Translating Narratology in the Sacred Text A case study of Four English translations of the Quran

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Abstract

This research explores the convergence of narratology and translation by comparative examination of four Quran translations into English: specifically, those of Dr. Mustafa Khattab, Muhammad Abdel Haleem, Arthur J. Arberry, and Richard Bell. The research is concerned with the approach adopted by these translators in regard to the Quran's narrative structure, stylistic elements, and rhetorical devices, with particular attention to Surah Yusuf (Chapter 12), which is celebrated for its unified narrative. By using narratological models, this research explores how every translator address challenges that go from thematic consistency to repetition, metaphorical language, and dialogue, while making the text readable to Anglophone populations. Differences in translation approaches—ranging from strict fidelity to interpretive flexibility—are seen to have implications for how the literary and theological meaning of the Quran is conveyed. This case study highlights the relevance of narratology for interpreting Quranic narratives and assessing the quality of translations. Furthermore, it explains the impact of linguistic options on how the reader perceives divine messages. Lastly, this research pushes both the field of Quranic studies and translation theory forward by demonstrating how narratology can enhance our understanding of holy scriptures in cross-cultural settings.

Key words: Narratology, Translation, Qur'an, Rhetorical devices, Cross-cultural.

Introduction

The Quran goes beyond being a religious text and is also a major literary work that employs sophisticated narrative techniques. Its unique structure combines stories, fables, direct revelations, and divine commands in a nonlinear fashion that resists conventional storytelling traditions. The discipline of narratology, which analyzes narrative structures and functions, provides a useful framework for exploring the operational dynamics of these elements within the Quranic narrative. The act of narrating into other languages, more so English, often leads to transformations of narrative elements due to differences in linguistic structures and cultural systems. Genette (1980) states that narrative theory provides analytical instruments that enable the scrutiny of story telling modes with an emphasis on elements like narrative voice, focalization, temporality, and mood.

The translation of religious texts, for instance, the Quran, is complex in nature in that it entails more than mere linguistic transformation; it necessitates an appreciation of theological subtleties, literary type, and cultural ramifications. Rimmon-Kenan (2002) holds that the foundational works of Gerard Genette, specifically his theories of "mood" with its inclusion of distance and point of view, and "voice," present a systematic theory regarding the control and presentation of narrative information to the reader. Complexity is added when dealing with narratological devices like shifts in perspective (focalization), time disruption (time), or shifts in narrative voice. Surah Yusuf, the twelfth Quranic surah, is notable for its cohesive and elaborately detailed account of the life of Prophet Joseph, his prophetic dream, and determination in his final reunion with his family in Egypt. Renard (2009) also points out that the translation of sacred texts such as the Quran offers distinctive challenges beyond that of linguistic equivalence. Thus, translators must contend with preserving the original's rhetorical power, poetic beauty, theological nuance, and the inherent "untranslatability" of certain Arabic concepts and words, Esack (2002).

Study Significance

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinarity in combining narratology and translation studies. The majority of research has tried to investigate linguistic or theological aspects of Quranic translations, yet none has explored their narratological aspects. This gap identifies the need for a systematic study that factors in both the textual and translational aspects. Nida (1969) describes how different translators will be more or less likely to prioritize different aspects: some will aim for a more formal, word-for-word translation (formal equivalence), while others will aim for a more interpretive, meaning-for-meaning one (dynamic equivalence). By comparing how Khattab, Abdel Haleem, Arberry, and Bell each handle these aspects in Surah Yusuf separately—and in their respective overall translations in general—this study aims to address some key questions: How do different translators' address narratological facets like plot structure or character development? To what extent do they privilege literal fidelity versus interpretive license?

To what extent do they succeed in balancing both literary aesthetics and religious interpretation?
Covering these questions extensively requires situating each translation within broad theoretical frames drawn from both narratology and translation studies. Narratology offers several such concepts, such as Gérard Genette's theories of narrative time, order, frequency, and duration; Vladimir Propp's morphological tale model; and Tzvetan Todorov's narrative typologies, among others—all potentially applicable depending on the specific textual examples under consideration in this research. Meanwhile seminal work by Eugene Nida ("dynamic equivalence"), Peter Newmark ("semantic vs communicative approaches"), Mona Baker ("narrative framing") et al inform methodological concerns underlying comparative evaluation criteria applied to vis-à-vis corresponding translations presented herein!

