

The socio-political implications of translating the Quran

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This paper investigates the socio-political implications of Quranic translations in the formation of a new public discourse in post-revolution Iran. The case study is of Quranic verse 4:34, which deals with the social and familial status of men and women. By juxtaposing three translations (by a hardline conservative Islamist, a Muslim feminist and a modern Islamist), the paper provides a hermeneutical analysis of the assumptions each translator brings into play when trying to reconcile the question of modern women's rights with the scripture. The study suggests that reformist translations of the Quran might be seen as part of the more general religious reform movement, translating the requirements of modern civil society into a religious discourse.

Keywords: hermeneutics, Quran, theocracy, religious reform, women's rights.

Introduction

With the rise of interdisciplinary research in the humanities since the early 1960s, translation is no longer perceived as an innocent transfer of semantic meaning across linguistic borders. The ideological and political implications of representing, or rather, constructing an image of the Other, i.e. texts, actions, rituals, works of art, etc., within the receiving culture have allowed disciplines such as anthropology, postcolonial and gender studies to make use of translation as an analytical and descriptive tool. The consequences of these applications have bounced back to the field of Translation Studies and contributed to its evolution, as can be seen in the cultural and sociological turns the discipline has taken since the 1990s.

In this paper I will study the political and ideological implications of Quranic translations for the development of a reformist discourse in the context of post-revolutionary Iran. This is done by analyzing the way in which conservative Islamists, modern Islamists and Muslim feminists have

tried to resolve the contradiction between (modern) women's rights with religious canonical texts through, partly, new translations and interpretations of the Quran. The Quran, as Dabashi observes, "has always been at the center of religious and political discourses of authority in Iran" (1993: 304). The political system in the Islamic republic has extended this centrality into the formation of political and legal institutions. With their call for reform in religion, religious intellectuals¹ have availed themselves of hermeneutics, among other theoretical apparatuses, to undermine the traditional methodology of Islamic jurisprudence and challenge the sole legitimacy of the clergy in interpreting the Quran as sacred scripture. New translations of the Quran are among those areas where religious reform might be embodied.

Method

The fourth Surah of the Quran is called An-Nisā' (the women) because it discusses many issues related to women. Three sections of verse 4:34 (*Alrrijalu qawwamoona 'ala alnnisai / bima faddala Allahu ba'dahum 'ala ba'din / wabima anfaqoo min amwalihim*; my italics) discuss issues related to conjugal relationships. They are chosen here to demonstrate three main points. First, translations are inscribed forms of interpretation. As such, hermeneutics serves as a key analytical tool to legitimize or critique certain translation products. Philological and hermeneutic text analyses provide linguistic and philosophical foundations upon which the legitimacy of diverging meaning potentials of the original text in different historical contexts can be put to the test. Second, the development of these meaning potentials has social and political ramifications. This is most visible in the Quran, which is understood as a guiding source of orientation for the individual and social lives of Muslims. Since the linguistic turn in humanities, the formation of textual meaning through translation is less an innocent act of textual transfer than an ideological attempt to construct meaning to serve particular purposes. Certain exegeses or translations of the Quranic passage mentioned above have been crucial to the formation of the

¹ "Religious intellectual" in Iran's post-revolutionary context is a designation for critical thinking that relies on modernity and modern tools of critical thinking to take a new look at the Quran and Islamic tradition, and then look back at modernity to underscore its defects and failures. "Religious intellectuals", says Soroush, "are committed to religion and look at it as a respected and accepted category of tradition. They try to investigate the relationship between religion and reason or new sciences—which belong to modernity. They then build a bridge between the two by critiquing the tradition and introducing their own theoretical innovations" (2007: 51; my translation).

Islamic Republic's official discourse on gender. Dissemination of this discourse has contributed to the formation of legal and political organizations, which systematically reproduce the theocracy's particular communication in society. And third, translation is a site to undermine the legitimacy not only of a religiously constrained discourse on gender, but also of the political and legal institutions that institutionalize such a discourse on women.

