CHAPTER 7

Translation as Contemporary Qur’anic Exegesis: Ahmed Ali and Muslim Modernism in India

AHMED H. AL-RAHIM

Translating the Qur’an seems, for some scholars in Islamic Studies, to be the crowning achievement of their career.1 Ahmed Ali (born in New Delhi, India in 1910 and died in Karachi, Pakistan in 1994), while a noted Pakistani novelist and not a professional Islamicist, appears to be no different. The popularity of his English translation of the Qur’an is attested to in its publication history: First appearing in print in 1984,2 subsequently in a second edition in 1986, a "revised definitive edition" in 1988,3 a [F]nal revised definitive edition4 in 1994, and finally in a posthumous eighth paperback printing5 newly comprising revisions last made by the translator in 2001.6 While a comparative study of the various editions of his translation(s) would shed light on the translator’s method or theory of translation, his translation(s) of key Qur’anic theological terms, and his use of earlier English translations of the Qur’an7 as well as classical Arabic sources, such an investigation would be beyond the scope of this article.

In this article, my analysis of Ali’s translation will be based on the aforementioned 2001 edition, wherein I examine the following themes: first, Ali’s translation of the Qur’an as a form of modern exegesis (tafsir), as it particularly relates to the Islamic theological dogma of the inimitability of the Qur’an (fsa ‘al-Qur‘an), and his notion of a ‘contemporary translation’; the second, the intellectual background and the Indian modernist context of Ali’s translation, specifically looking at the influences of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) in British India, regarding the question of reconciling modern science and reform with Islamic tradition; and third, an analysis of selected Qur’anic verses translated by Ali which reflect a form of Muslim scientism, or scientific exegesis (fsa ‘al-Qur‘an), and modernist social reform, where translation and modern commentary become inextricably linked.

Translation as Contemporary Exegesis

The historical question of the Qur’an’s Arabic inimitability is touched upon by Ali in his preface to the translation. Anticipating the theological and linguistic difficulties in translating the Qur’an into English, he writes, “Qur’anic Arabic is distinguished by sublimity and excellence of sound and eloquence, rhetoric and metaphor, assuasion and alliteration, onomatopoeia and rhyme, ellipse (sic: ellipses) and parallelism. Its cadences and sprung rhythm, pauses and stops, imply eloquent speech and diction. Some of its stylistic beauties are untranslatable and can only be suggested [in the target language].”

Within many modern Islamic theological circles the question of treating the Qur’an as literature, like a novel, or any other text qua text, which is analysed with all the tools of literary critical method and theory, is often rejected as blasphemous.8 This rejection of treating Islam’s scripture, the Qur’an and also the hadith, as a product or creation of human culture and experience, is largely premised on the medieval Muslim theological arguments about the literary inimitability or miraculous nature of the Qur’anic text.9 The inimitability argument arose partly in the context of Muhammad’s challenge to the pagan Arabs to produce a text, or even a verse, resembling that of the Qur’an,10 and later within the early medieval inter-religious, mainly Christian-Muslim, polemics over the question of whether Muhammad, Islam’s prophet, like Jesus before him, had any miracles of his own.11 The Muslim theological response was that an ‘illiterate man’ (ummat),12 Muhammad, through God’s power, revealed an eternally present textual miracle, the Arabic Qur’an, while Jesus, whom Muslims believe to be a prophet of God but not his son, produced (temporal) miracles, to be witnessed only by his contemporaries. Thus, the question of temporality versus eternality of miracles was, at least for some Muslim theologians, settled in favor of the eternality of miracles.

As for the Qur’an’s literary quality, the miracle lies in the text’s unmatched eloquence (bahagha), rhetoric (hayat), and excellence of style, as Muslim theologians argued, which could not be imitated by the combined efforts of all of mankind and jinn-kind13 (the two Islamically recognized sentient
being, created by God, who inhabit the terrestrial world), or if they could imitate the Qur'an's style, then God himself has, through his volition (intra), miraculously prevented them from doing so.

