



## **The Enduring Legacy of Abdullah Yusuf Ali: A Comprehensive Analysis of His Contributions to the Translation and Interpretation of the Holy Quran**

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*Abstract: Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a distinguished Islamic scholar and jurist, made significant contributions to the understanding of the Holy Quran through his renowned translation and interpretation. This paper conducts a meticulous examination of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's lasting impact on Quranic translation and interpretation, encompassing linguistic, cultural, and theological dimensions. Placing Ali's work in historical context, it scrutinises his methods in translating the Holy Quran into English and assesses the implications of his choices for diverse audiences. The analysis explores the reception of Ali's translations, considering both the resonance and differences of opinions within Muslim communities and beyond. Additionally, it delves into the broader influence of Ali's work on subsequent scholars and the enduring mark he left on the discourse surrounding the Quran. In essence, this study offers a comprehensive understanding of Ali's profound contributions, contributing to ongoing scholarly discussions on the significance of his legacy in shaping the comprehension and appreciation of the Quranic message.*

**Keywords:** Yusuf Ali, Quran, Translation, Interpretation.

**Introduction:** British-Indian Islamic scholar and barrister, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, (14 April 1872 \_ 10 December 1953)<sup>1</sup> Born in Bombay in a Dwoodi Bohra community in Surat, Gujrat. He was schooled at Wilson College, Bombay, but also received Islamic schooling, eventually becoming a 'Quran Hafiz', able to recite the entire Quran from memory. He attained a first class degree in English Literature at the University of Bombay, aged 19 and was awarded a Presidency of Bombay Scholarship to study at the University of Cambridge where he pursued an MA and LL.B. He was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1896 in absentia because he had returned to India. He had two marriages to English women, both marriages ended in divorce despite his second wife converting to Islam and moving to India. He was fluent in Hindi, Arabic and English. He was the recipient of a CBE in 1917 for his services to supporting the British War effort. He became a lecturer in Hindustani at the School of Oriental Studies the same year. He bequeathed most of his estate to the University of London for the benefit of



Indian students studying there. He is buried at Brookwood Cemetery, near Woking.<sup>2</sup>

*Works:* Among his publications were Muslim Educational Ideals (1923), Fundamentals of Islam (1929), Moral Education: Aims and Methods (1930), Personality of Man in Islam (1931), and The Message of Islam (1940). However, his best-known scholarly work is his translation into English and commentary of the Qur'an, the Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary (1934–8; revised edition 1939–40), which remains one of the two most widely used English versions (the other being the translation by Marmaduke Pickthall).<sup>3</sup>

*The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary:* Abdullah Yusuf Ali dedicated his focus to the Quran, delving into the commentaries from the early days of Islamic history. His most renowned work is "The Holy Quran: Text, Translation, and Commentary," initiated in 1934 and released in 1938 by Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers in Lahore, India (later Pakistan). During his promotional tour for the translation, he contributed to the inauguration of the Al-Rashid Mosque, the first mosque in North America, in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in December 1938.<sup>4</sup>

His translation is in blank verse, employing biblical language. Despite his proficiency in the English language, he wasn't a religious scholar, attracting both praise and criticism for his work. In his English rendition, he used "God" for the Arabic word "الله" and "apostle" for the Islamic term "رسول". The Saudi Government later organized a revision of his work, forming a committee to assess and recommend changes. Subsequently, modern

editions of his work were revised and published by Amana Publications in the USA and the King Fahd Holy Quran Printing Complex.

While widely acclaimed among Muslims and English readers, Ali's translation and commentary also face considerable criticism.

*Characteristics and Patterns of Interpretation:* The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, and Commentary, authored by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, adopts a traditional style. It features parallel columns with Arabic text and English translation, accompanied by commentary notes below. Each Surah begins with a poetic summary. The book commences with a general introduction, a poetical introduction, and a table of contents. Surahs are divided into sections (Ruku), each section starting with a verse-style introduction, potentially mistaken for the translation. A concise subject index is found at the end. Both the translation and commentary have a devotional and practical tone. The translation is presented in blank verse, resembling biblical English. Abdullah Yusuf Ali aimed to elevate English to an Islamic language, acknowledging the impossibility of substituting Arabic words. This intention is expressed in the Preface to the First Edition,

“Gentle and discerning reader! What I wish to present to you is an English Interpretation, side by side with the Arabic Text. The English shall be, not a mere substitution of one word for another, But the best expression I can give to the fullest meaning which I Can understand from the Arabic Text. The rhythm, music, and Exalted tone of the original should be reflected in the English Interpretation. It



may be but a faint reflection, but such beauty and Power as my pen can command shall be brought to its service. I Want to make English itself an Islamic language, if such a person As I can do it, and I must give you all the accessory aid which I Can.”<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, he adhered to the conventional approach, referencing classical works in his interpretation. However, when faced with conflicting views among early commentators, he opted for the most logical stance, as articulated in the Lahore Edition preface.<sup>6</sup>

This extensive translation necessitated consulting numerous source materials. Abdullah Yousuf Ali categorizes these reference books into two groups: the first includes previous books and existing translations while the second comprises dictionaries and readily available general reference books.