I will be looking at three translators with different ideological and Islamic backgrounds. The first translation is in Persian and was done by the hardline conservative cleric Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, a prolific author in traditional Islamic jurisprudence. Until his death in 2007, he held key political and religious positions in post-revolution Iran. The second translation is in English and was done by Laleh Bakhtiari, an Iranian-American Muslim author whose feminist translation of the Quran created considerable controversy within and without Iran. I will finally look at the Persian translation by Abdolali Bazargan, a modern Islamist known for his attempts to show how modern values such as democracy, science, civil society and human rights are fully compatible with Islam and the Quran. I will precede these translations by referring to Allameh Seyed Hossein Tabataba'i's 20-volume Quranic commentary known as *tafsir al-mizaan* or Balance in the Exegesis of the Quran, which is a canonical Quranic commentary widely available to translators. Tabataba'i was the most renowned Shiite philosopher of the twentieth century. He was also the first cleric to address the question of gender and women's rights from the perspective of Islamic philosophy. His writings on women in Islam had a lasting influence on the Islamic republic's discourse on gender.

Case study

In addressing the question of women, Tabataba'i underscores the categorical equality of women and men. However, he does not conceive of equality on a par with sameness. Although men and women must enjoy equal rights and meet equal obligations in an Islamic society, they are not subject to the same rights and obligations. It is true, according to Tabataba'i, that both sexes in general are endowed with emotional and intellectual faculties. However, the proportion of these traits is not equally distributed among them.

This is the assumption against the backdrop of which Tabataba'i finds his exegesis. "*Qawwam*" is the highly emphasized form of the term "al qayyem", i.e. one who looks after somebody else's affairs. His exegesis declares men the maintainers, i.e. "*qawwamoon*" (the plural form of "qawwam"), of women for two reasons, as the following sections of the verse shows: because men in general excel women in general in certain

natural characteristics, and because men provide women with financial means prior and during marriage (cf. Tabataba'i 1972: vol. 4, 543).

The verse does not indicate in what natural characteristics men excel women. Tabataba'i elicits them from other resources (cf. Shabestari 2000: 124ff.), although he claims that his exegesis relies solely on the text of the Quran. The unequal distribution of potentials in men and women accounts for the difference between the two sexes (cf. Tabataba'i 1972: vol. 18). While men are more intellectually inclined, women are more emotionally oriented. In discussing whether the audience of the verse is the small circle of conjugal life or the larger scope of community and society, he categorically opts for the second alternative:

The generality of this principle, i.e. men are maintainers of women, shows that it is a principle based on its causes. This means that men's being 'qawwam' over women is a general principle and not one confined to husbands and wives. This is of course valid in those common areas that affect the lives of both sexes on the whole. (1972: vol. 4, 543, my translation)

This assumption leads to another assumption, namely that the performance of duties that guarantee the continuance of society such as governance, judiciary and defense of the society against enemies are preserved for men, because they rely on "psychical strength" and "rationale which is clearly stronger and more in men than in women" (ibid).

In exegeting the Quran, Tabataba'i claims to be indifferent to the pressing issues and questions of the time. Since the text constitutes a harmonious whole, the accuracy of each exegesis should be tested by reference to other Quranic passages. Tabataba'i denies any reliance on theoretical or philosophical discussions, scientific theories, or mystic revelation, i.e. importing non-textual elements into the process of interpretation. This very claim proves controversial with religious intellectuals who point to hermeneutics as an ideal lens for looking at canonical texts in contemporary times. Shabestari (2000) questions Tabataba'i's assumption that he is interpreting the text of the Quran using the Quran itself. Without intending to judge the content of his exegesis, Shabestari lists a number of assumptions about the Quran that are not derived from the text *per se* but from the theological and philosophical background of Tabataba'i's education: "Allameh Tabataba'i has approached the interpretation of the Quran with a particular view of philosophy, the human being, society, history, ethics, etc. Without these assumptions, his method of interpretation relying on the text of the Quran itself would not be feasible" (2000: 130, my translation).

The premises of Tabataba'i's commentary have permeated the formal discourse of the Islamic Republic. They have helped form legal and political programs that facilitate theocratic communication and its acceptability

across society. In addition to religious intellectuals like Shabestari and Soroush, who have challenged the legitimacy of Tabataba'i's methodology and its exegetical results from a hermeneutic perspective, certain reformist translations of the Quran go hand in hand with the thinking of religious intellectuals in contributing to the formation of a new religious discourse in Iran's public sphere. These translations stand in contrast to those by conservative Islamists such as Ayatollah Ali Meshkini, who translates the text as follows:

Men are guardians of women because Allah has favored some over others (men over women in their intellectual, psychological and physical potentials) (and because the guardianship of the society at the level of prophethood, Imamah and an appointed guardianship on behalf of the infallible Imams are all assigned to men by God). And men are also the maintainers of their wives because of what they spend from their wealth (on women). (My English translation of the Persian translation, italics added to indicate the non-textual added interpretations inserted by Ayatollah Ali Meshkini in parentheses).