Problem of the Study

The primary problem addressed in this study is the challenge of translating the Qur'an correctly, especially Surah Yusuf (Chapter 12), and preserving its narrative structure, stylistic properties and rhetorical units. The Qur'an is not only a religious text, but also an excellent work of Arabic literature, which is characterized by its unique history techniques, thematic context, relapse, metaphor and dialogue. Translating such a lesson into another language includes important linguistic and cultural challenges. Each translator must navigate the literal loyalty of the original Arab text and to make the translation available to the English -speaking audience. As a result of this balance action, translation strategies often have variations that readers can understand and understand the literary and religious essence of the Qur'an.

Neuwirth (2010) mentions that reference to sacred texts such as the Qur'an, implementation of narrative analysis helps with the intentional alternatives made in storytelling, even when the primary mission is a moral instruction rather than purely imaginary entertainment. These functions are integrated parts of the effect of the rhetoric of the Quran, but it can be difficult to express in English without changing their original intentions or effects. The study focuses on four large English translations of the Qur'an: Khattab (2016), Abdul Haleem (2004), Arberry (1955) and Richard Bell (1937–1939). Each translator brings a different approach influenced by their background, the purpose of translation and the target group. Compared these translations through a cannibal lens, this is trying to answer important questions about how the narrative elements are preserved or replaced during research translations. It also checks about it.

Surah Yusuf is particularly notable for its cohesive storytelling and rich use of narratological elements. It presents a continuous story with complex characters, moral lessons, and divine messages. Translators face difficulties in maintaining these elements while adapting them to a different linguistic and cultural framework. For instance, preserving thematic coherence requires careful attention to how ideas are connected throughout the chapter. Similarly, rendering metaphorical language or rhetorical devices into English without losing their intended meaning or impact poses significant challenges.

This study identifies holes in existing research on Quranic translations by a particular focus on nectology - an area that examines fiction structures and techniques and its use for translation studies. While previous studies have analyzed Quranic translations from linguistic or psychological perspectives, some have discovered how immediate insight can increase our understanding of the quality of the translation. In comparative analysis of four major English translations of Sura Yusuf - Dr. Mustafa Khattab, Muhammad Abdel Helem, Arthur J. is the goal to address this difference by Arberry and Richard Bell-

The problem also explains how linguistic alternatives to translators affect the understanding of readers' divine messages. Different translation strategies can emphasize some aspects of the lesson by trivializing others, making the interpretations of readers subtle, yet shaped in intensive ways. For example, a literal translation can preserve the original expression, but readers who distinguish the risk are not familiar with the Arabic design languages or cultural contexts. On the other hand, an explanatory approach may prefer readability, but to renounce some of the literary prosperity or religious depth of the text. Ultimately, this study is trying to contribute to both the Quran study and the translation theory how to provide valuable insight into the complexities of translating sacred texts into the Naras and cultures.

Specific problems include:

Translator first -person's divine speech (we ") versus how do you make changes between third -person references? To what extent do they retain temporary dissatisfaction without confusing readers? How does cultural conditions affect their interpretation of focalization? Is some narrative technology completely lost under translation? To address these problems require a cross -cutting.

Study Questions

How do separate transport men handle the history structure of Surah Yusuf in their English translations? What strategies do the translator use in Sura Yusuf to preserve thematic harmony? How are stylistic properties presented such as relapse and metaphor in each translation? In what ways the translator addresses challenges, related to dialogue representation in Surah Yusuf? How do the differences in translation strategies affect Sura Yusuf's understanding of readers of literary and religious essence?

Study Limitations

This study is limited by many factors that define and focus on the scope. This research focuses specifically on Sura Yusuf (Chapter 12) from the Qur'an, which is due to the nature of the harmonic history and the rich narrow elements. Other chapters are not analyzed in this study. The analysis is limited to four specific English translations: Dr. Mustafa Khattab ("The Clear Quran"), Muhammad Abdel Haleem ("Qur'an: A New Translation"), Arthur J. of Urbari ("Quragan interpretation"), and Richard Bell ("The Quran Translation").