Whether the Qur'an's literary style can be emulated in translation or even if a translation of the Qur'an itself is possible are questions with which many translators, Muslim and non-Muslim, have had to struggle. As to the latter question, the issue is a theological one having to deal with the identity of the Qur'an in another language; that is, unlike the Christian Bible, which when translated into any language theologically retains its identity as the Bible, is a translated Qur'an a Qur'an, or merely an interpretation of the Arabic text (as, for example, Arthur J. Arberry titled his own translation, The Koran Interpreted)? While apparently respecting the theological notion of the inimitability of the Qur'an, Ali does not miss chances when calling his translation a translation; that is, he believed he could convey the meaning of the Arabic text into the semantics of his target language, English. As one who appears to have been keenly aware of the nuances and shades of meaning in language (he himself translated literary works into English from Urdu, Arabic, Persian, Indonesian, and Chinese?), Ali says, 'my attempt in translating the Qur'an has been to give rendering of [the Arabic text] as faithfully as is possible within the limits of another language wholly divergent in syntax, structure and scriptural development.' Moreover, as a translator Ali believed that he should strive to reproduce, for his English reading audience, a sense of the Qur'an's literary style, its rhymed prose (asa) and poetry. Ali says, 'the form of metrical lines has, therefore, been adopted in this translation to convey through accent, sprung rhythm and tonal structure the sonority and rhythmic patterns of the Qur'anic language.' That is, Ali seeks to translate into English the very literary features of the Qur'anic language which, albeit in a target language, are so often the focus of the theological and philological discourses in Islamic works on Qur'anic inimitability.

As a novelist, Ali appears to have accepted the notion of the Qur'an as literature, or at least as divine literature. He says, the Qur'anic text recapitulates the rich poetic traditions of the Pagan Arabs (who) did not deal in abstraction and pure thought ... [but in] concrete, almost physical objects [into] the metaphorical mold through allegory, parallelizing it as a rhapsodical unit with the conceptual language of transcendence which acquired primary authority and universal persuasive power to conform to its conceptual standards.'

This responsiveness to how language, more or less to the point literature, transposes and appropriates the words and objects of a culture as its own is central to understanding Ali's approach to translating the Qur'anic text as a contemporary commentary on the Qur'an itself. For Ali, the task of the translator is not merely one of a mechanical, ad literatum translation but a creative act where translation is primarily ad sensum, appropriating as much of the 'intended' meaning of the source text (ST) for a target text (TT) whose audience and context is contemporary and modern—a context, historically and theologically, far removed from the environment of the ST, but one within which the translator locates himself and the TT. While there have been critical reviews of Ali's translation of the Qur'an—of it being too 'liberal' in its agenda or 'historical' in its rendering of the Arabic text—the point that is often overlooked (except perhaps by Robinson and Conrad) is that Ali is engaged in a modernist project whose purpose, through the craft of translation, is to make the Qur'anic 'message' relevant to a contemporary, global audience. In this respect, Ali's translation is a contemporary exegesis of the Qur'an.

