‘K. A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies’ and 21st Century Quranic Studies in English

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Review Essay

The K. A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies (henceforth KANCQS), Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) is focused on ‘the study of Quran and related subjects’. Named after Professor Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (1925-97), the Centre’s establishment was approved in 1998 under the ‘provisions of the AMU act (1981)’. The Centre is committed to ‘the advancement of academic excellence in teaching, research and publication’, and it provides ‘a meeting point between the Islamic and Western worlds of learning’. The major ‘aims and objectives’ of the Centre are: (i) to promote research in the field of Qur’anic exegesis (tafsir), especially South Asia; (ii) to provide an academic forum for scholars whose academic interests focus on any aspect of the Quran; (iii) to promote the educational and cultural advancement of Muslims of India; and (iv) to enable the students of the Quran to gain or renew their acquaintance with the latest developments in the field of Quranic Studies.¹ The Founder Director of the Centre is Prof. Ahtisham Ahmad Nizami (2007-2014) who was succeeded, from April 2017, by Prof. Abdur Raheem Kidwai. The Centre has been active in organizing seminars/conferences, lectures, and publishing books on various aspects of Quranic Studies. The Centre, in order to show more dynamism towards research, has recently come up with the idea of an academic research journal (Aligarh Journal of Quranic Studies) as well. Besides, since last few years, the Centre has published around two dozen books (in Urdu and English) on various aspects of Quranic Studies. Among these, two recently published books are: Abdur Raheem Kidwai’s God’s Word, Man’s Interpretations: A Critical Study of the 21st Century English Translations of the Quran (2018; henceforth ‘God’s Word’),² and Sajid Shaffi’s, 21st Century Quranic Studies in English: A Bibliography (2018; henceforth Bibliography).³ Both these works, though different in content and nature, are focused on a single theme: 21st century Quranic Studies scholarship in English. In this backdrop, this review article presents an assessment of these two recently published books by the Centre, revealing that the Centre is committed to fulfilling its purpose and realizing, very fairly, its objectives.

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Among other fields, Professor Abdur Raheem Kidwai (Professor of English, and Director, KANCQS, AMU), has contributed significantly to the field of Quranic Studies, especially in the sub-area of English Translations of the Qur’an. In this field, some of his books are: *The Qur’an: Essential Teachings* (2005); *Daily Wisdom: Selections from the Holy Qur’an* (2011); *What is in the Quran? Message of the Quran in Simple English* (2013); and *365 Selections from the Holy Qur’an* (2014). Besides these, his three (3) significant works on the critical assessment of English translations of the Qur’an are: *Bibliography of the Translations of the Meaning of the Glorious Quran into English 1649-2002* (2007); *Translating the Untranslatable: A Critical Guide to 60 English Translations of the Quran* (2011); and *God’s Word, Man’s Interpretations* (2018). Below is provided an assessment and appraisal of his last work, published by Viva Books, New Delhi in association with KANCQS.

In *Bibliography of the Translations* (2007), Kidwai presents a comprehensive and critical assessment of 47 complete English translations of the Noble Qur’an, in terms of their strengths and weaknesses, by using these criteria: (a) biography and background of the translator; (b) publication history, number of editions and their reception; (c) the features of the translation, highlighting both positives and negatives; (d) Mindset of the translator, as reflected in the translation: identifying the predilections and dogmatic presuppositions of each translator; and (e) Reviews: in this part, Kidwai lists the book reviews and other critiques on each translation, including their publication details. These criteria help a reader not only to learn about translators, especially non-Muslims, but about their motives and objectives, their underlying assumptions, and about other aspects like the main contours of the Westerns scholarship on Islam in general and Qur’an in particular.

*Translating the Untranslatable* (2011), an extension of the previous work, is a critical study of sixty (60) complete English translations of the Quran, carried out from 1649 to 2009. It seeks “to guide readers in selecting a suitable translation for
their study out of the many available” (p. xvii). The major objective is to present an analytical review of each translation, and thus attempting “to identify the ideological and sectarian affiliation, mindset, features, and strengths and weaknesses of every translator” (p. xvii). The work is divided into six (6) parts. In part I, 35 English translations by “[Sunni] Muslims”, have been reviewed (with the first one published in 1911 and the last one in 2009, pp.3-161). In part II, four (4) translations by “Shia Muslims”, published between 1964 and 2004, have been reviewed and analyzed (pp. 165-181). In part III, two (2) translations by “Barelwi Muslims”, published in 1988 and 1990, are reviewed (pp. 185-191). In the next part, seven (7) translations by “Qadiyanis”, published from 1905 to 2005, are critically assessed (pp. 195-233). In part V, English translations by “Orientalists”, published from 1649 to 1956 and one in 2007 are reviewed (pp. 237-281).