He did not follow any of the early commentators as authority. Despite he adopted general sense of accepted commentaries. The early works, he referred time and again in his commentary are:

- Jaami’ al-Bayaan fee Tafseer al-Qur’an by Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir Al Tabari
- Al Mufradat, Abu Al-Qasim Husayn Al Raghib Al-Isfahani
- Al Kashshaf by Abu Al-Qasim Mahmud ibn Umar Al Zamakhshari
- Al Ta Al Kabir by Abu Al Fadl Muhammad Fakhr Al Din Al Razi
- Anwar Al Tanzil by Quadi Nasir Al Din Abu Said Abd Allah Ibn Umar Al Baydawi
- The Tafsīr of Abu Al Fida Ismail ibn Kathir

• Al Itqan fi Ulum Al Qur'an by Jalal al Din Al Suyuti

• Tafsīr Al Jalalayn by Jalal Al Din Al Suyuti and Jalal Al Din Al Mahalli

In addition to these he also got inspiration from Tafsīr Rahmani by Shaykh Alī ibn Ahmad Mahaymi of Mahim near Bombay, Shah Walīullah, Shah Abd Al Qadir, Abd Al Aziz and Tafsīr Haqqani by Mawlvi Abd Al Haqq.<sup>7</sup>

Abdullah Yusuf Ali drew inspiration from various sources, remaining cautious of specific schools of thought among commentators. As a result, his work is less influenced by conventional perspectives, as he endeavored to present his own viewpoint while avoiding typical biases.

The second category which consists:

- (1) Al- Mufradât by Abû al-Qâsim al-Husaynî Râghib al-Isfahânî, an Arabic dictionary of words and Phrases in the Qur’an.
- (2) Qamus, a well-known Arabic dictionary,
- (3) Lisân al-Arab , also a Well-known Arabic dictionary,
- (4) Sûrah , an Arabic-Persian dictionary,
- (5) Dictionary and Glossary of the Newspaper by J. Penrice,
- (6) English-Arabic Lexicom by EW Lane,
- (7) al-Itqân fî ‘Ulûm al-Qur’ân by Jalal al-Dîn al-Sayûtî, an encyclopedia of the Qur’an which very broad,



(8) Geschichte des Qorans by Noldeke Und Schwally, German essay on the chronology of the Qur'an whose criticisms and conclusions are from the point of view of non-Muslims,

(9) Encyclopedia of Islam,

(10) Encyclopedia Britanica , fourteenth edition, to which the Knowledge of the Arab world is based,

(11) Dictionary of Islam by Hughes, an outdated but still Useful as a reference,

(12) Sirat al-Rasl by Ibn Hisham about the history of the apostle in detail,

(13) Sirat al-Nabi by Maulana Syibli Nu'mânî (d.1914 AD/1334 H) a history of the life of the Prophet in Urdu,

(14) Fath al- Rahmân by Faidullah Bek Hasani, a 1346 Cairo concordance of the Qur'an in Arabic.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of words he did not furnish any grammatical understanding. He endeavored to render the word in literal meanings exclusively. As in verse 104 of Al Baqarah: He interpreted the meaning of the word رَاعِنًا and أَنْظَرْنَا in his own explanatory style:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقُولُوا رَاعِنًا وَ قُولُوا أَنْظَرْنَا وَ اسْمِعُوا<sup>9</sup> وَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ

“O ye of Faith! Say not (to the Messenger) words of ambiguous import, but words of respect; and hearken (to him): to those without Faith is a grievous punishment.”<sup>9</sup>

While most of the other commentators refrained from translating the word, opting instead to use the same terms, as evident in Daryabadi's translation:

“O ye who believe! Say not: Ra'ina, but say: Unzurna, and hearken; and unto the infidel shall be a torment afflictive.”<sup>10</sup>

And in Surah Al Baqrah Verse: 26

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي أَنْ يَضْرِبَ مَثَلًا مَّا بَعُوضَةً فَمَا فَوْقَهَا

Abdullah Yūsūf Alī: “Allah disdains not to use the similitude of things, lowest As well As highest.”<sup>11</sup>

Daryabadi: “Verily Allah is not ashamed to propound a similitude, be it of a Gnat or of aught above it.”<sup>12</sup>

Mohsin Khan: “Verily, Allâh is not ashamed to set forth a parable even of a mosquito or so much more when it is bigger (or less when it is smaller) than it.”<sup>13</sup>

Here A. Yūsūf Alī translated the word بَعُوضَةً as lowest while others translated it as Gnat and Mohsin Khan translated it as mosquito.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali adhered to a specific pattern in his commentary. At the beginning of a Surah, he provides a comprehensive introduction to the following Surah and then translates the text. In the footnotes, he gives explanations and sometimes discussions about a word.

