When women and men collaborate to translate the Qur'an:
An 'interactive' approach

Yazid Haroun

University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

Abstract

This article discusses the ways in which women-related Qur'anic verses have been dealt with in male-female collaborative translation. It specifically examines the role of Mohamed Ahmed and Samira Ahmed's 1994 *The Koran, complete dictionary and literal translation* as a social activity, offering a textual analysis on how the translators made sense of the most controversial gender-related verses in Islam, 4:34 and 2:282. It argues that their translation can be seen as a criticism of exclusive approaches to the Qur'an in general and, therefore, a defence of other ways of reading the holy text. Drawing on the works of Muslim feminists, it suggests that this translation offers a new way of looking into Qur'an translation, beyond the discourse of conformity or emancipation. Overall, Ahmed and Ahmed's translation is shown to favour a discourse of diversity, emphasising the plurality of meaning which is eminently compatible with the postmodern condition. The result of that influence of the postmodern condition is the introduction of a new and innovative strategy in Qur'an translation, called the 'interactive' (Hassen, 2012a, p. 70).

Keywords

Female-male collaborative translation, interactive approach, reader-oriented translation, Qur'an translation, women translators

1. Introduction

Women's contribution to Qur'an translation is not only unusual but largely uncharted. However, a tradition of Qur'an translation exists, and women have recently contributed to its development. Indeed, there are women translators who have practised what is usually considered a male craft. Like their male counterparts, they have produced a number of translations of lasting influence, but also translations which are mediocre and of little value to empowering women – see, for instance, Um Muhammed's Saheeh International (1997). Still, the sum of their endeavours is relevant to understanding the role of Qur'an translation in challenging essentialist approaches to translation. An analysis of their work will link them to the historic contribution of women in translation and connect their accomplishments to the objectives of the inquiry.

There is a large body of literature on Qur'an translation, but not on the topic of women translators of the Qur'an. Much of what has been written up to now can be found in Rim Hassen's work. Hassen has focused on gender awareness in Qur'an translations by women and has tackled women's concerns. She argues that no matter how often women translators have been involved in their translations, no matter what interests impelled them, they may have departed from conventional ways of reading the Qur'an but their contributions still remain marginal. Women translators' contributions refine our thinking about the role of Muslim women in Islam (Hassen, 2010, 2011, 2012b, 2012a, 2017; Hassen & Şerban, 2018).

Although women's contributions to Qur'an translation have received some attention recently, it is often studied in terms of a discourse of conformity or emancipation. Women translators are generally presented as rebelling against or conforming to conservative theological, political and social norms. For instance, in her translation of the Quran, Laleh Bakhtiar did not rely on *tafsir* (Islamic exegesis) or other conservative Islamic religious sources. Her choice could be viewed as a direct challenge to the authority of ulama, an elite class of learned Muslim scholars viewed as the custodians of Islamic tradition, and for whom the *tafsir* is a fundamental requirement in all Qur'an translations and interpretations.

The same holds for Camille Adams Helminski, who resisted cultural expectations about the male image of Allah by using the pronoun 'she' to refer to Allah. The implications of their translations are profound; as Hassen has observed, these were the stories that women wanted to share with the world. Um Muhammed, by contrast, occupied a conservative position, particularly susceptible to the mandates of patriarchy, understood here as "a politics of sexual differentiation that privileges males" by awarding them a higher degree of moral worth and control over females (Barlas, 2002, p. 12).

These stories of women translators are undoubtedly symptomatic of the broader social perspective on gender awareness. However, the exclusive emphasis on gender awareness only results in a mechanical labelling of translators as either 'feminists' or 'chauvinists' (Li cited in Hongyu, 2017, p. 138). This article therefore aims to contribute to ongoing discussion in several ways: (1) it suggests it is necessary to avoid labelling Qur'an translation as either 'feminist' or chauvinist' as its interpretation by readers is a never-ending process. (2) The dominance of patriarchal ideologies in Qur'an translation calls for a study of how various translators questioned, assessed, and, above all, challenged them. (3) The contribution of female translators, even when it takes the form of a collaboration with male translators, needs to be taken into account, evaluated, and, certainly, recognized.

The article engages with issues long identified in Translation Studies (TS): the role of translation in challenging essentialist pretentions. The aim is to demonstrate that: (1) translation does not necessarily oscillate between the ideological paradigms of conformity or emancipation;

(2) translation maintains a sceptical attitude to totalizing explanations. Some of the specific questions I raise are: in what ways has the difficulty of providing an inclusive translation of the Qur'an had an impact on the translators' translation approach or strategies? What are the implications of such an approach for their translation? The literature has already discussed various aspects concerning women translators, such as the challenges they face, and it did so from the different theoretical perspectives – e.g., gender as a socio-political category, gender issues as a site of political/literary engagement, theoretical questions about translation, etc. (von Flotow, 2010a, p. 129; cf. Chamberlain, 1988; Delisle, 2002; Dib, 2009, 2011; Flotow, 1991, 2000, 2004, 2009, 2010b, 2016; von Flotow & Farahzad, 2017; Godard, 1990; Korsak, 1992; Lotbinière-Harwood, 1991; Santaemilia & von Flotow, 2011; Stanton, 1985; Simon, 1996).