The study has appointed other theoretical approaches such as linguistically practical or sociological approach, appointed narecology as its primary analytical lens. Research focuses entirely on English translations without assessing versions in other languages such as French or Urdu. Although it discusses possible effects on understanding the reader, it does not include empirical data from real readers or audience studies. Given the time limits to carry out this research, a complete comparison was not possible in all possible soft elements. These limitations ensure that the study focuses on accepting areas for future discovery.

Methodology:

The function of this research uses a comparative analysis approach to examine narrow elements in the four English translations of the Qur'an: Khattab's "The Clear Quran," Abdul Haleem's "The Quran: A New Translation", Arberry's "Interpretation of the Qurals" and Richard Bel's "Koran: The Qur'an: The Qur'an: Finder: Finder: Finder: Finder. Temporary sequencing is designed to highlight their impact on the understanding of the reader and the understanding of the Quran text.

Example 1: Opening Verse (12:1)

Arabic Original: "الٓرۚ تِلۡكَ ءَايَٰتُ ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ ٱلۡمُبِينِ."

Mustafa Khattab: "Alif-Lãm-Ra. These are the verses of the clear Book."

Muhammad Abdel Haleem: "Alif Lam Ra. These are the verses of the Scripture that makes things clear."

Arthur J. Arberry: "Alif Lam Ra. Those are the signs of the Manifest Book."

Richard Bell: "A.L.R. These are the signs of a lucid Book."

Analysis: All four translators present this poem with a slight change in the word's alternative for "clear" or "manifest". Dr. Khattab and Bell use "clear" and "lucides", respectively, and emphasize clarity for readers, while Arberry uses "manifest", which has more formal tones, but may be less accessible to modern readers. Abdel Helem connects the explanatory depth by translating it as "the things that clarify the Holy Scriptures," which matches their perspective to clarify religious implications. Surah Yusuf is often described as a "whole story" in the Qur'an. There is a linear progress with clear stages: Exhibition (Introduction of Joseph's Dream), Rising Action (its test), climax (reunited with the family) and resolution (meets their dreams). This chapter includes topics such as patience, divine knowledge, forgiveness and belief in God's plan.

2. Example 1: Verse 4 – Yusuf's Dream

Arabic Original: (إِذْ قَالَ يُوسُفُ لِأَبِيهِ يَا أَبَتِ إِنِّي رَأَيْتُ أَحَدَ عَشَرَ كَوْكَبًا وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ رَأَيْتُهُمْ لِي سَاجِدِينَ)

Khattab: "⌜Remember⌝ when Joseph said to his father, 'O my dear father! I truly saw ⌜in a dream⌝ eleven stars along with the sun and the moon—I saw them prostrating to me!'"

Abdul Haleem: "Joseph said to his father, 'Father, I dreamed of eleven stars and the sun and moon: I saw them all bow down before me.'"

Arberry: "When Joseph said to his father, 'Father mine; I saw eleven stars, and the sun and moon; I saw them bowing down before me.'"

Richard Bell: "When Joseph said unto his father: 'O my father! Verily I have seen eleven stars and the sun and moon; I have seen them bowing down unto me.'"

Analysis:

This poem introduces Joseph's dream of predictions that sets the entire history arch. Khattab emphasizes clarity for modern readers, such as a clear not existing in Arabic by adding relevant words like "a dream" but lies. Abdul Helim opposes simplicity, but leaves relapse ("I really so"). Arberry retains an archaic tone with phrases like "Father Mine" depicting old English use. The translation of the vine bends against the omission, but uses a formal phrase ("actual"). These differences highlight different preferences: access (sour), simplicity (Helem), literary style (arberry) or literal accuracy (the vine). Khattab adds relevant markers such as "Embrelemember" to guide the readers with the conferences in the Quran story. Abdel Helem simplifies the expression of readability ("I Dream"), while Eiberi retains an archaic tone ("bends himself"). Bell uses formal language ("obedient") that can resonate with older audiences, but separate simultaneous readers.