Indian Muslim Modernism, Science, and Social Reform

The context of Ali's translation of the Qur'an can be traced to the modernist thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in British India, the founder of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh (M.O.A. College), one of the first modern universities in the modern world, which in 1920 became Aligarh Muslim University (where Ali received his Bachelor of Arts in English in 1930). Having resigned himself to the decline and end of the Mughal Empire (r. 1526–1858) and the rise of British colonial power in India, Sir Sayyid forcefully argued that the way forward for India's Muslim communities would be through modern, Western-style education and science, coupled with loyalty to the British Empire. In promoting modern education in India, he believed that the primary educational focus of the M.O.A. College should be the modern natural and applied sciences as well as a scientific approach to Islamic scriptural sources and history. Sir Sayyid himself studied the Islamic sciences in his youth, but considered certain aspects of traditional Muslim belief, particularly in folklore and superstition, to be obstacles to modernizing India's Muslim communities and contributing to their rejection of modern science. The reconciliation of modern science with the Islamic religion was a foremost intellectual preoccupation of Sir Sayyid, leading him to a kind of science where (properly modern) religious belief would either be confirmed by the discoveries of science or at the minimum not be contradicted by them; that is, if Islam was to become modern, Muslims must shed those beliefs that are not, or cannot be, substantiated by 'reason', the 'scientific method', and the 'laws of nature', including, for example, the Islamic belief in the existence of the Jinns, who are attested to in the Qur'an and hadith. Western science is, therefore, taken to be a panacea for the political and social ills facing the
More modern scientific exegetes of the Qur'an include Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Ishandarani (d. 1880), who saw the total convergence of the natural sciences and the Qur'an;39 Sir Sayyid who wrote a six volume Qur'anic exegesis, titled The Exegesis of the Qur'an, That is the Guide and Criterion [for Discerning Truth], the earliest exegetical work of its kind to address the modern sciences, ethics and society, explicating the Qur'an according to the contemporary, modern context of the natural sciences and the modern sciences...39 The Egyptian Tantawi Jawhari (d. 1940), considered to be the founder of modern scientific exegesis, composed a twenty-six volume scientific commentary, which includes photographs, scientific charts and illustrations, making the case that the chapters (sura) of the Qur'an accord with, if not confirm, much of the discoveries of the modern natural and astronomical sciences;40 the Syrian modernist Salafi 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (d. 1902) regarded the Muslim 'abandonment' of science and reliance on 'superstition' as inevitably leading to the decline of 'Islamic civilization' and to its subjugation to the (modern scientific) West;41 and finally, the Egyptian Ahmad Hanafi (d. 1968) wrote an exegesis attempting to reconcile modern astronomy with Qur'anic cosmology.42 While Ali may have been familiar with many of these authors, their methods of scientific exegesis, and their critiques of Muslim culture, his formative influence appears to have been Sir Sayyid's modernist works, most likely encountered during his undergraduate years at Aligarh Muslim University and possibly later at Lincoln University, where he was awarded an M.A. in 1931, also, in English.

Ahmed Ali and the Art of Modernist Interpretation

What follows is a selection of Qur'anic verses translated by Ali that reflect the influence of modernist Muslim thought and science, where translation and exegesis become inextricably linked, and in which the following modern themes are addressed: the natural sciences, miracles, superstition and folklore, as well as women and gender rights.34

Scientism

In commenting on Surat al-Qamar, 54.1, which begins with the spectral image of 'the splitting of the moon' (inshaggata l-qamar) on judgment day, Ali provides an allegorical interpretation of this verse saying, '[i]t is the moon was the emblem of [Muhammad's tribe,] the Qurash, ... [and] that the flag of the Arabs consisted of the moon. ... [Its splitting] therefore, stands, in the metaphor of the Qur'an, for the split in the ranks of the Qurash.'35 While the image of the moon's splitting appears to have been (literally) intended,
among other similar verses in the Qur'an, as a sign of the judgment hour, to strike fear in the hearts of Muhammad's enemies and awe in the hearts of the believers. All goes to great lengths, contrary to the medieval Qur'anic exegetical tradition, to show that this verse has to be metaphorically understood and is in no way miraculous, nor a breach of the laws of nature. Another example of Ali's scientism is in his translation of the *nasut*, mentioned in Surat al-Nahl, 16.15. He translates this word with the geological term 'stabilisers', commenting that these 'are actually mountains in the interior of the earth made evident by modern geophysicists who mapped the earth's interior.'

16.15. He placed *stabilisers* in the earth so that while it revolves you live undisturbed, and the rivers and tracks so that you may find your way; 16.16. As well as many other signs, as by the stars [you] find direction [Ali, Al-Qur'an, 229; emphasis added].

The idea that the Qur'an contains scientific knowledge which only now is being discovered, or confirmed, is evidenced by Ali's translation and commentary (also see below), clearly reflecting Sir Sayyid's scientific rationalism and rejection of miracles.

**Rejection of Folklore, Miracles, and Superstition**

Surat al-Nahl has a well-known reference to Solomon learning 'the speech of birds' (*aysa*) and ants, 27.16, and describes him as being amused with his comprehension of these languages, 27.18.