Visually speaking, the extent of the interpretations imposed on the original text, albeit demarcated by parentheses, is striking, particularly when the length of this translation is compared with those by Laleh Bakhtiari and Abdolali Bazargan, respectively:

Men are supporters of wives because God has given some of them an advantage over others and because they spend of their wealth.

Men stand over (physically) (protect and guard) women because Allah has preferred some (in the general average) over others, and because of what they spend from their wealth. (My English translation of the Persian translation)

In analyzing the translations from a hermeneutic perspective, I will be employing the theoretical framework of Shabestari in criticizing the traditional jurisprudence. By doing so, I will also be drawing an analogy between the work of religion intellectuals and religious reformists in challenging theocratic discourse.

Theoretical framework and discussion of translations

The different interpretations seen in the translations are first due to the ambiguity of certain terms in the original text. This is most visible in the polysemous term "qawwamoon", translated as "to have authority", "to maintain", "to be responsible", "to be in charge", "to guard", "to be superior", "to manage" etc. (cf. Dib 2009, Syed 2004). The adoption of one

meaning by a translator entails strong ideological attitudes towards the question of gender. The disambiguation of terms in this verse thus heavily marks the trace of the translator's interpretation and hence their visibility in the translation.

To resolve the polysemy and opt for one meaning that fits into the context of reading is the translator's first step toward interpretation (cf. Ricœur 1973: 113). Once disambiguated in translation, the text becomes "at once clearer and flatter than the original" (Gadamer 2006: 388). However, the text does not disambiguate itself unless the translator opens up a horizon for approaching the text and the text opens itself up accordingly. Understanding, as Ricœur holds, consists of interpretation as much as an explanation. It "is the culmination of the interpretation that the translator has made of the words given him" (Gadamer 2006: 386). It is where the translator's subjectivity comes into play to complement the explanation and account for the moment in which the text discloses its subject matter.

There are many different ways of disambiguating words by referring to other Quranic passages and hence creating isotopies (Greimas), i.e. semantic cohesion of the text. All three translators justify their exegesis by referring to the text of the Quran, yet they use different passages. How these connections are made is a matter of interpretation. Interpretation is guided by the translator's structure of expectations, previously built and evolved in a particular educational and socio-cultural context. The constant process of linguistic disambiguation through the internal textual web (explanation) requires an incessant interpretive attempt (interpretation) on the part of the translator. Meshkini's translation, where the interpretations are inserted and marked in the translation, clearly reveals that explanation and interpretation do not exclude but complement each other. The other two translators show their explanations in the commentaries on the verse. Different interpretations might lead to different textual explanations, and vice versa. The continual interplay between explanation and interpretation results in textual meaning. This view situates textual meaning "not behind the text, but in front of it. It [textual meaning] is not something hidden, but something disclosed" (Ricœur 1976: 87).

To take Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle, the problematic of polysemy is resolved in constant circular movements between parts and the whole. This circular movement has both an objective and a subjective side. The former is palpable at the textual or rather linguistic level. A word acquires its unique meaning in the context of the sentence in which it is used. The sentence is meaningful with respect to the text, and the text, in turn, belongs to the total context of the author's works, on the one hand, and the entire intellectual trend of the time, on the other. The subjective aspect is the fact that a written work is the creative manifestation of the author's inner life. The dialectic between parts and the whole in both its objective and subjective aspects, according to Schleiermacher and later on adopted by

Dilthey, can account for understanding. Tabataba'i's interpretation seems to follow this same trend. Although this dialectic lays down the foundation of hermeneutics, its task does not, for either Gadamer or Ricœur, stop there. The main objection is the exclusion of the reading subject reading as a crucial aspect of meaning-construction. The objective aspect of Schleiermacher's hermeneutic circle resembles Ricœur's textual explanation, with reference to the structural constellation of the text as a whole. This is also the objective method used by Allameh Tabataba'i in interpreting the Quran. However, interpretation, as the subjective side of understanding, departs from its Romantic ideal in reconstructing the inner experiences of the author, and places the reading subject at the center of the re-construction of textual meaning.