Abdullah Yusuf Ali skillfully incorporates concise summaries before delving into continuous subject matter, such as in Surah Taha (طه) where, prior to verse 9, he adeptly encapsulates the narrative spanning verses 9-36, unfolding the tale of Prophet Musa (Moses).<sup>14</sup>

In his translation of the Qur'an, Yusuf Ali intertwines poetic commentaries, numbering approximately 300, meticulously crafting verse-specific reflections in poetic form when deemed essential. A notable example is



found in Surah Yasin, spanning 83 verses. The poetic annotations span from the introduction on page 1116 to page 1134.<sup>15</sup>

Yusuf Ali's extensive exploration of the Qur'an spans both classical and contemporary interpretations in Western and Eastern languages, showcasing a profound understanding. Renowned not only for his Quranic expertise but also for his passion for literature, particularly Persian and Classical English works, Yusuf Ali boasts familiarity with the likes of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Keats, and others.<sup>16</sup>

*Critical Examination of Abdullah Yusuf Ali's Quranic Translation by Marmaduke Pickthall and Other Scholars*

Marmaduke Pickthall, while scrutinising Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation for the first time, critiqued it and published his own work while still engaged in creating his bilingual edition. Pickthall acknowledged that the English used in the translation was "better than any previous English translation by an Indian," but cautioned that it "could not be mistaken... for the writing of an Englishman." According to Pickthall, translating the Quran into English required a unique form of English, as the impressive rhythm in Arabic could not be replicated in any other language. He considered Ali's attempt to introduce a new literary form, which resembled meter but lacked metrical or reasoned structure, onto a language not his own as a rash undertaking.<sup>17</sup>

Pickthall disapproved of Ali's use of his own words to convey the meaning of the sacred text. For instance, he criticised the

substitution of "Most Gracious, Most Merciful" with "the Beneficent, the Merciful," considering the latter more appropriate. Additionally, Pickthall objected to Ali's consistent use of the term "Apostle" for Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), deeming it a "serious error for a Muslim writer" as it was traditionally associated with the twelve messengers of Jesus Christ in English. While acknowledging the value of Ali's footnotes for revealing faith and making apt comparisons with Christianity, Pickthall expressed disapproval of Ali's departure from the established terminology.<sup>18</sup>

T. B. Irving noted that Yūsūf Ali's translation was more satisfactory as a commentary but criticised his English for being overly laden with unnecessary words that neither explained the text nor enhanced its meaning.<sup>19</sup>

Arafat examined Yusuf Ali's English translation and identified approximately 400 "incorrect equivalents."<sup>20</sup> Abdul Rahim Kidwai reviewed Ali's work and asserted that it accurately represented the sense of the original, dismissing Arafat's criticism by stating that "literally not one" out "of four hundred alleged incorrect equivalents" was "worthy of serious consideration."<sup>21</sup>

Abdullah Abas Al-Nadw highlighted in his review the distinct translation of the first verse of Surah Baqarah, emphasizing "This is the Book: In it is guidance sure without doubt to those who fear God." Unlike other translators and interpreters, Yusuf Ali linked the absence of doubt to the presence of guidance in the Quran.<sup>22</sup>

*Strengths and Disadvantages of Tafṣīr The Holy Qur'an*





Yusuf Ali's work, widely regarded as a reference in numerous countries, has notably influenced Islamic studies and Tafsir. His interpretation aligns with linguistic principles and incorporates a poetic style in English, facilitating comprehension for Western readers exploring Islam.

Nevertheless, scrutinising the shortcomings of this interpretation reveals a brevity in explanations. Regrettably, Yusuf Ali focuses predominantly on challenging words or meanings. Despite the controversies surrounding his interpretation, Yusuf Ali's unwavering dedication to infusing his thoughts into the Quranic interpretation remains unchanged, casting a fragrant legacy upon his esteemed name.

#### *Conclusion*

Abdullah Yusuf Ali's widely acclaimed commentary on The Holy Qur'an stands out as a modern masterpiece, blending diverse perspectives with an eloquent and accessible language. Its popularity is attributed to both its linguistic excellence and widespread availability. The commentator's esteemed status appeals to the contemporary generation, and the Saudi government's support significantly contributes to the dissemination of this commentary.

In his work, "The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation, And Commentary," Yusuf Ali primarily emphasizes the linguistic aspect, interpreting verses spiritually through a synchronic or semantic linguistic approach. This approach delves into the basic meanings, particularly in the context of Islam, and highlights inner meanings evident in cosmological verses. The use of rhythmic poetry enhances the understanding of the

tafsir for readers, especially in religious themes. Yusuf Ali adopts a more general interpretation of Islam, focusing on language in his English rendition. He intends to present a moderate view, contributing to the introduction of Islam to the Western audience.

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