27.16. Solomon was heir to David, and he said: 'O people, we have been taught the language of *tair*, and have been given of everything. This is clear favour indeed.' 27.17. His armies of jins and men and Tair assembled, formed into ranks, (and marched) 27.18. Till they reached the Valley of Naml. Said the lady of Naml: 'O Naml, go into your dwellings lest Solomon and his

hordes should crush you unawares.' 27.19. (Solomon) smiled, amused at her speech, and said: 'O Lord grant me that I should be grateful for the favours You have bestowed on me and my parents' [Ali, Al-Qur'an, 322].

To All's modern scientific sensibility, the notion of God teaching Solomon—or for that matter any man—to speak 'the language[s]' of the birds and the ants is an outright fiction or fabrication, whose (re)interpretation appears to be based on a rejection of the *isa*iyat or *isa'ili* based exegetical, that is, traditions and materials mainly dealing with cosmogony and the stories of the lives of the patriarchs and prophets (giyas al-anbiya'), whose origins, in the medieval Islamic exegetical tradition, are ascribed to be Jewish or Biblical and thus deemed alien to the Qur'an, *hadith*, and Islam itself. In the context of modernist Muslim reform, the *isa'iliyat* are often derided for being a major source of the superstitious beliefs and folklore associated with 'Muslim backwardness', the purging of which from the Qur'anic exegetical tradition is a condition for either modernizing Islam or returning it to its 'prime' origin. All identifies the languages of the 'Tair' and the 'Namli'—transliterated by him—as ones spoken by South Yemeni men who were often named after their tribes as well as after birds. ... [and that] knowlege of the language of tair implies that [the] Tair were a conquered tribe or race and David and Solomon had knowledge of their language, and likewise the 'Naml as a tribe from Syria.' And, similarly, that the *fime* implies nomadic tribes many of whom were recruited by the king of Tyre for Solomon,[148] and not the mythic creatures whom God fashioned out 'smokeless fire'.

And, in Surat al-Fil where God (miraculously) defeats the military expedition of Abraha, the Abyssinian governor of Yemen, against Mecca, ca. 571 C.E., the traditional year of Muhammad's birth, employing the *tayzan abubil* and *abjaris min sijji*:

105.1. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant? 105.2. Did He not make their plan go wrong, 105.3. And sent hordes of chargers flying against them, 105.4. (While) you were pelting them with stones of porphyritic hosts will not crush you when they do not see [you].' 27.19. He smiled, laughing at its speech, and said, 'My Lord, press me to be thankful for your blessings, which You bestowed on me and my parents' [Jones, Al-Qur'an, 346].

105.1. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant? 105.2. Did He not make their plan go wrong, 105.3. And sent hordes of chargers flying against them, 105.4. (While) you were pelting them with stones of porphyritic...
like devoured ears of corn [Jones, Al-Qur'an, 589; emphasis added]?"

In a long, detailed footnote on this Sura, Ali provides a description of Abraham's elephant army and of the pursuing battle with the Meccans who were mounted on 'chargers' or 'swift-footed horse[s]', historically comparing it to 'those [battles] of Porus21 and Ibrahim Lod22 had done under the charge of cavalry of Alexander and Babbar [where] ... the elephants would go amuck in such an attack.' This historical excursion into military animals and campaigns is the basis for his translation of the *suyan ababal* as 'herds of chargers'—and not the mythical porphyritic lava-throwing birds—who through no miracle of God defeated Abraham's advance on the Ka'ba in the 'year of the elephant.' 23

Ali metaphorically translates the Qur'anic miracle story,24 in Surat Al 'Imran, 3.49, of Jesus fashioning out of clay the likeness of a bird (tayy), which he (Ali) suggests could also mean 'omen,'25 as follows:

3.49. And [Jesus] will be Apostle to the children of Israel, (saying) 'I have come to you with a prodigy from your Lord that I will fashion the state of destiny (tayy) out of mine for you, and breathe (a new spirit) into it, and (you) will rise by the will of God. I will heal the blind and the leper, and infuse life into the dead, by the leave of God' [Ali, Al-Qur'an, 56; emphasis and gloss added].