If Tabataba'i's exegesis goes through textual explanation to prove the intellectual as well as physical superiority of men as the natural order of things, the religious modernist Bazargan narrows down the realm of men's dominance to a merely biological verity to serve a particular function within the family. His interpretation stands in sharp contrast to those of Tabataba'i and Meshkini, who evoke a biological, psychological and intellectual authority or superiority of men over women. If there is any superiority, as Bazargan's translation reads, it is a biological one that gives men more physical strength. This is a matter of fact and not a divine decree. This very physical strength makes men the more appropriate candidate for maintaining the family and caring for women. So the translation not only abolishes any divine, intellectual or psychological superiority of men over women, but also replaces it with a sense of responsibility that falls onto the man's shoulders to carry out within the framework of conjugal life. The same argument is continued in a more radical way, compared to Meshkini's translation, in Bakhtiari's rendering of "qawwamoon" as supporters, and as such takes away any trace of patriarchy.

This interpretation is due to the way the term *qawwamoon* is disambiguated by Bazargan. He adds that the word *qawwam* means "advocate, defender, guardian, protector, attendant, one who is there for the benefit of and at the service of women, not one who is against them". Hence the question of being *qawwam* is far from evoking any divinely ordained superiority, for he refers to dozens of Quranic verses that "recognize superiority and excellence to be attributes of self-control and do not recognize inherent or sexual superiority" (Bazargan 2001).

The translation of this short Quranic clause clearly demonstrates how the combination of isotopies and textual elements produce meanings that can go in contradictory directions. This is what religious intellectuals with hermeneutic-oriented minds point out. The disambiguation of the Quranic passage is not possible unless Meshkini, like any other translator, brings his own particular context and horizon of meaning expectations with him. This horizon is shaped by the social context surrounding him, part and parcel of

which is his seminary education in Qom. This city is a powerful center in both the political and religious arenas for delimiting Islam's stance on gender. It is the burden of this powerful and heavily dominant traditionalist view of gender that reveals an indelible patriarchal trace in Meshkini's translation of the second section of the verse.

The delimitation of men's guardianship over women in the first clause of the verse is partly resolved and partly increased in '*bima faddala Allâh ba'dahum 'ala ba'din*' –because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other—. This is also a source of ambiguity, since it does not say whether it is a vertical preference of men over women, in which case there would arise a contradiction with other verses that deny any divinely ordained preference among humans based on their sexual and racial characteristics, or it is a particular kind of preference of some over others, irrespective of their gender. This ambiguity is due to the plural pronoun '*hum*' being applied to both men and women. In Arabic, pronouns are masculine if they refer to both men and women. This ambiguity is reflected in Bakhtiari's translation. The translation takes a sexual preference from the verse and turns it into a general statement. This stands in sharp contrast to Meshkini's disambiguation, which posits that men's excellence over women is on the basis of a disproportionate distribution of certain abilities. His translation of the passage is delineated as a sexual priority of "men over women in their intellectual, psychological and physical potentials". He even goes so far as to introduce more reasons for this superiority: "and because the guardianship of the society at the levels of prophethood, Imāmah (Imamate²) and the appointed guardianship on behalf of the infallible *Imām* are all assigned to men by God".

The third section of the verse brings a particular instance, which might be interpreted as either a case of the first general law (as in Tabataba'i's exegesis and as reflected in Meshkini's translation), or the delimitation or clarification of the first two sections (Bazargan and Bakhtiari's translations). In other words, particular advantages of men over women, whatever these advantages could be, if there are any, might be either extended to the whole society and individuals, or narrowed down to the very intimate system of the family. The relevance of this difference lies in the way these inequalities are translated into texts with normative, legislative and legal powers such as the Constitution and the criminal, penal and civil codes. Meshkini makes his interpretation of men's inherent superiority over women markedly visible:

² "Imamate" designates, in the Shiite doctrine, the qualified religious authorities to whom the rightful rulership of the Muslim community is held to belong. In this doctrine, the Imām must be a direct descendent of the prophet Mohammad and Ali, the first Imam.

“and men are *also* the maintainers of their wives because of what they spend (on women) from their properties” (emphasis added).