This study contributes to the current literature by focusing on female-male translators working collaboratively and on how they brought about new perspectives and approaches to Qur'an translation. The study is not concerned with how western or eastern representations of women have influenced translation, but with how collaborating together led to an interactive approach in Qur'an translation emphasising a discourse of diversity. Such a discourse underpinned by an anti-essentialist philosophy is a rich ground for exploring Qur'an translation practices.

Anti-essentialism is characterized by an attitude of suspicion of "master narratives" or "meta-narratives" and makes use of a deconstruction approach to destabilize and decentralize meaning (see Derrida, 1974, 1978, 1978; Lyotard, 1984). TS talks about this trend in the context of deconstructing established consciousness of centrality, totality and fidelity (see e.g., Bhabha, 1994; Gentzler, 2001; Spivak, 1974; Venuti, 1995). Translation is no longer thought of as a faithful rendition from language to language but one that involves a complex process of negotiation between cultures, and one that involves political and cultural implications. This line of thought emerged in the "cultural turn" and is indebted to Jacques Derrida. Derrida (1981, p. 20, cf. 1992, 2001) asserted that the relationship between the source and target texts is unstable, and accordingly translation becomes a transformation of something potential rather than a passive transfer of meaning.

Thinkers, like Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and Lyotard, tried to point to the irrationalism inherent in the search for the real meaning as well as the violence thereto involved. Essentialist, also known as master, narratives, Lyotard (1984) argued, revolve around the search for the rational and universal truth, inevitably disregarding and disfiguring the regional specific. As various trends of contemporary thought, such as deconstruction, tried to show, essentialist projects' desire for a particular reason may engulf all other "reasons" (Arrojo, 1995, 1998) . An essentialist philosophy is incipiently totalitarian (Arrojo, 1996, p. 99).

Anti-essentialist theories of knowledge do not alienate difference, however – in fact, they are solemnly concerned with every experience to de-homogenize differences (Arrojo, 1996, p. 99). These conclusions have direct implications for Qur'an translation. A Qur'an translation that is idealized by essentialism protects canonized meanings, stimulating a kind of logic that is violent towards women, as is the case in translations much influenced by patriarchal interpretations. Essentialist translations do not allow readers to explore and strengthen their perspectives but end up imposing an authoritarian reading of the Qur'an, a certain conception of looking at women, as well as a "correct" way of doing it.

In essentialist conceptions of reading and writing, the translator is linked with invisibility, whereas the reader is supposed to passively receive what the translator thinks is right (Arrojo, 1997b, p. 21), legitimized by a tafsir institution and supported by a system of countless agents. The implications of this hierarchical distinction between the translator and reader are clear and far-reaching, for it necessarily serves to "silence" readers, while also transforming them into subjects that blindly follow the established authorities of meaning. These implications are,

as will be shown below, challenged in Qur'an translation through the translator's collaborative approach.

2. Theoretical and methodological considerations

'Collaborative translation' in the broadest sense of the term refers to "two or more actors cooperating in some way to produce a translation" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 17). In the past, scholars considered teamwork in literary translation, for instance, as a sort of 'contaminated' type of work, and were mostly interested in identifying the "genuine, strong, or brilliant partner" when it came to collaborations: "It is as though, in every collaborative writing relationship, critics who adhere to a normative single-author paradigm must somehow undertake an archaeological dig to unearth the single author from the rubble of miscegenated, monstrous, messy collaboration" (York, 2002, p. 14).

Recent research, however, began to look at translation as primarily a collaborative process, demonstrating that the image of the solitary translator is socially defined (steeped in Renaissance translation theory; see, for instance, Bistué, 2011) and that the translation process is invariably mediated by multiple agents (Perteghella & Loffredo, 2006). Scholars have pointed to circumstances where collaborative practices prevail, such as *The Women's Bible* (1895) by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Rather than diminishing the value of the translation, collaboration forces us to reconsider questions about agency and creativity. Experimental, challenging, and exciting combinations might result from the interaction of multiple subjectivies: "the translation dialogue becomes an 'intercontextual' and 'intercreative' process, a meeting point not only of different or similar contexts, of skills, expertise, cultures, but also of perceptions and cognitions" (Perteghella & Loffredo, 2006, p. 8). This is supported by several cases, including those of Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield. Their work could be viewed as "aesthetically original" and as "creative involvements that influenced their own writings as well as widening the scope of modernist poetics as a whole" (see discussion in Davison 2014).

Research on collaborative Qur'an translation is scarce, and the importance of collaboration for Muslim women has received little attention. Um Muhammed is an anomaly, as she collaborated with other women namely: Amatullah J. Bantley and Mary M. Kennedy. The Islamic feminist endeavour of reclaiming female voices in translation can therefore be linked to the need to recognise women as autonomous beings.

The discourse of Islamic feminism, as articulated within the boundaries of Islam and the Qur'an, is particularly relevant to Qur'an translation, for it seeks rights for marginalised women in Islamic discourse (Badran, 2009, p. 242). Islamic feminism is not, however, a coherent identity but a set of practices via which one seeks justice for Muslim women (Cooke, 2001, p. 59). The rise of Islamic feminism in the 1990s brought about a body of ideas related to the unpacking of patriarchal attitudes inherent in past exegetes' teachings of the Qur'an. These can be found most notably in the writings of Amina Wadud (1999), Asma Barlas (2002), Kecia Ali (2006), and Leila Ahmed (1992). Their work highlights the role of gender in understanding the structure of different societies and expresses in particular the need to seek equal opportunities for Muslim women in male-dominated countries.