From the assessment of each translation, in these works, what becomes evident is that Kidwai reviews and evaluates these English translations of the Qur’an, whether by Muslims or non-Muslims, on the grounds of language, style, faithfulness to the original Arabic text, and on the basis of a translator’s background/expertise in the field.

A new addition, and an extension and supplement of his Bibliography of the Translations (2007) and Translating the Untranslatable (2011), God’s Word attempts to provide, as the sub-title clearly reveals, a “critique” on the newly published English translations of the Qur’an, from 2000 to 2017 (p. xii). It provides an assessment of 32 translations, highlights their (de) merits and literary features, points out the translators’ ideological presuppositions and intrusions; and brings to the limelight trends and changes that have occurred in this field over the decades.

The book consists of 32 chapters, each covering a critical assessment of a single translation. The book is preceded by a Preface (xi-xvii), and ends with an ‘Appendix’ (pp. 142-54) followed by a rich ‘Bibliography’ on Qur’anic Studies (pp. 155-178) prepared by Sajid Shaffi.

In the Preface, the author points out that more than 40 English translations of the Qur’an have been published since 2000 (p. xi), but he has “evaluated”, among these, only 32 translations in this book. Each translation has been analyzed by the author “in terms of its approach and its strengths and weaknesses” (p. xii). The author observes that these translations (and/or translators) fall in these two major trends: (i) “surcharged with ideological presuppositions”, and (ii) “liable to confound readers on account of their pernicious ideological presupposition or their poor presentation of the things Quranic” (pp. xii-xiii).
Of these 32 Translations, most are done by Muslims (both Sunni and Shia), and very few by Orientalists and Qadiyani translators. Thus, in comparison to the past—when English translations were done mostly by the Orientalists—“the field is now dominated by [the] Muslim scholars” (p. xiii). But the author is well-aware of the fact that in “terms of quality”, all these translations “vary [and differ] much”, and here the author has tried to “provide readers with a clear idea of their pitfalls and brilliant and redeeming features” (p. xiii).

Some of the general observations made by the author, about the (de) merits of these translations are summarized here: (i) “An obnoxious practice … of unacknowledged borrowing from the earliest printed English translations” (or plagiarism), especially from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, M. Marmuduke Pickthall, and A. J. Arberry; (ii) repeating the same polemical/biased orientalist views as centuries before; (iii) seeking “to impose their peculiar sectarian views on the Quranic text; (iv) spreading Qadiyan creed, which is more “pernicious” than sectarian issue, etc. (see, pp. xiii-xvi). However, he observes and appreciates their positive qualities as well. Among these, presenting “the true meaning and message of the Quran in chaste, easy to understand English”, and the trend of highlighting “the commonalities between the Quran, and Buddhism and Judeo-Christian tradition”, are appreciative (p. xvi). On the basis of these observations, Kidwai concludes his Preface with these lines: “Despite a large number of translations in English, the field is not so rich and substantial, …, however, gratifying is that as compared to 1980s, the scene is far better and brighter. … These translations illustrate how Muslims have in last 50 years appropriated English,…, for promoting the life ennobling divine guidance embodied in the Quran” (pp. xvi-xvii). That is, in this book, Kidwai evaluates every English translation of the Quran on the basis of translator’s religious belief, ideological presupposition and organizational affiliation, etc. To prove his claims and assertions, below is provided an assessment of his evaluation and ‘critique’ on some selected translations, from each category, with the two-fold aim of attesting his claims and highlighting his contribution:

(i) While evaluating ‘The Quran with a Phrase-by-Phrase English Translation’ (2004), authored by Ali Quli Qarai (an Iranian-Shia scholar), Kidwai is of the opinion that this translation “is not disfigured by blatant sectarianism”, but is, in comparison to previous Shia translators, “balanced and moderate on sectarian issues” (p. 14), and thus calls it “a welcome addition to the field” (p.15).