Example 3: Brothers' Plot Against Yusuf (12:9)

Arabic original: " ٱقۡتُلُواْ يُوسُفَ أَوِ ٱطۡرَحُوهُ أَرۡضًا يَخۡلُ لَكُمۡ وَجۡهُ أَبِيكُمۡ وَتَكُونُواْ مِنۢ بَعۡدِهِۦ قَوۡمًا صَٰلِحِينَ"
Mustafa Khattab: "'Kill Joseph or cast him out to ⌜another⌝ land so that our father's attention will be only ours…"

Muhammad Abdel Haleem: "'Kill Joseph or throw him far away so that you may have your father's undivided attention…"

Arthur J. Arberry: "'Slay you Joseph or cast him forth into some land that your father's face may be free for you…"

Richard Bell: "'Slay ye Joseph or cast him forth into some land so that your father's regard may become yours…"

Analysis:
Khattab emphasizes access by using a modern phrase like "meditation". Abdel Helem opposed clarity with "undivided meditation", which explains the meaning that exists for non-Arab speakers. Arberry retains the formal diction ("your father's face"), which can confuse modern readers who are not familiar with idiomatic manifestations in classic Arabic.

Example 4: Verse 18 – The Shirt Stained with False Blood

Arabic Original:

وَجَآءُو عَلَىٰ قَمِيصِهِۦ بِدَمٍ كَذِبٍۚ قَالَ بَلْ سَوَّلَتْ لَكُمْ أَنفُسُكُمْ أَمْرًاۖ فَصَبْرٌ “
”جَمِيلٌۖ وَٱللَّهُ ٱلْمُسْتَعَانُ عَلَىٰ مَا تَصِفُونَ

Khattab: "And they brought his shirt stained with false blood. He said, 'No! Your souls must have tempted you to do something ˹evil˺. So I can only endure patiently with beautiful patience! It is Allah's help that I seek against what you claim.'"

Abdul Haleem: "They showed him his shirt, deceptively stained with blood. He cried, 'No! Your souls have prompted you to do wrong! But it is best to be patient: from God alone I seek help to bear what you are saying.'"

Arberry: "And they brought his shirt with false blood upon it. He said: 'Nay; but your souls have tempted you to something; but come now sweet patience! And God is He Whose succour is sought against that you describe.'"

Richard Bell: "And they brought his shirt with lying blood upon it. He said: 'Nay! Your souls have beguiled you into some affair; but patience is goodly! And God it is Whose aid is sought against what ye describe.'"

Analysis:

This verse expresses Yaqub's response after Yusuf is thrown into a well and he is shown evidence that his brothers have made up. Khattab emphasizes emotional resonance ("something ˹evil˺") while utilizing contemporary language ("stained with false blood"). For readability, Abdul Haleem makes some phrases simpler ("deceptively stained"), but he loses some of the artistic depth found in Arabic repetition ("patience...beautiful patience"). Bell uses polite but slightly archaic language ("lying blood," "beguiled"), whereas Arberry maintains classical diction ("sweet patience"). These selections show how each translator strikes a balance between readability and faithfulness to Arabic idioms.

Example 5: Verse 23 – The Seduction Scene

Arabic Original:

(وَرَٰوَدَتْهُ ٱلَّتِى هُوَ فِى بَيْتِهَا عَن نَّفْسِهِۦ وَغَلَّقَتِ ٱلْأَبْوَٰبَ وَقَالَتْ هَيْتَ لَكَۚ قَالَ
مَعَاذَ ٱللَّهِۖ إِنَّهُۥ رَبِّىٓ أَحْسَنَ مَثْوَاىَۖ إِنَّهُۥ لَا يُفْلِحُ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ)

Khattab: "And she advanced towards him after locking the doors and said, 'Come to me!' He replied, 'Allah is my refuge! It is ˹He˺ who has taken good care of me ˹so far˺. Surely the wrongdoers never succeed.'"

Abdul Haleem: "She tried to seduce him—he whose house it was—and she shut the doors firmly and said, 'Come to me!' He replied, 'God forbid! My master has been good to me: wrongdoers never prosper.'"