The main argument of Islamic feminism is that the source of gender inequality in Islam stems from the patriarchal reading of the Qur'an, not the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an has for long been interpreted by men and, therefore, patriarchal voices can certainly be heard when reading *tafsir* (exegesis) (Barlas, 2002, p. 21; Wadud, 1999, p. 2). In this view, the Qur'an has an egalitarian discourse that has become virtually inaudible because of the clamour of patriarchal voices attributing different social roles to women and men (Barlas, 2002, pp. 21-22). The imposition of a gendered set of roles would inevitably transform the Qur'an from a sacred text to a culturally-

specific text. In fact, the Qur'an assigns no social roles to the sexes, though it recognises the anatomical distinction between them; social roles are the product of the cultural readings of the Qur'an (Wadud, 1999, pp. 8-9). For example, practices such as domestic violence and a misconception that women are inferior to men were read into the Qur'an, and are simply no more than essentialist readings of the sacred text (Wadud, 1999, p. 9).

Muslim feminists' critique of traditional modes of *tafsir* is useful for the deconstruction of rationalist pretensions in patriarchal translations. It defends the legitimacy of multiple, independent readings of the Qur'an through their claim to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) (Hidayatullah, 2014, p. 35). It also asks questions about the Qur'an as "a timeless text", but from the perspective of women's "experience, knowledge, and observation". Their interpretations shake the foundations of knowledge, of what constitutes 'truth' in Islam, giving rise to multiple interpretations, allowing readers to participate in the establishment of meanings.

This article does not talk about the process of collaborative translation per se, but about how the collaborative endeavour between the translators brought about an interactive translation. The term 'interactive', initially coined by Hassen (2012a, p. 70), is understood here as a reading that aims to unearth various meanings of the verse intratextually in order to allow readers to recognize difference and reach their own conclusions. This is akin to what Hidayatullah (2014) called an 'intratextual reading.' However, Ahmeds' translation, though inspired by an interest in the Qur'an's egalitarian message, it is not a work of exegesis with explicitly stated methods. Therefore, the word 'interactive' instead of 'intratextual' would work particularly well in the context of the Ahmeds' translation. I argue that much of their translation can be seen as a criticism of exclusive approaches to the Qur'an and, therefore, a defence of other ways of reading it.

This article focuses on *The Koran, complete dictionary and literal translation* (1994) by father and daughter Mohamed Ahmed and Samira Ahmed. Mohamed Ahmed was born in 1939 and raised in Egypt. At the age of 17 he left for Germany and subsequently settled in Canada. He had several professions, including filmmaking and piloting. Samira, currently a housewife in the US, was born in Germany and raised in Canada. She studied Arabic in Egypt for five years, where she also worked as a volunteer English teacher, before she moved back to Canada.

The article examines two verses related to marital relations in Islam – Q 4:34, known as the wife-beating verse and Q 2:282, known as the degree verse. The content of these verses highlights and presents some of the key and problematic issues of gender relations in Islam. While it would undoubtedly be interesting to examine more verses, an in-depth discussion of these two reveals how the Ahmeds' collaborative project contributed to the emergence of an inclusive rather than an exclusive translation. In what follows, I examine the translation strategy used, the translators' linguistic choices as well as their interpretation of the verses with a view to understanding their translation approach and its implications. To complement textual analyses, I was able to establish email and phone correspondence with the translators, who accepted to answer questions about their work.

3. Translation as a tool to challenge central narratives

3.1. The wife-beating verse, Q 4:34

The legitimation of traditional narratives (in this particular context, patriarchal) is quite prevalent in Qur'an translations by women. The translation into English commonly known as *Saheeh International*, by Um Muhammed, is a most telling example of how women use translation to legitimize a patriarchal ideology or narrative concerning Muslim women. The controversial Q 4:34 (a crucial verse on gender relations), known as 'the wife-beating verse',

contains several gender-related words, with *aḍribūhunna* as the most problematic of them all. The root of *aḍribūhunna* is *daraba*, whose meanings include 'travel', 'leave', but also 'strike', 'beat'. While domestic violence exists almost everywhere, within Muslim communities the problem is usually attributed to Q 4:34. Um Muhammed renders the verse as follows:

> Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [in the husband's] absence what Allah would have them guard.* But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance – [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them (Saheeh International, 1997, p. 105; emphasis added).

Um Muhammed translates the controversial word *aḍribūhunna* as 'strike', thereby conforming to traditional readings. Indeed, classical exegetes often interpret Q 4:34 to mean that men, as financial providers, are superior to women and, as a result, they have the right to 'strike' their wives if they disobey them: "if they did not obey after being admonished and abandoned, you are justified to beat them, not severely" (see Ibn Kathīr, [1358] 2004, p. 290). It is undoubtedly difficult to escape these meanings, and nearly all translators and exegetes of the Qur'an reproduce them (see e.g., al-Zamakhsharī, [1134] 2009, p. 34; Ar-Rāzī, [1209] 1981, pp. 90-91; Turner, 1997, p. 46; Maududi, 2000, p. 333).