(ii) In evaluating The Sublime Quran (2007) by Laleh Bakhtiar (an Iranian-American female Muslim writer) Kidwai finds her translation “an intriguing one on several counts”: not delivering what it promises as per its title; her claim of presenting “free of any denominational or doctrinal bias” and at the
same time following/basing the legal issues on “Hanafi, Maliki, and Shafi Schools of Law”; her interpolation of “whimsical notions”; and her Feminist agenda (see, pp. 31-33). It, thus, “does not contribute in any degree in advancing the understanding the meaning and message of the Quran” (p. 34).

(iii) In evaluating (Mawlana) Wahiduddin Khan’s *The Quran: Translation and Commentary* (2011), Kidwai claims that it “facilitates in its own way a better understanding of meaning and message of the Quran”, but also opines that it “represents a *tafsir* with a difference” and thus calls it “unconventional *tafsir*”, for it “does not delve into the Quranic commands, events, personalities, places, and geo-historical allusions” nor does it contain “the usual verse by verse annotations”; rather “the overarching concern [of Mawlana Khan] is to bring out the overall message of the Quran…thematically placed together” (pp. 58-59).

(iv) On similar lines, he considers Tahir ul Qadri’s *The Glorious Qur’an* (2011) translations as an off-shoot and extension of and representative of “Barelvis’ understanding of the Quran” (p.74), with a more inclination for prescribing the readers “the veneration of the Prophet (pbuh)” by using the phrases “O Esteemed Messenger”, “O Glorious Beloved” in place of “O Messenger” and “O Prophet” (see, pp. 76, 77).

(v) In evaluating the translations by orientalists like Thomas Cleary’s *The Quran: A New Translation* (2004), Kidwai is of the opinion that in comparison to other orientalists, Cleary’s translation “deserves every credit for this excellent work” for it is, shortcomings apart, “undoubtedly a work to be treasured for his empathy” (pp.5, 9). In contrast to Cleary, Jones’ translation, *The Quran Translated into English* (2007), “marks the return of the Orientalist breed with a vengeance”, for it brings to the limelight again, the centuries-old “misconceptions and half-truths about Islam and the Quran”, and has used the word “polemic/al” hundreds of times (pp. 26-27). Calling Quranic text as “highly problematic both in its stylistic presentation and its subject matter”, he labels Quran as ‘disputed’, ‘uncertain’, ‘unclear’, ‘conflicting’, ‘troublesome’, etc. (p. 29). It thus revives the legacy of Alexander Ross, Richard Bell, J.M. Rodwell, and like-minded, and it is on these basis Kidwai calls Jones’ translation as “deep rooted hostility under the guise of scholarship” which is both “regrettable and anachronistic” (p. 30).

Out of these 32 Translations, Kidwai “detects” 7 translations which are just a replica of previous translations (like Yusuf Ali, Marmuduke Pickthall, and Arberry), i.e., these are the translations which borrow mostly ‘unacknowledged’, from previous works. Among these he lists the translations of the Translation


Another remarkable observation made by the author is that the translations produced through “collaborative teamwork”—like the works done by the Translation Committee, *The Majestic Quran* (2000), Adalhaqq and Aisha Bewley, *The Noble Quran: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English* (2011), Sahih International (2012), and Monotheist Group, *The Message: A Translation of the Glorious Quran* (2017)—underscore not only the “sensitivity about the needs of the reader” but are an indication of “a healthy, positive development” as well (p. xvi).

However, among these, for Kidwai, it is “Hammad’s and Khattab’s works” which “stand out” (p. xvi), and, along with Khalidi’s work, are “remarkable translations” for their lucidity, chastity, idiomatic English, reader-friendly, and other features (p. 128). Because of its “elegant and reader-friendly” nature as well as being written in “lucid, idiomatic English”, Kidwai calls Hammad’s work as “a monumental English translation” (pp. 36, 38). Similarly, he places Khattab’s translation “in the envious category of the very few English translations...recommended to readers, Muslims and non-Muslims” equally, and thus praises it for “providing readers of the day with the gems of Quranic guidance in their own preferred idiom” (pp. 128, 133). Khalidi’s translation is “remarkable” as well as “refreshing and accurate” (p. 51). “Amid more than 90 complete translations”, as summarily put forth by Kidwai, “these three stand out for
contextualizing the meaning and message of the Quran for today’s readers who…yearn for divine guidance for leading life” (p. 128).