Although the other two translations render the final clause rather literally, the repercussions seem significant. Bakhtiari uses the second section to create a distance between the first and third sections, i.e. the second clause being a general statement irrespective of sexes and an explanation of the first clause. Bazargan conceives of the first and second clauses to be introductions to the third clause, i.e. the reason why men and not women should be financing the family. It is not, contrary to Tabataba'i and Meshkini, a general law that goes beyond husbands and wives to encompass men and women as two distinct groups. It is rather a statement that is confined to the very intimate system of family. In addition, for Bazargan this section is more a Quranic recommendation than a normative statement for the structure of family and the distribution of responsibilities. Their physical strength makes men in general and husbands in particular the better candidates to be of service to women and family. The second explanation denies the verse an a-historical prescription of the way the family should function. The subject of the verse is, as Bazargan holds,

indicative of the way of life of the human societies at the time of the Quranic revelations. Clearly, as the societal roles of men and women change, i.e., women in the West nowadays partake in the army, police force, and other hard labors, the basis of the laws governing the role of women in the society will also change and the reasons once valid for such roles will become obsolete. (Bazargan 2008)

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the conservative exegesis of the Quranic sections discussed above is visible in the theocratic discourse on gender. This discourse has, since the revolution, been disseminated through primary and secondary schools, pre-university and university curricula, and reinforced by state-run television and radio. The reproduction of this discourse is crucial for the continuance of the theocracy as a whole. If it is true to say with Luhmann that “[w]hatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world we live, we know through the mass media” (2000: 1), then it is equally true to say that mass media and communication possibilities they give rise to play a crucial role in determining the way our subjectivities are shaped.

The theocratic discourse on gender has also been reinforced by its institutionalization in the Constitution and the political and legal organizations constituted thereupon. A case in point is Article 163 of the Constitution, which clearly states that the characteristics of judges, the head of the judiciary, the public prosecutor and the head of the Supreme Court are

to be in line with Sharia law. Since the principles of Sharia law are derived by Islamic jurisprudence, and the majority of conservative jurists – legal experts— such as Meshkini himself reserve such positions for men due to their supposedly higher proportion of rationality and lower proportion of emotionality, the particular exegesis and translation of this verse is used as an Islamic justification to disqualify women from such positions. Meshkini’s conservative translation of the verse and its normative tone makes it easy to track the way the Civil Code is formulated within the context of Iran’s theocracy. When translated into the legal system, the verse prescribes mutual rights and obligations. Article 1105 of the Civil Code states in the case of a conjugal relationship that “the position of the head of the family is the exclusive right of the husband”. The following article states that “the cost of maintenance of the wife is at the charge of the husband in permanent marriages”, as is indicated in the verse. However, this obligation on the part of husbands creates obligations on the part of women; thus if a woman neglects these obligations “without legitimate excuse, [she] will not be entitled to the cost of maintenance” (Article 1108). A wife is also obliged to “stay in the dwelling that the husband allots for her unless such a right is reserved to the wife” (Article 1114). A man is also given the right to “prevent his wife from occupations or technical work which is incompatible with the family interests or the dignity of himself or his wife” (Article 1117).

The brief analysis of these translations clearly demonstrates how the exponents of conservative theology and reformist theology introduce two contradictory images of the Quranic attitude towards an aspect of the gender issue. Whereas Bakhtiari’s translation takes away any patriarchal readings from the verse, Bazargan’s translation shifts the focus away from the predefined authority or superiority of men to promote a sense of responsibility. As more women become aware of their existence as independent beings and fight for their rights by breaking down the patriarchal structures of society, their concerns automatically determine a part of the historical horizons for the translators who aim to transfer and revive the textual meaning. This historical horizon is crucial in determining the textual meaning. On the one hand, the translator’s non-textual knowledge is used to expose the textual meaning, and this is a method used by religious intellectuals to promote an unavoidable plurality of understandings of religion and hence to deny its monolithic institutionalization within the context of theocracy. On the other hand, the crucial role played by the current status of individuals’ knowledge in the formation of textual meaning emphasizes the legitimacy of new understandings and re-translations of canonical texts.

Reformist translations of canonical religious texts contribute to the formation of a new public discourse as a narrative of resistance against the dominant theocratic discourse. The latter is a monopolized and politically ideologized narrative of a mainly jurisprudential Islam that circulates

through omnipotent state-run *dissemination media* (Luhmann) such as writing, print and electronic media to reach as many individuals as possible, and through *symbolically generalized media* such as power, law and truth to increase the acceptance of this discourse by the masses. Reformist translations of the Quran should be seen in line with religious intellectuals' attempts to reform the theocracy's public discourse, which will leave its traces in the way individuals define themselves as citizens of a civil society with rights. This reform is not possible unless opinions in the private sphere are translated into themes in the public sphere and become able to irritate the political system to undergo change. The contribution of translation is modest, yet crucial.

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