However, there are good reasons for challenging such a translation, for it undermines the legitimate role of women in Islam and confiscates their freedom. The Ahmeds set out to combat these dominant interpretations by choosing meanings excluded up to that point in time (as well as by indicating the feminine gender of Arabic words which are gender-neutral in English, using (F) where words refer to women in the Qur'an). This is how they render Q 4:34:

> The men (are) taking care of matters for livelihood* on (for) the women with what God preferred/favored some of them (men and women) on some, and with what they spent from their (M) properties/possession*, so the correct/righteous females are obeying humbly*, worshipping humbly, protecting/safekeeping* to the invisible* with what God protected; and those whom (F) you fear their (F) quarrel (disobedience), so advise/warn them (F) and desert/abandon them (F) in the place of lying down (beds), and *ignore/ disregard/push* them (F),*** so if they obeyed you, so do not oppress/transgress on them (F) a way/method, that God was/is high, mighty/great (Ahmed & Ahmed, 1994, p. 54; emphasis added).

The translators propose multiple meanings for the word *aḍribūhunna*, i.e., 'ignore', 'disregard' and 'push'. Based on our communications, they said that they engaged in a long process of brainstorming, giving a lot of thoughts to the verse. Their aim was just to avoid falling into binary male or female thinking, that is, to look at the verse not only from a male or a female perspective, but to generate as many possible ways of reading it. They decided not to use the word 'strike', though they also refer the reader to the dictionary, through the use of asterisk signs, attached to the translation, where further meanings of *aḍribūhunna* are given, including 'beat' and 'strike' ('ignore them/disregard them/push them/separate them/distance them/ *beat them*/*strike them*/migrate them/incline to them/reside them …'; Ahmed & Ahmed, 1994; emphasis added). According to them, the fact that the verse can be read in multiple ways indicates that it is open to an array of interpretations. Therefore, translators should reconsider their commitment to its dominant exegesis that reads husband privilege and inequality into the Qur'an. Even if they disagree on the best meaning, they should be able to concede that viewing this verse as a licence to strike women or demand obedience from them is unacceptable since

it is not the best meaning that the Qur'an overall has to offer.

The Ahmeds's translation of this verse illustrates their innovative approach to translation, one that implicitly challenges master narratives. The result of their translation is an attitude of scepticism about the claims of any kind of overall, totalizing explanation, an attitude of 'resistance' even to 'consensus', which "has become an outmoded and suspect value" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 66). The translators simply wanted to give voice to those who did not 'fit' into master narratives – the oppressed and the marginalized – against the powerful who disseminate the master narratives. In so doing, they contest the idea that men are inherently superior to women and are allowed to commit aggression against their wives under certain circumstances. To be more accurate, they implicitly challenge essentialist approaches to Qur'an translation, which claim to have distilled the Qur'anic verse into the most accurate translation. They write:

> When it came to the word 'daraba' (4:34), sadly all translations (that we have seen to date) took only the meaning 'beat.' This is why we have made the extra effort to give Moslems a better understanding of the wide variety of meanings expressed throughout the Koran by God (M. Ahmed & Ahmed, 1994, p. 1).

The Ahmeds' observations are reminiscent of the work of Islamic feminists such as, for instance, Barlas and Hassan, though the Ahmeds can be considered as forerunners of these scholars since calls for an inclusive approach in the Qur'an can be traced out in their translation. Indeed, Barlas (2002, p. 189) claims that the literal translation of *ḍaraba* as 'beat' or 'strike' is not the only way to read the original: "it is questionable whether the term *ḍaraba* even refers to beating, hitting or striking a wife, even if symbolically". This is because wife-beating contradicts the totality of the Qur'an's teaching, which calls for love and harmony. Hassan (1999, p. 354) also argues that *ḍaraba* has a wide range of meanings and cannot be simply read as a sanction for wife-beating.

The Ahmeds reveal that previously trusted interpretations of the Qur'an can and should be questioned. It is misleading to try to impose one single way of reading the Qur'an, for it is logically obvious that the Qur'an's language (and any language) lends itself to multiple meanings/readings (M. Ahmed & Ahmed, 1994, p. 1). Therefore, there could be no single or simple meaning for this verse because there is no reliable centre of consciousness. The ambiguity of the verse and the multiplicity of meanings provided by exegetes could be confusing and challenging for translators. This shows that translation does not oscillate between one meaning or another (or one position or another – e.g., feminist/conformist), but is open to an array of meanings, thus maintaining a sceptical attitude toward homogeneity. Why, then, would the translators wish to show the multiplicity of meanings in the verse?

The Ahmeds' approach does not so much rely upon established meanings as upon the various potential meanings of the verse, aiming to escape the shackles of essentialist narratives (M. Ahmed & Ahmed, 1994). They perfectly demonstrate their point. They explain that the word *aḍribūhunna* has a range of meanings, from 'ignore' to 'strike'. All the terms have roots in a particular historical worldview. The translators emphasize how different terms can reasonably claim to convey *a* 'truth' about the meaning of the verse. Nor can they claim to encode finally *the* truth about the verse. For the translators, then, translation only seems to mark out clear differences between meanings; it actually only 'defers', as Derrida would have put it, as the meaning of the verse perpetually slips away within the linguistic chain.

The translators go on from such a form of relativism to suggest ways in which all ideological frameworks, thus viewed, can be questioned. This is their key contribution to translation, and it does not much depend on the 'correctness' of their ideological position, since ideologies are prone to a mystifying position.