It is on the basis of this evaluation—not only of these 32 translations, but his previous experience as well—that Kidwai suggests that “notwithstanding the intense activity in the field, there is still need for a reader friendly translation in idiomatic English which may cater to the varying needs of an ever increasing English readership” (p. xvi).

One expects that all the 40 translations should have been included (and evaluated) in this book, but due to reasons, better known to the author, he has left 8 translations, including the influential-collaborative work by S. H. Nasr et. al., The Study Qur’an (2015). Also, the author has missed to mention, or avoided (for unknown reasons), to mention the earlier publication of most of these chapters, as reviews first in the quarterly The Muslim World Book Review (Leicester, UK)—to which he has been contributing, unceasingly, since 1985—but has enlisted them in the Bibliography.

Despite such kind of slips/ shortcomings, this 196-page work is a remarkable one, for it presents, very succinctly and lucidly, the (de) merits and features of each translation. Such kind of assessment helps a reader in his/ her selection of the translation. And, in the end, such kind of works prove that Quran is indeed the Word of God, and all the translations are just human endeavors and attempts of ‘Translating the Untranslatable’. In Sum, Kidwai’s God’s Word Man’s Interpretations not only validates and substantiates its title but meets all the expectations and undoubtedly succeeds in presenting a balanced and fair ‘critique’ of 32 translations of the Qur’an published in between 2000 and 2017: it thus serves, fairly and genuinely, as an extension of author’s previous works ‘Bibliography of the Translations’ and ‘Translating the Untranslatable’ on the same theme.

**Introducing Sajid Shaffi’s Bibliography of 21st Century Quranic Studies in English**

In the scholarship on Islam—which includes works on Islam, its Primary Sources (Quran and Hadith), history, law, and Islam vis-à-vis contemporary issues—one of the interesting and exciting academic disciplines is the Quranic Studies: the studies related to Quran and its varied aspects. This area is spread over a number of branches, and both Muslims and non-Muslims (Orientalists/ Islamicists: literally ‘those who study Islam academically’) have contributed to it extensively. The major branches in the area of Quranic Studies are: ‘Ulum al-Qur’an, Tafsir literature, translations of the Qur’an in various languages (especially
Arabic, Urdu, English and other indigenous languages, and such new trends as Quranic hermeneutics, contextualist approach to Quran, thematic interpretations of the Quran, simple introductions to the Quran, and personal wrestling(s) with the Sacred Text.

Another significant (but found scarcely especially in the English language) category in this area is the publication of ‘Bibliographies’ on the Quranic Studies. Bibliography (as a work) is generally defined as a book which provides ‘a list of sources of information on a given subject, period, etc.’ or ‘a list of writings relating to a given subject’, or ‘a list often descriptive or critical notes of writings related to a particular subject, period, or author’. The history of writing/ publishing Bibliographies in the Quranic Studies, in English language, goes back to 1930s. One of the earliest examples is the publication of Woolworth’s linguistically and chronologically arranged A Bibliography of Koran Texts and Translations, published in 1927.4 Since then, it has continued throughout the coming decades, and some prominent examples are: Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu’s World Bibliography of the Translations of the Meanings of the Holy Quran (1980); Fawzi Mikhail Tadros’ The Holy Quran in the Library of Congress (1986); Abdur Raheem Kidwai’s three works: Bibliography of the Translations (2007), Translating the Untranslatable (2011), and God’s Word, Man’s Interpretation (2018); and Morteza Karimi-Nia’s Bibliography of the Quranic Studies in European Languages (2012). A new (and recent) addition to this genre is Sajid Shaffi’s 21st Century Quranic Studies in English: A Bibliography, published by Viva Books, New Delhi in association with KANCQS, AMU (2018).

