are significant differences between the visibility of these three translators. For instance, it is not possible to find any information on Balcı or to establish contact with her through digital communication means (i.e. email, phone etc.). She does not use any social media platforms or give interviews either. She has, however, a closed circle of disciples with whom she continues to study the Qur'an, which is why, she is visible to a limited extent. Her name is also well-known in the field of Islamic studies in Turkey, but she keeps her discourse quite modest and does not put any emphasis on being a woman translator of the sacred text. By contrast, Yasdıman has a multi-media visibility thanks to a personal website. As a Qur'an translator, she is very active and has contributed to the field of Qur'an translations with a number of books on Arabic language, in which she integrated the translation of the sacred text as the fundamental linguistic practice. However, her role is largely known as an Arabic language instructor rather than a woman translator of the Qur'an. In comparison to her predecessors, Abdullah's position is more complex; she is well-known in the field of Qur'an translations in Turkey and unlike Balcı and Yasdıman, she puts a clear focus on being a 'woman' translator and wants the reader to receive her translation accordingly. In other words, in her view, being a woman has impacted her translation and made her work stand out from those undertaken by male translators. However, Abdullah's bold and intriguing discourse contradicts with the realities of her life, considering the fact that she could not put her real name on her translation, nor reveal her face. Her remarkable visibility on the level of rhetoric (which refers to the image intended to be created by her statements) is accompanied by an utmost secrecy on the level of identity, which blurs the conceptualization of visibility in this highly religion- and politics-oriented context.

Furthermore, each translator seems to have been influenced by a different ideology, which makes each case particularly interesting. Balcı, for instance claims that, initially, her translation sprang out of the need for a better understanding of the Qur'an for her students. Her main aim was to help her disciples understand the doctrines of the sacred text through her translation. At a later stage, she decided to publish her translation after discovering certain Qur'an translations which, in her opinion, distorted the meaning of the original text. Thus, she claims that her translation was intended to correct inaccurate Turkish translations of the Qur'an available at the time. Yasdıman, on the other hand, seems to have adopted a highly market-oriented strategy. That is to say, she has produced and designed her translations according to the needs of Qur'anic language learners. As an Arabic language instructor, Yasdıman attributes her rendition a dual function; teaching people how to speak Arabic and helping them understand

the meaning of the Qur'an. The third translator, Abdullah, has also adopted a different strategy with a feminist agenda. She expresses her criticism of male dominance in the field of Qur'an translation. Accordingly, Abdullah (2019b) declares that she has produced her translation in order to present the female perspective to correct inaccurate male-centered interpretations of certain Qur'anic verses and to expose gender inequality that is imbedded in conventional belief systems.

However, the three female translators seem to share one key similarity, namely their translation translational strategy which could be defined as 'deconstructive'. They all challenge the existing (established) version of the Qur'an in their translation and deconstruct the unity of the source text at varying levels. In Balcı's translation, for instance, the original is broken into lexical elements and the meanings of individual words are prioritized over the integrity of whole/complete sentences. Balcı adopted this approach in order to help her readers understand the meaning of the Qur'an independently. In Yasdıman's case, the original is transformed into a grammar book with an emphasis on the syntax and morphology of the source text. The translator adopted this strategy in order to help readers learn Arabic through the Qur'an and enable them to understand it through their own language competence. Abdullah took this strategy a step further. Exceeding lexical and syntax levels, she changes the established order of the surahs by arranging her translation according to the temporal framework (i.e. the order of the revelation). The main reason behind her new reconstruction is to prevent the misinterpretation of certain ayahs (verses) which, according to the translator, is a result of the decontextualization caused by the order used and preserved in the established version of the Qur'an. Abdullah presents her strategy as a bold approach in order to ensure that the sacred text is understood freely without influence from male-dominant interpretations and translations of the Qur'an in Turkey.

Balcı, Yasdıman and Abdullah adopted similar translations strategies, however, a comparative analysis of their translations of key ayahs such as Q 2:187, 2:223, 2:228, Q 4:3, 4:34, Q 30:21 that particularly concern women can give an idea about their key differences and the unvoiced and/or claimed gender-sensitive approaches of the three translators. This comparison could help us answer the question whether they, as women translators, (un)intentionally pose any challenge to the dominant male voice or reproduce it (Hassen, 2011). To answer this question, I have comparatively examined translations of ayahs Q 2:187, 2:223, 2:228, Q 4:3, 4:34, Q 30:21 by Balcı, Yasdıman and Abdullah respectively. The results of the analysis are compatible with the above-outlined discourse of the translators. The first and second translators, Balcı and Yasdıman, maintain their low profile concerning the feminist agenda. That is to say, they do not add any different interpretation from a woman's perspective to the relevant verses. Abdullah, on the other hand, clearly deviates from her predecessors and makes her woman perspective clear in her translation.