3.2. The degree verse, Q 2:228

A second example of a passage where the Ahmeds endeavour to use as many meanings as possible to avoid providing an exclusive translation is Q 2:228 – a verse which has been debated for centuries. Often known as 'the degree verse', Q 2:228 also concerns marital relations. The controversy is generated by the end of the passage, where the Qur'an determines the functional distinctions between husbands and wives as regards their roles and responsibilities towards each other. The Ahmeds translated this verse as follows:

> And the divorced (F) wait with themselves (F) three menstrual cycles*, and (it is) not permitted/allowed to them (F) that they (F) hide/conceal* what God created in their (F) wombs/uteruses*, if they (F) were believing with God, and the Day the Last/Resurrection Day, and their husbands/spouses (are) more worthy/deserving* with returning them, in that if they wanted/intended a reconciliation*. And for them (F) similar/equal* what (is) on them (F) with the kindness/generosity*, and to the men a step/stage/grade on them (F), and God (is) glorious/mighty*, wise/judicious (M. Ahmed & Ahmed, 1994, p. 19).

The translation lays bare various meanings of the word *daraja*, step/stage/grade, in an attempt not to impose a single meaning. These three meanings are versions of the word 'degree' used to imply a male-female hierarchal relationship (Hassen, 2012a, p. 221). However, the translation also includes the traditional meaning as well. The translation of *lil-rijāl* as 'men' generalizes the verse's purport from husbands and wives to men and women. Furthermore, the expression 'on them' implies comparison and a superior position given to men over women.

The major thread running through the translation is about providing an unbiased approach. The idea is that a neutral way of looking into the Qur'an is inevitably caught in contradictions. It can never exist because meaning is generated by social discursive practices, and one way of looking into the Qur'an is just at base another more or less a socially acceptable or competing narrative; just another way of putting things right according to a set of socially constructed beliefs. By choosing not to select a specific meaning, the Ahmeds seem to liberally oppose all universal explanations (even if they sometimes readmitted meanings in sympathy with those of conformists), showing that choosing one or another meaning reproduces certain narratives.

What we also learn from the Ahmeds is that, in abandoning the notion of dominant or resistant ideology, they facilitated the promotion of a politics of difference. In postmodern culture, pluralistic identity politics plays an important role; it involves the self-conscious assertion of a marginalized identity against a dominant ideology (Evans, 1995, p. 22). An example of this, undoubtedly central to today's politics, is the relationship between women and Qur'an translation. For centuries, women have not only been excluded from activities related to translation and *tafsir*, but they have been defined as inferior and were assigned less important roles, by comparison with those associated with men (Bakhtiar, 2007, p. xxii).

This general move is a challenge to established dominant ideologies, and it points to the differences between people, differences that need to be recognised and appreciated rather than repressed. The Ahmeds's work, consequently, can be seen as going against stereotypical translations, defending difference; it incorporated all these separate meanings which could be useful to different groups of people to demand recognition away from the dominant conceptualizations of the verse. For once all these different meanings are established, they are cut off from any central totalizing ideology.

Indeed, the Ahmeds' emphasis on differences in meanings made an inevitable attack upon universalizing claims by traditional translations. Such differences manoeuvre the reader into a state of scepticism about the text: accessing/understanding the text depends on the reader's acceptance or resistance to its content. This produces what Barthes calls a "text of bliss":

the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point
of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological
assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation
with language (1975, p. 14).

This generously democratizing idea, offering the reader a plethora of meanings, was the
product of years of struggle of anti-essentialist critics. The imposition of meanings in translation
by the translator was out of question, while questions about giving the reader room to judge
meanings for themselves take centre stage (Barthes, 1977, p. 161).

4. Implications of an interactive approach to Qur'an translation

4.1. Recognizing the reader's agency

The revelation of the hidden meanings of the verse surely 'deconstructs' them. The strategy
the Ahmeds use in translation is fairly innovative, simply hinging less on the objective reading
than on how reading is a kind of misreading, for it is always a form of partial interpretation.
It is this central use of the strategy, dubbed as the 'interactive' (Hassen, 2012a, p. 70), to
subvert confidence in logical, ethical, and religious commonplaces that has proved most
innovative, profound, and, at times, revolutionary. By using this strategy, the translators call
for an 'irreducible pluralism', devoid of any unifying set of beliefs that are perpetually liable to
domination (cf. Arrojo, 1997a, 2005; Koskinen, 2000; Davis, 2001). Their call is the product of
their collaborative efforts to set the reader free, i.e., to let them judge for themselves. In my
conversation with Mohamed Ahmed, he said:

> At times, we stopped talking to each other because we had different opinions about the
> meaning of the verse. Then we realised that the best way is to put all these meanings
> together and allow readers to decide for themselves (personal communication with the
> translators, June 14, 2020).

The philosophy behind the use of this strategy is that it can give people the confidence to
select and choose, to break away from an allegiance to any 'given' translation, emphasizing
that the way Qur'an translation is often done can and should be changed. The translators
and readers can enter into an alliance, refuting any universalizing approach to translation, an
approach after asserting a particular 'truth'.

The translators suggest that the reader should be wary of particular assertions of meaning by
the translator, if viewed as a delimiting authority, because the meaning of a translated verse
privileges a particular narrative (personal communication with the translators, June 14, 2020);
this is reminiscent of Barthes's proclamation of 'the Death of the Author' (see Barthes, 1977).