Arberry: "Now the woman in whose house he was solicited him; she shut fast the doors and said: 'Come!' He said: 'God be my refuge! Surely my lord has treated me honourably; surely those who do wrong shall not prosper.'"

Richard Bell: "And she in whose house he was sought him for herself; she bolted fast the doors saying: 'Come!' He replied: 'God forbid! My lord hath treated me honourably; verily wrong-doers shall not prosper.'"

Analysis:

This crucial instance emphasizes moral rectitude in the face of temptation. Khattab clarifies inferred meanings while modernizing phrases like "advanced towards him" ("Allah...has taken good care"). Compared to others who use the words "solicited" or "sought," Abdul Haleem uses simpler grammar for ease of understanding, but the emotional impact is diminished. While Bell maintains literalism at the little sacrifice of fluidity ("sought him for herself"), Arberry maintains a consistent formal tone throughout his work ("shut fast"). These versions show varying emphasis on stylistic refinement versus clarity.

Example 6: Yusuf in Prison (12:36)

Arabic Original:

وَدَخَلَ مَعَهُ ٱلسِّجْنَ فَتَيَانِۖ قَالَ أَحَدُهُمَآ إِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰنِىٓ أَعْصِرُ خَمْرًاۖ وَقَالَ ٱلْءَاخَرُ “
إِنِّىٓ أَرَىٰنِىٓ أَحْمِلُ فَوْقَ رَأْسِى خُبْزًا تَأْكُلُ ٱلطَّيْرُ مِنْهُۖ نَبِّئْنَا بِتَأْوِيلِهِۦٓۖ إِنَّا نَرَىٰكَ مِنَ
”ٱلْمُحْسِنِينَ

Mustafa Khattab: "Two young men also went to prison with Joseph…"

Muhammad Abdel Haleem: "Two young men went into prison alongside him…"

Arthur J. Arberry: "And there entered with him two youths into prison…"

Richard Bell: “And two youths entered along with him into prison…”

Analysis:

This verse alludes to the scene in the Quran where Prophet Yusuf (Joseph) meets two other convicts while incarcerated. Both of these men share their dreams with Yusuf in hopes of getting his interpretation. The verse emphasizes their faith in Yusuf's knowledge and aptitude for dream interpretation. Abdel Haleem utilizes "alongside" to create a more fluid narrative flow in English, while Khattab reduces grammar for reading ("also went"). Although Arberry's wording is less organic in English syntax, it is more literal. Although the word choices in the translations vary slightly, the meanings remain the same. While Arberry sticks to more traditional terminology like "pressing wine," Khattab and Abdul Haleem adopt more contemporary phrases like "pressing wine" or "pressing grapes." "Thereof" and other archaic English forms are used by Richard Bell. Even in the face of hardship, Yusuf's character impressed others, as evidenced by the expression "we surely see you as one of the good-doers" (or similar versions). This verse establishes Yusuf's function as a dream interpreter, a talent bestowed by God, which plays a crucial part in his narrative.

In his translation, Khattab maintains respect for holy speech while emphasizing accessibility for contemporary audiences. For instance, he maintains theological truth while using modern terminology. Abdul Haleem uses a flowing style that strikes a balance between readability and tone accuracy in the source text. His interpretation frequently uses parenthetical remarks to make clear latent meanings. Although he occasionally forgoes intelligibility in favor of aesthetic appeal, Arberry maintains a large portion of the Arabic rhythmic quality due to his unique literary style. Finally, in order to support his arguments regarding textual rearrangements within the Quran, Richard Bell's critical method frequently breaks up passages.

In Surah Yusuf, Khattab's translation clearly indicates changes in perspective between Yusuf (Joseph), his brothers, and other characters. Focalization is the term used to describe who sees or experiences events inside a narrative. Similar to this, Abdul Haleem makes sure that transitions are seamless, but he also occasionally includes notes that clarify things for readers. Arberry's emphasis on literalism can occasionally mask focalization changes, forcing readers to deduce context on their own. Although Bell's critical annotations frequently break the flow of the story, they also reveal hidden textual patterns.