Due to space limitations, this section only includes excerpts from translations of the verse Q 30:21, which, in my view, represents a valid example to display and question the existence of any gender-sensitive approach in the translations of the three women translators of the Qur'an:

Size kendi nevinizden kendilerine ısınmanız için zevceler yaratmış olması, aranızda bir sevgi ve merhamet getirmesi de O'nun ayetlerindedir. Şüphesiz ki bunda iyi düşünen bir topluluk için ibretler vardır. (Balcı, 1991, p. 828)

[And of his signs is that He created wives from your own kind for you to like peacefully and He ordained love and kindness between you. Indeed, in that are signs/lessons for people who well reflect.]<sup>8</sup> (Balcı, 1991, p. 828)

<sup>8</sup> Translations provided in square brackets are mine, unless stated otherwise.

Kendi (cinsi)nizden kendileriyle huzura kavuşacağınız eşler yaratması, aranızda muhabbet (sevgi ve dostluk) ve rahmet kılması, Onun ayetlerindedir. Doğrusu bunda düşünen bir toplum için dersler vardır. (Yasdıman, 2006, p. 509)

[And of his signs is that He created wives from your own kind for you to live with in tranquility and He ordained love and kindness between you. Indeed, in that are signs/lessons for people who give thought.] (Yasdıman, 2006, p. 509)

Ve onun işaretlerinden birisi de içlerinde sükûn bulasınız diye size kendi nefislerinizden (bilinçlerinizden) eşler (beden) yaratmasıdır. Şüphesiz bunda düşünebilen bir kavim için nice işaretler vardır. (Abdullah, 2019a, p. 338)

[And one of his signs is that He created matches (body) from your ourselves (your consciousness/soul) for you to find tranquility in them. Indeed, in that are signs/lessons for people who give thought.] (Abdullah, 2019a, p. 338)

This verse is frequently visited in feminist discussions on the Qur'an, specifically as a reference to marital harmony. The key controversy created by this ayah is the interpretation that woman was created for man to find peace, tranquility, love and kindness in her rather than focusing on the mutual dependence of man and woman on one another. In other words, it infers the superiority of man over woman, but with a possible gender-egalitarian reading.

The first translation shows that Balcı (1991) maintains conventional interpretations in her rendering, where she uses the words 'wife/spouse' and guides the reading of the ayah without any hints for a particular feminine perspective. In a similar way, the second translator Yasdıman does not challenge the 'woman for man' reference explicated-above, and maintains the mainstream reading. Abdullah on the other hand, abandons the conventional rendering by formulating word-tricks in which she changes 'spouses/mates' with 'body' and 'for you' with 'from you/your consciousness'. Abdullah also omits the words 'love' and 'mercy' in order to support the intended interpretation in her translation. I should note here that to discuss the appropriateness or accuracy of any of these translations is beyond the scope of this study. However, within the limits of these descriptive examples, it is my opinion that Abdullah (2019) still deserves credit for being the first woman translator of the Qur'an in Turkey to produce a feminist translation of the sacred text, to defy her two female predecessors and to challenge the dominant male voice that governs the field of Qur'anic studies and translations.

#### 4. The reception and publication of women's translations of the Qur'an in Turkey

Various Qur'an translation studies conducted in different social, political and cultural contexts share one phenomenon in common around the world: androcentric hegemony. In this respect, Turkey constitutes an example *par excellence*. The uncharted status of the Qur'an translations by women reveals how deliberate silencing acts can determine the position of certain translations in a cultural system.

Women's invisibility in the practical and professional milieu of Qur'an translations in Turkey is well-attested at the meta-narrative level as well. First of all, there is a widespread ignorance about women translators of the Qur'an in the academic field. There is no scholarly work dedicated to any of the Qur'an translations undertaken by Balcı, Yasdıman and Abdullah. It is difficult to understand the reasons behind this oversight and the low number of women translators in this field, but there could be various explanations.