In other words, what the translators try to tell is that the text, once interpreted by the reader,
becomes liberated to a certain extent from the translators' worldview. Meanings belong to the
reader, for it is both philosophically wrong and politically retrogressive to freeze the meaning
of the text to a specific end. The text is, in their work, now liberated to swim, with all its
linguistic companions, in a sea of ideological frameworks. Thus, the pursuit of certainties, the
translators demonstrate, is as reactionary in its implications as was the manufactured dominant
lines of thought of the established tradition. They open the text to multiple interpretations
to show what and whom previous translations exclude, and how. Exclusion fundamentally
occurs, for example, when the conformists define the role of women in a particular way and
close off all other possible meanings as unreasonable or outside the remit of Allah's laws (see
e.g., Um Muhammed's translation). In contrast, the Ahmeds seem to challenge such ideas by
opting for a diversity discourse and bringing into being the deviant or the other in translation.

Their discourse actually helps to give voice to those previously excluded from mainstream translations by providing multiple meanings so that readers choose what is best for them, or what best fits their personal narrative. They say:

> We looked for the multiplicity of meaning, so that we do not limit the understanding of the Qur'an. My daughter looked at the translation from a female perspective, whereas I had a tendency to look at things from a male perspective. That's why we had a lot of debates and brainstorming activities to come up with many meanings for a single word (personal communication with the translators, June 14, 2020).

Their translation becomes more or less the voice of the repressed and a criticism of dominant approaches to translation. It seems to combine various thoughts and voices, old and new, all run together in a parallel, in what seems to be an attack on one-dimensional ideological interpretations. Qur'anic verses can be equally complex and multi-layered, which is why they are translated in a way which provides a compendium of various meanings. It could be said here that the translators tend to leave the job to the active readers who are willing to examine the differences between what is 'true' and 'false', or 'real' and 'unreal'.

4.2. Uncommitting to dominant narratives

Postmodernist writers are often criticised for their open approach to the text: they cannot make a significant moral, social, or even political commitment; they are just sceptics, tangling themselves up in a perpetual regress of meaning (see e.g., Norris, 1990, p. 44; Helvacioglu, 1992, p. 24; Wenger, 1994, p. 68). Can such frequently made accusations be equally applicable to the case of the translators? Can we really look at the translators' interactive approach as simply and ultimately uncommitted to anything that matters?

The above-mentioned examples of the interactive approach could be viewed as a challenge to dominant narratives and criticism of manipulative systems. It supports a general move toward relativist principles, not particularly interested in the confirmation of one or the other. In so doing, they abandon the belief in traditional ideologies under the influence of a postmodern culture that appreciates difference, becoming more and more the expositors of the workings of culture in the Qur'an.

Is it then possible to speak of the translators' unwanted commitment to any settled ideological position as a grave problem? Is it better to follow a rationalist project of emancipation or an anti-essentialist route, which often ends up in radical separatism? Although their approach to translation helps to define differences and give voices to marginalized meanings, effective ideological change in norms needs more than an appreciation of difference (Baker, 2009; Boéri, 2008; Lotbinière-Harwood, 1991; Tymoczko, 2000; Venuti, 1995; cf. Handler, 1992, p. 820; Helvacioglu, 1992, p. 31).

Recent translators already began to question the boundaries of social roles, and their contribution is extraordinarily effective in combating restrictive ideologies. Talal Itani, for example, does so by using an interactive, yet 'dynamic', strategy, where translation is "always changing" to "make the Quran more accessible to more people" (personal communication, May 06, 2020). He describes his translation as follows:

> This new translation never stands still, but it is always changing, adapting, improving. And it is a collective effort by translators, scholars, and whoever wills to send us suggestions (personal communication, May 06, 2020).

> Different individuals have different skills, talents, experiences. A non-scholar may see what a scholar does not see. Any individual who loves the Quran is capable of contributing (Itani, 2019).

In such a pluralistic translation, no framework is likely to gain assent. It is a translation free of any commitment and actuated not by a dominant ideology, but an insatiable love for diversity. In this way, the translator essentially makes a liberal demand for the recognition of difference, an acceptance of the 'other' in translation.

5. Concluding remarks

In light of the initial questions about the translators' strategy and its implications, the Ahmeds' endeavour to provide an inclusive translation both from male and female perspectives had a major influence on the strategies that they used in the translation. This surfaced in the call for plurality of meaning to include the reader in translation, in a sense that the reader is taken into consideration to judge for themselves. In their attempt to deconstruct dominant narratives, the translators challenge exclusive approaches to the Qur'an and, in effect, defend other ways of looking into it. This article has revealed that the translators use an 'interactive' strategy (Hassen, 2012a, p. 70) to unearth various meanings, allowing readers to recognize the fact that meanings are always local and unstable and that it is necessary to reach their own relative conclusions.

However, the translation does not automatically imply relativism whereby all linguistic choices are equally acceptable. The translators tell the reader of the tension in the Qur'an, tension expressed in the unstable relationship between commitment and contingency. They do not deny the fundamental impossibility of any commitment, but an impossibility of a certain kind of commitment, a commitment to essentialist narratives. Their 'interactive' strategy demonstrates the ultimate vulnerability of any commitment to one thing or the other, while also makes the reader aware of the dangers of commitment. What it offers instead is a commitment to radical plurality (much realigned in neo-hegemonic approach) because master narratives inevitably come with exclusion, repression, and injustice, though they also give coherence to disparate events and experiences. So, the translation has both a critical and emancipatory potential.

