

Chapter Seven

Translation of Qur'anic Verses with Injunctions: A Theme-based Comparative Review

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While the translation of the Qur'an is a challenging task as a whole, the translation of the verses of injunctions in the Qur'an is more challenging. It requires translators to understand and consider many other factors in addition to the knowledge and command of both languages. Since the Qur'an (in its original language) is the perfect word of God, for Muslims, the translation of the Qur'an to any other language is always limited. Therefore, Islamic scholars and Qur'an translators agree that any translation of the Qur'an is actually the translation of the meaning of the Qur'an, and not anything like an equivalent to the Qur'an.

A comparison is attempted between four translations: Abdullah Yusuf Ali (hereafter, YA), *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*; Muhammad Asad (MA), *The Message of The Qur'an*; Muhammad Taqiyyu al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan (H&K), *Interpretation of the Meanings of The Noble Qur'an in the English Language*; and Sayyid Abul A'lā Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding The Qur'an: Abridged Version of Tafhīm al-Qur'an* (A/M). A passage is discussed in terms of clarity of meaning, consideration of the context of the verse, subject, section, Surah, consideration of jurisprudence knowledge (fiqh), and consideration of the historical background and issues of this age. The passage selected for review in this chapter includes only the first part of connected texts for the injunction of the dress code for women.³³

The injunctions (*ahkām*), or ruling, injunction, command, decree, ordinance, or judgment, of the Qur'an form the primary source of the Shari'ah. The language of the verses of injunctions in the Qur'an often has a unique style. Many of the injunctions of the Qur'an start with a direct address to the believers, such as, "O believers." The translators of the Qur'an require knowledge of jurisprudence (fiqh) and issues of today's world related to the Qur'an. The various translations of verse 24:31 will be reviewed. This injunction is referred to as *ahkām al-ḥijāb*. Although *ḥijāb* applies to both males and females, it is often referred to the dress code of women.

Verse 24:31 is preceded by a verse that commands Muslim males first to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. While lowering of one's gaze and protection of one's private parts have to be observed by both men and women, as explained in verse 24:30, verse 24:31 requires women to cover their *zinah* or natural beauty. The next part of verse 24:31 calls on women to walk without stamping their feet lest they attract people's attention because of the sounds produced by such walking. Verse 24:31 ends with an invitation to all of the believers to turn to God for true success.

YA translated the verse as:

(24:31). And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard (*2984) their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments (*2985) except what [must ordinarily] appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (*2986) And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss. (*2987)

MA translated the verse as:

(24:31) And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their charms [in public] beyond what may [decently] be apparent thereof; (*37) hence, let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms. (*38) And let them not display [more of] their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women folk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are beyond all sexual desire, (*39) or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness; and let them not swing their legs [in walking] so as to draw attention to their hidden charms (*40) And [always], O you believers – all of you – turn unto God in repentance, so that you might attain to a happy state! (*41)

H&K translated the verse as follows:

(24:31) And tell the believing women to lower their gaze [from looking

at forbidden things], and protect their private parts [from illegal sexual acts, etc.] and not to show off their adornment except only that which is apparent [like palms of hands or one eye or both eyes for necessity to see the way, or outer dress like veil, gloves, head-cover, apron, etc.], and to draw their veils all over *Juyūbihinna* [i.e. their bodies, faces, necks and bosoms] and not to reveal their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sister's sons, or their [Muslim] women [i.e. their sisters in Islam], or the [female] slaves whom their right hands possess, or old male servants who lack vigor, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And all of you beg Allah to forgive you all, O believers, that you may be successful. (* 1)

A/M translated the verse as follows:

(24:31) And enjoin believing women to cast down their looks and guard their private parts and (* 20) not reveal their adornment except that which is revealed of itself, and to draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment save to their husbands, or their fathers, or the fathers of their husbands, (* 21) or of their own sons, or the sons of their husbands, (* 22) or their brothers, (* 23) or the sons of their brothers, or the sons of their sisters, (* 24) or the women with whom they associate, (* 25) or those that are in their bondage, or the male attendants in their service free of sexual interest, (* 26) or boys that are yet unaware of illicit matters pertaining to women. Nor should they stamp their feet on the ground in such manner that their hidden ornament becomes revealed.

Focusing on key words and phrases in comparative review, YA translated the word *zīnah* as “beauty and ornaments” that covers both aspects. MA has translated it as “charms” which means attractive features. H&K and A/M have translated it as “adornment” that may not cover the natural beauty. MA translated *khimār* as “head covering,” but the rest have translated it as “veil.” YA and MA rendered the word *jilbāb* (plural, *jalābīb*) as “outer garments,” but YA has further explained it in his comment as “an outer garment: a long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom.” H&K have rendered it as “cloaks (veil)” and A/M has rendered it as “outer coverings.”

Regarding the phrase: *Yudnīna ʿalayhinna min jalābībihinna*, the translators have rendered this phrase as follows: YA: “They should cast their outer garment over their persons [when abroad];” MA: “They should draw over themselves some of their outer garments [in public];” H&K: “To draw their cloaks [veils] all over their bodies [i.e. screen themselves completely except the eyes or one eye to see the way]” and A/M: “To draw a part of their outer coverings around them.”

Regarding the phrase: *Illā mā zahara minhā*: The translators have rendered this phrase as follows: YA: “except what [must ordinarily] appear thereof;” MA: “beyond what may [decently] be apparent thereof;” H&K: “except only that which is apparent [like palms of hands or one eye or both eyes for necessity to see the way, or outer dress like veil, gloves, head-cover, apron, etc.]”; and A/M: “except that which is revealed of itself.”

Regarding the phrase: *Wal yaḍribna bi khumurihinna ʿalā juyūbihinna*, the translators translated it in the following ways: YA: “they should draw their veils over their bosoms;” MA: “let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms;” H&K: “to draw their veils all over *juyūbihinna* [i.e. their bodies, faces, necks, and bosoms];” and A/M: “to draw their veils over their bosoms.”

In reviewing the translations of the verses containing women’s dress code injunction, it is apparent that of the four translators, YA has provided much of the necessary details in his commentary to explain and clarify the subject. While the other three translators have tried to expound, each one of them has made some statements that need to be clarified and addressed.

The theme-based approach applied in this chapter to assess various translations of the Qur’an allows, as demonstrated, for meaningful differences among translators to be highlighted, as well as identifying the need for certain qualifications among translators to augment their expertise.