3.49. And [make Jesus] a messenger of the Children of Israel, saying, 'I have brought to you a sign from your Lord. I shall create for you out of clay [a shape] like that of a bird, and I shall breathe into it, and it shall become a bird by God's permission; and I shall cure the blind and the leper and give life to the dead by God's permission' [Jones, Al-Qur'an, 69-70; emphasis added].

As to Jesus' healing of the blind and the leper, Ali notes that, here, 'healing means to have one misfortune added to another[26] and that, here, the Qur'an compares blindness to moral crimes ... and calls those guilty of them "deaf, dumb, and blind" as in 2:18, and "dead" as in 27:80. That is why the Scripture is called "a healing" as in 4:144. The meanings of blind, leper, and dead have, therefore, to be taken in their metaphorical sense and not the literal'.27

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Women in the Qur'an

Finally, in translating the well-known verse, 4.34, covering corporal punishment of women in Surat al-Nisā'—the so-called 'beating verse'—over which much modernist Muslim apologetic ink has been spilt, Ali reflects his modernist disposition and even, perhaps, his uneasiness with the literal meaning of the text:

4.34. Men are the support of women as God gives some more means than others, and because they spend of their wealth (to provide for them). So women who are virtuous are obedient to God and guard the hidden as God has guarded it. As for women you feel are averse, talk to them suavely; then leave them alone in bed (without molesting them); and go to bed with them (when they are willing). If they open out (i.e.) to you, do not seek an excuse for blaming them. Surely God is Sublime and great [Ali, Al-Qur'an, 78; emphasis added].

4.34. Men are overseers of women (al-arjūn qawwānumu 'ala l-nisā') because God has guarded them. Admonish those women (istaw-humna) whose rebelliousness you fear, then them (aljar-su-humna) in [their] resting places and his them (adhirbhu-humna). If they obey you, do not seek a [further] way against them. God is Exalted and Great [Jones, Al-Qur'an, 92; emphasis and glosses added].

The issue, here, for Ali is clearly how can God sanction the beating of women—such an act would, for many modernist Muslims, appear to compromise the notion of God's justice (tasdul) and also possibly their own rationalism about the (relative) equality of genders. In arguing for his metaphorical translation of the above italicized text, Ali relies on a number of medieval lexicons, on the Mu'azzizī al-Zamakhsharī's (d. 1144) al-Kashshaf, mainly a philological exegesis of the Qur'an,28 and on a canonical hadith attributed to Muhammad, namely, 'Could any of you beat your wife as he would a slave, and then lie with her in the evening?'29 Leaving aside the question of beating a slave, Ali, in making the case for his translation, relies, not only and mainly, on his modernist, liberal sensibilities, but also (and, perhaps, more importantly for some in his Muslim audience) attempts to marshal all of the available traditional textual evidence for a metaphorical and non-literal, contemporary reading of the Qur'an—a reading which he believed ought to be foundational for reconciling Islam, the Muslim world, and modernity.
Notes


6. An example of a Contemporary Translation? [This and the below bracketed text are mine].


10. The so-called 'challenge verses' (ayat al-taḥlīl), Q.17:88: "Say, 'If Man and Jinn were to assemble to produce the like of this Revelation, they could not produce its like, even though they supported one another'." (Jones, The Qur'an, 258).


19. Ibid., p. 7.

21. On the theory and practice of literary translation, see W. Benja
tim, ‘The Task of the Translator’, in Illuminations: Essays and Reflec
tion to Translation Studies, pp. 169–70.

22. For a modern Shi'i exegetical translation of the Qur'an, which the author/translator describes as a combination of translation and exegesis—tafīr—in which the verses of the Holy Book have been "opened up" to reveal some of the layers of meaning expended by the Prophet (Muhammad) and transmitted through the ages by the Prophet's family and companions, see Muhammad Bajg Bhakbudia and C. Turner (trs.), The Qur'an: A New Interpretation (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1997), pp. xvi.