Though only two verses were examined, these are typical of Ahmed and Ahmed's overall approach, which was to stay away from assertions and bring the reader forward. Whether their translation engenders transformative effect for readers remains a point of further examination.

6. References

Ahmed, L. (1992). *Woman and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Yale University Press.

Ahmed, M., & Ahmed, S. (1994). *The Koran, Complete Dictionary and Literal Translation*. M., J. & S Ahmed.

al-Zamakhsharī, M. I. Q. (2009). *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf* (K. M. Shīḥā, Ed.). Dār al-Maʿrifah.

Ali, K. (2006). *Sexual ethics and Islam: Feminist reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and jurisprudence*. Oneworld.

Ar-Rāzī, F. al-Dīn. (1981). *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī* (Vol. 10). Dār al-Fikr.

Arrojo, R. (1995). Tradition and the Resistance to Translation. In H. Salevsky (Ed.), *Kultur, Interpretation, Translation* (pp. 53–60). Peter Lang.

Arrojo, R. (1996). Postmodernism and the Teaching of Translation. In C. Dollerup & V. Appel (Eds.), *Teaching Translation and Interpreting 3: New Horizons* (pp. 97–103). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Arrojo, R. (1997a). Asymmetrical Relations of Power and the Ethics of Translation. *Textcontext 11 = NF*, *1*(1), 5–24.

Arrojo, R. (1997b). The 'death' of the author and the limits of the translator's visibility. In M. Snell-Hornby, Z. Jettmarová, & K. Kaindl (Eds.), *Translation as Intercultural Communication* (pp. 21–32). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Arrojo, R. (1998). The Revision of the Traditional Gap between Theory & Practice & the Empowerment of Translation in Postmodern Times. *The Translator*, *4*(1), 25–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.1998.10799005

Arrojo, R. (2005). The Ethics of Translation in Contemporary Approaches to Translators Training. In M. Tennent (Ed.), *Training for the New Millennium – Pedagogies for Translation and Interpreting* (pp. 225–245). John Benjamins.

Badran, M. (2009). *Feminism in Islam: Secular and religious convergences*. Oneworld Publications.

Baker, M. (2009). Resisting state terror: Theorizing communities of activist translators and interpreters. In E. Bielsa & C. W. Hughes (Eds.), *Globalization, Political Violence and Translation* (pp. 222–242). Palgrave Macmillan.

Bakhtiar, L. (2007). *The sublime Qur'an english translation*. Kazi Publications.

Barlas, A. (2002). *'Believing women' in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Quran*. University of Texas Press.

Barthes, R. (1975). *The pleasure of the text* (R. Miller, Trans.). Hill and Wang.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Hill and Wang.

Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Bistué, B. (2011). The Task(s) of the Translator(s): Multiplicity as Problem in Renaissance European Thought. *Comparative Literature Studies*, *48*(2), 139–164.

Boéri, J. (2008). A Narrative Account of the Babels vs. Naumann Controversy. *The Translator*, *14*(1), 21–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2008.10799248

Chamberlain, L. (1988). Gender and the metaphorics of translation. *Signs*, *13*(3), 454–472.

Cooke, M. (2001). *Women claim Islam: Creating Islamic feminism through literature*. Routledge.

Davis, K. (2001). *Deconstruction and translation*. St. Jerome.

Davison, C. (2014). *Translation as collaboration: Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield and S.S. Koteliansky*. Edinburgh University Press.

Delisle, J. (Ed.). (2002). *Portraits de traductrices*. University of Ottawa Press.

Derrida, J. (1974). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and Difference* (A. Bass, Trans.). The University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (1981). Semiology and Grammatology: An Interview with Julia Kristeva. In A. Bass (Trans.), *Positions* (pp. 17–36). University of Chicago.

Derrida, J. (1992). Des tours de Babel. In R. Schulte & J. Biguenet (Eds.), *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (pp. 218–227). The University of Chicago Press.

Derrida, J. (2001). What Is a 'Relevant' Translation? *Critical Inquiry*, *27*(2), 174–200.

Dib, N. (2009). *D'un islam textuel vers un islam contextuel: La traduction du Coran et la construction de l'image de la femme*. University of Ottawa Press; JSTOR. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ckpg7t

Dib, N. (2011). L'interrogation du Coran et la valeur heuristique de la traduction (Questioning the Koran and the Heuristic Value of Translation). *TTR*, *24*(1), 149–182. https://doi.org/10.7202/1013258ar

Evans, J. (1995). *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second-Wave Feminism*. SAGE.

Flotow, L. von. (1991). Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories. *TTR*, *4*(2), 69–84.

Flotow, L. von. (2000). Women, Bibles, Ideologies. *TTR*, *13*(1), 9–20. https://doi.org/10.7202/037390ar

Flotow, L. von. (2004). Sacrificing Sense to Sound: Mimetic Translation and Feminist Writing. *The Bucknell Review*, *47*(1), 91–106.

Flotow, L. von. (2009). Contested Gender in Translation: Intersectionality and Metramorphics. *Palimpsestes*, *22*, 245–256.

Flotow, L. von. (2010a). Gender in translation. In Y. Gambier & L. van Doorslaer (Eds.), *Handbook of Translation Studies* (Vol. 1, pp. 129–133). John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Flotow, L. von (Ed.). (2010b). *Translating women*. University of Ottawa Press.

Flotow, L. von. (2016). *Translation and Gender: Translating in the 'Era of Feminism'*. Routledge.