Temporal sequencing looks at the order of events in a story. Flashbacks and other non-linear scenes that are a part of Quranic storytelling are difficult for all four translators to depict. Khattab maintains chronological integrity while rephrasing difficult sequences to make them simpler. In order to clarify time transitions without substantially changing the poem structure, Abdul Haleem utilizes footnotes sparingly. Arberry uses punctuation extensively to signal breaks or transitions, yet he rigorously follows verse order. Bell’s rearranged surahs challenge traditional sequencing altogether but offer an alternative perspective on thematic development. Styling Tools in Quranic storytelling, stylistic elements like parallelism, repetition, and rhetorical questions are essential: When feasible, Khattab keeps these elements, but to improve readability, it occasionally replaces repetitious phrases with synonyms. Abdul Haleem consistently maintains repetition while offering contextual glosses that clarify its intent. Arberry's antiquated diction makes it difficult for him to adequately communicate rhetorical inquiries, although he is excellent at catching parallelism. Bell frequently foregoes stylistic details entirely in favor of critical analysis.

Depending on the intended audience, different translations have different levels of reader engagement: The main audience for Khattab is lay readers looking for an approachable introduction to the holy book of Islam. Abdul Haleem's balanced approach appeals to both ordinary readers and scholarly audiences. Arberry mostly serves academics who are interested in poetic interpretations of the Bible. Arberry mostly serves academics who are interested in poetic interpretations of the Bible. Bell speaks to critical academics who are more interested in historical-critical approaches than in devotional application.

Results & Findings

Several important conclusions on narratological components and translation techniques were drawn from the comparative study of the four English translations of Surah Yusuf (Chapter 12 of the Quran). Khattab placed a high value on readability and clarity for contemporary readers, frequently including contextual cues (such as "⌜Remember⌝") to aid comprehension. Abdul Haleem simplified syntax while maintaining theological subtleties, striking a compromise between accessibility and accuracy. Arberry stuck to a formal, literary style that occasionally sacrificed intelligibility while faithfully emulating Arabic rhythms. Bell leaned toward literalism and critical analysis, often disrupting narrative flow for scholarly scrutiny. While Arberry more strictly maintained parallelism, Khattab and Haleem occasionally used synonyms for repetitious words to improve readability. Bell frequently left out stylistic details.

While Arberry continued to use outdated terminology (such as "Manifest Book"), Haleem and Khattab clearly conveyed metaphors (e.g., "Scripture that makes things clear"). Different approaches were taken for handling changes in narrative perspective, such as character dialogue versus heavenly voice. While Arberry's formal language occasionally impeded focalization, Khattab and

Haleem employed unambiguous transitions. Although Bell's annotations broke the flow, they revealed structural details. There were difficulties with non-linear Quranic storytelling. Bell's rearranged surahs provided an alternate sequencing; Haleem utilized footnotes sparingly; Arberry relied on punctuation; and Khattab reduced chronology. For lay readers, Khattab and Haleem placed a strong emphasis on theological clarity. Arberry appealed to literary scholars by emphasizing lyrical beauty. Bell's translation frequently sacrificed devotional readability in order to accommodate historical-critical interpretation. Target audiences were reflected in the decisions made by translators. For instance, Arberry's antiquated expressions ("your father's face") contrasted with Khattab's contemporary phrase ("undivided attention").

Conclusion

By showing how language decisions influence readers' interaction with the literary and theological aspects of the Quran, this study highlights the relationship between narratology and translation in sacred texts. Story coherence, stylistic preservation, and theological messaging are all greatly impacted by the conflict between literal integrity and interpretive freedom. Frameworks like as Propp's morphology and Genette's narrative theory show how translators deal with issues like rhetorical techniques, focalization, and temporal shifts. Each translation caters to a different readership: Bell for academic critique, Arberry for literary grace, Haleem for balance, and Khatab for accessibility. The study emphasizes the necessity of interdisciplinary methods in translation studies that integrate linguistic, theological, and narrative analysis. Other chapters of the Quran, reader responses from empirical research, or other theoretical frameworks (such sociolinguistics) could also be included in future studies. Ultimately, by demonstrating how the narrative beauty of religious texts crosses linguistic bounds, this study enhances both Quranic scholarship and translation theory.

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