24. The Scottish Orientalist Sir H.R. Gibb (d. 1971) is often quoted with some pride in Indian publications as having said that the M.A.O. College was the first modern institution in Islam [quoted on Aligarh Muslim University’s website, http://www.amu.ac.in/aboutamu.htm (consulted on 11 August 2011); I could not locate the original source of the quote]; and in S.K. Bhargava, History of the M.A.O. College, Aligarh (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p. v.


26. To this end Sir Sayyid wrote a treatise arguing that the jinn represent what pagan Arabs believed to be ‘sages who live far from the civilized world in blind corners in forests, mountains and deserts’, that is, they are not the fictional smokeless fiery being infrared by the Islamic tradition; see Tafīr al-fām wa-‘l-jinn ‘alad mas fi l-Qur‘an (n.p., 1892), as quoted in Balijin, Religious Ideals of Sir Sayyid, p. 57. It is worth noting that Sir Sayyid cites many of his works, particularly those on religious ethics, using Arabic rhymed prose.

27. Sir Sayyid compared, in Urdu with English translation and Hebrew text, one of the first modern Muslim exegesis of the Bible, where he argued for Islam’s religious affinity with Christianity and the possibility of its reform, namely, Tafsīr al-fām wa-‘l-jinn ‘alad mas fi l-Qur‘an (n.p., 1892), as quoted in Balijin, Religious Ideals of Sir Sayyid, p. 57.


29. ‘Abduh did not, however, promote a science-based exegesis of the Qur’an, see J.J.G. Janzen, The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), pp. 18–34.


33. There are numerous editions of this work, including a Persian translation, but its first installment appears to have been published in Aligarh by the Institute Press in 1882; see Nizam, ‘Syed Ahmad Khan’, 5, p. 4264.


36. See Mahir Sharif and Salam Kuzait, Tafsīr al-baqā‘i wa-‘l-dā‘i wa-‘l-mashrurru ‘alad maṣṣal; al-‘awāl ‘alad maṣṣal wa-‘l-wujud ‘alad maṣṣal (Cairo: Mu‘assasat al-Dar al-Ma‘arif al-‘A’lamī, 1968)

37. Al-Tafsīr bi-l-amli bi-al-kawāntiyya fi l-Qur‘an, second edition (Cairo: Dar al-
Ma‘arif, 1960).

38. Many of these examples are cited in the reviews by Robinson and Conrad.


40. Cf., the similar images of ‘the sky splitting’ in the Meccan Surat al-Infitar and Surat al-Inshiqaq, 82.1 and 184.1, respectively, on which Ali does not comment.

41. See for example, Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), Tafsīr al-Qur‘an al-‘asim, 6 (Beirut: Dar al-
Ma‘arif al-‘A’lamī, 1976), p. 38, reports that the ‘triumph of the moon’ is one of Muhammad’s miracles (mu‘ajjada). Ali is familiar with Ibn Kathir’s exegesis and quotes it in a number of footnotes in his translation.

42. Al-Qur‘an: A Contemporary Translation, 239th (for this reading Ali cites: Roder’s Digest, May 1987).

43. It is worth noting that while appearing to accept much of the findings of modern science, Ali rejects Darwinism, arguing for a form of creationism where man ‘did not evolve from the age but was created as an independent species like the
apes themselves and all other creatures (Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation, 229n)."

47. Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation, p. 322.
48. Ibid., pp. 322n–323n.
49. On the meanings of these terms, see E.M. Badawi and M.A. Abdel Haleem, Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), pp. 6, 423, respectively.
50. This form of lara-rock consists primarily of melted volcanic material, see H. Watts, A Dictionary of Chemistry and the Allied Branches of Other Sciences, 2, new edition (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1883), p. 852; Alī’s translation of kīfānāt min sījīf as porphyritic lava, a technical geological term, is suggestive of his attempt to show the modern scientific nature of the Qur’anic text.
53. Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation, 552n.
56. Al-Qur’an: A Contemporary Translation, 56n.
57. Ibid., 56n.
58. These sources are listed in the Acknowledgements, ibid., p. 6.