Flotow, L. von, & Farahzad, F. (Eds.). (2017). *Translating women: Different voices and new horizons*. Routledge.

Gentzler, E. (2001). *Contemporary translation theories* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Godard, B. (1990). Theorizing Feminist Discourse Translation. In S. Bassnett & A. Lefevere (Eds.), *Translation, history and culture* (pp. 87–96). Cassell.

Handler, J. F. (1992). A Reply. *Law & Society Review*, *26*(4), 819–824. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/3053818

Hassan, R. (1999). An Islamic Perspective. In K. Lebacqz (Ed.), *Sexuality: A Reader* (pp. 337–373). The Pilgrim Press.

Hassen, R. (2010). Allah in translation: The feministe perspective. *In Other Words: The Journal for Literary Translators*, *35*, 12–25.

Hassen, R. (2011). English translation of the Quran by women: The challenges of 'gender balance' in and through language. *MonTI*, *3*, 211–230.

Hassen, R. (2012a). *English translations of the Quran by women: Different or derived?* [Ph.D., University of Warwick]. http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/55511/

Hassen, R. (2012b). Online paratexts and the challenges of translators' visibility: A case of women translators of the Quran. *New Voices Transl. Stud. New Voices in Translation Studies*, *8*(1), 66–81.

Hassen, R. (2017). Negotiating Western and Muslim Feminine Identities through Translation: Western Female Converts Translating the Quran. In L. von Flotow & F. Farahzad (Eds.), *Translating women: Different voices and new horizons* (pp. 17–38). Routledge.

Hassen, R., & Șerban, A. (2018). Translation of Religious Writings. In S. Chan (Ed.), *An encyclopedia of practical translation and interpreting* (pp. 243–267).

Helvacioglu, B. (1992). The Thrills and Chills of Postmodernism: The Western Intellectual Vertigo. *Studies in Political Economy*, *38*(1), 7–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.1992.11675423

Hidayatullah, A. A. (2014). *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*. Oxford University Press.

Hongyu, L. (2017). Gender and the Chinese Context: The 1956 and 1999 Versions of Doris Lessing's The Grass Is Singing. In L. von Flotow & F. Farahzad (Eds.), *Translating women: Different voices and new horizons* (pp. 138–158). Routledge.

Ibn Kathīr, I. (2004). *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm: Āl 'Imrān-al-Nisā [The exegesis of the grand Holy Qur'an: The Family of 'Imran-Women]* (S. ibn M. Salāmah, Ed.; Vol. 2). Dār Ṭībah.

Itani, T. (2019). *About Hello Quran*. https://www.helloquran.com/about

Korsak, M. P. (1992). *At the start: Genesis made new: a translation of the Hebrew text*. Doubleday.

Koskinen, K. (2000). *Beyond ambivalence: Postmodernity and the ethics of translation*. University of Tampere.

Lotbinière-Harwood, S. de. (1991). *Re-belle et infidèle: La traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin (The body bilingual: translation as a re-writing in the feminine)*. The Women's Press.

Lyotard, J.-F. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (C. Bennington & B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Maududi, S. A. A. (2000). *The Meaning of the Qur'an* (M. Akbar, Trans.; Vol. 1). Islamic Publications.

Norris, C. (1990). *What's wrong with Postmodernism: Critical theory and the ends of philosophy*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.

O'Brien, S. (2011). Collaborative Translation. In Y. Gambier & L. van Doorslaer (Eds.), *Handbook of Translation Studies* (Vol. 2, pp. 17–20). John Benjamins.

Perteghella, M., & Loffredo, E. (2006). Introduction. In M. Perteghella & E. Loffredo (Eds.), *Translation and creativity: Perspectives on creative writing and translation studies* (pp. 1–16). Continuum.

Saheeh International. (1997). *The Qur'ān: Arabic text with corresponding English meanings*. Abulqasim Publishing House.

Santaemilia, J., & Flotow, L. von (Eds.). (2011). Woman and Translation: Geographies, Voices and Identities. *MonTI*, *3*(Special issue), 9–470.

Simon, S. (1996). *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. Routledge.

Spivak, G. C. (1974). Translator's preface. In J. Derrida (Ed.), *Of Grammatology*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stanton, E. C. (1985). *The woman's Bible: The original feminist attack on the Bible*. Polygon Books.

Turner, C. (1997). *The Quran: A New Interpretation*. Curzon.

Tymoczko, M. (2000). Translation and Political Engagement. *The Translator*, *6*(1), 23–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/13556509.2000.10799054

Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge.

Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*. Oxford University Press.

Wenger, M. G. (1994). Idealism Redux: The Class-Historical Truth of Postmodernism. *Critical Sociology*, *20*(1), 53–78. https://doi.org/10.1177/089692059402000103

York, L. M. (2002). *Rethinking women's collaborative writing: Power, difference, property*. University of Toronto Press.

Yazid Haroun

University of Birmingham
Room 403, Ashley Building, Edgbaston
B15 2TT Birmingham
United Kingdom

y.haroun@bham.ac.uk

Biography: Yazid Haroun is an academic specializing in Translation Studies. He works at University of Birmingham. Yazid's current research focuses on the ways in which ideology manifests in Qur'an translation, in the process of political mobilization. He is particularly interested in the question of what a focus on ideology and religion can bring to the understanding of translation as a social activity.