First, female intelligentsia in Turkey is a marginalized group and men are the overwhelming majority in the field of Islamic studies. Secondly, the issue of qualification comes to the fore. Receiving formal or conventional Arabic education in an Arabic-speaking country appears to

be a required credential for Qur'an translators. Considering the conditions, especially before the 1980s, this kind of education was not as accessible to women as it was for men in Turkey, which led to the under-education of women in Qur'anic Arabic as they did not have the chance to attend most of the prestigious Arabic institutions abroad. Finally, and — in my view — most probably, many women who have high-level competence in Arabic language and Islamic knowledge would not dare to translate the Qur'an in fear of facing criticisms about their ability to translate the Qur'an. Most of these women also lack or do not have supporting networks, which could affect their self-confidence and relegate them in a 'secondary' and 'minority' status in the field of Qur'anic studies in Turkey.

Furthermore, women translators in this field do not receive the attention they deserve in the publishing industry. None of the Qur'an translations by women are promoted in a gender-sensitive way. Indeed, neither of the publishing houses (*Ebrar*, *DDY* and *Hermes* respectively) have printed Balcı, Yasdıman and Abdullah's<sup>9</sup> translations with an emphasis on the fact that they were produced by women. This could be because of the oversight or ignorance of the male-dominated field of Qur'anic studies and translations that does not help — and sometimes actively prevents — women translators express their voices and claim their rightful positions. In fact, among the hundreds of promotion pages on Qur'an translations in several periodicals and bulletins in Turkey, women's translations are not given the opportunity to stand out, which casts a shadow on women's contribution and forces them to operate behind the scene.

Moreover, financial issues concerning the production and publication of each translation clearly expose their underprivileged positions. None of them received any payment for their translation services. In fact, Balcı and Abdullah have published their Qur'an translations by investing their personal wealth rather than receiving any financial support from anyone or any institution. Moreover, the publishing houses of each translator seem to have a limited cycle of circulation. For instance, the agency *Ebrar Yayınları* only published works of Medine Balcı, her husband and her mentor Fahreddin Dinçkol. *DDY*, probably, published Yasdıman's translation because she was already well known for her coursebooks used in Theology faculties. The publishing house printing Abdullah's translation *Hermes Yayınları*, appears to be a non-conventional/marginal publishing house specializing in religious books on spiritual journeys, new belief systems and practices of worship. Despite the social and financial difficulties, it is still possible to find all translations in mainstream bookshop websites in Turkey, such as *D&R*, *Kitapyurdu*, *Idefix*, etc. This can be interpreted as a sign of the demand for and readers' acceptance of women's translations of the Qur'an (though it might constitute a relatively small group) in Turkey.

## 5. Conclusion

One of the aims of this study is to give voice to the women translators of the Qur'an in Turkey. Despite hosting a diverse and rich translation history, the field of Qur'an translation in Turkey is still governed and dominated by an androcentric voice. The translations of Medine Balcı (1991), Necla Yasdıman (2006) and Ayşa Zeynep Abdullah (2019) have emerged as distinctive productions concerning modes and ideologies of translation. Medine Balcı as the first woman translator of the Qur'an does not adopt any feminist agenda in her translation of the sacred text. She views her contribution as the duty of a modest believer whose main goal is to ensure the transfer of the holy text's true meaning to the target culture. In Necla Yasdıman's case, the translation is adapted for pedagogical purposes, and transformed into a grammar book to serve her main intention of teaching Arabic language and enabling her readers to understand the

<sup>9</sup> The feminist arguments concerning the case of Ayşa Zeynep Abdullah and her Qur'an translation derive from her personal interview. This individual act of promotion is not underwritten by the publishing house.

Qur'an independently. Despite taking pride in producing such a voluminous work, Yasdıman does not adopt any gender-sensitive discourse either to position her contribution among Qur'an translations in Turkey. By contrast, the most recent woman translator, Ayşa Zeynep Abdullah, who chose to remain anonymous, sets her agenda with a feminist approach. Abdullah asserts that her gender determines her reading of the Qur'an and that her interpretation aims to challenge the male-biased perspective that governs Qur'an translations in Turkey.

Finally, the 'secondary' and 'minority' status of women translators of the Qur'an mirrors the conditions that govern the field of religious texts production in Turkey. Considering their contribution in the dissemination of the sacred text's message in different societies and cultures, women translators of the Qur'an deserve more attention in both scholarly and professional circles.

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