Consisting of around 250 pages, this Bibliography is divided into five (5) parts, excluding Preface (pp. xiii-xiv) and ‘Foreword’ by Prof. A. R. Kidwai (pp. ix-xi). Written by a young researcher, who is presently pursuing PhD in the Department of Islamic Studies, AMU (and is Assistant Convener, Quranic Studies Forum, KANCQS), this Bibliography lists and “covers works on 21st century Quranic Studies in English”, numbering 2000 (arranged alphabetically in each part and category, but numbered sequentially from 1—2000). It “includes the bibliographical details of the works related to the Quran in English—[complete] translations (45), books (400), journal articles/ book chapters (1200) and book reviews (200) in addition to unpublished theses/ dissertations (100)”. An “indispensable for the students of Quranic studies”, it lists these works under five (5) different broad categories, viz., English Translations of the Quran, Books on the Quran, Articles on the Quran, Book Reviews on the Quranic Studies, Theses on the Quran (p. xiii). Moreover, this work also includes a list of the ‘Reference Works on
the Quran’ as well as a ‘List of Selected Journals’. These categories are further subdivided thematically.

In the Foreword, Prof. Kidwai highlights the importance of publishing such kind of works, in these words: “A Bibliography stands out as an excellent source of information … [and] is much more than a treasure house of hard information about the latest publications in the field. More importantly, it projects for a discerning eye [on] the main contours, emerging trends, thrust areas and geo-political dimensions of the area of study under discussion” (p. ix). Moreover, he highlights in clear terms the main goal of this Bibliography by saying that it “affirms the pivotal position which the Quran enjoys in the world of scholarship” and thus highlights the “thematic diversity” of this scholarship. It underscores the “active participation of scholars of almost all parts of the world in the Quranic discourse”—Muslims (of Middle East, Asia, and Muslims settled in the West) and non-Muslims, or Western scholars/ Orientalists (pp. ix, x).

In his concise Preface (pp. xiii-xiv), the author, besides highlighting the importance and structure of the Bibliography, points out that while “maintaining hierarchy of the contents” this Bibliography provides detailed list of the 45 complete “English translations of the Quran” in the alphabetical order, which have been published in between 2000-2016. This forms the Part-I (pp. 1-6) of the work. It is followed by ‘Books on the Quran’ (part-II, pp. 7-43) which include entries from serial 46-472 under seven (7) categories, ranging from introducing the Quran to contemporary issues. ‘Articles on the Quran’ (Part-III, pp. 43-177) consist of 16 categories and includes entries from serial 473-1701. ‘Book Reviews on the Quranic Studies’ (Part-IV, pp. 177-196) include entries from 1702-1899. These have been further categorized and classified, thematically, under specific headings: ranging from “Theology/ Metaphysics; The Quran and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh); History of the Collection and Codex of the Quran; Art of the Quran Recitation; The Quran Translations and Translators; Interpreting the Quran” to such categories like ‘Law’, ‘Sufism’, ‘Comparative Religions/ Scriptures’, ‘Art and Architecture’, ‘Science’, in the Quranic Context. It also includes a list of the works which highlight “Contemporary Issues in the Quranic Context (Current Issues and the Quran/ Feminism and Related Issues); Orientalist Polemics and Muslim Responses” (pp. xiii-xiv). For instance, in these last two categories, entries from 1440-1587 and 1588-1638 are included, respectively.

Moreover, in Part-V, ‘Theses on the Quran’ (pp. 197-208), it provides a list of 100 PhD and Masters Theses/ Dissertations (numbering from serial 1900-1976 & 1977-2000, respectively). This is followed by (i) a list of 47 ‘Reference Works on
the Quran’, which are sub-divided into Bibliographies, Concordances, Subject/Content Guides, Catalogues, Dictionaries, and Encyclopaedias (pp. 209-212); and (ii) ‘List of Selected Journals’ which are 40 in number (pp. 213-14). It ends with the reader-friendly ‘Author Index’ (pp. 215-229), which though in alphabetical order lists the names of authors along with the entry number(s), which makes it easy to locate an author’s number of writings in different categories. For example, one of the prominent Quranic Studies scholars from India is Prof. Kidwai and one finds that his name (as Kidwai, Abdur Raheem) appears in seven (7) different categories, like 28, 64, 65, 106-108, 710-713, 1659, 1768-1819 (p. 222); similarly, against the present reviewer’s name (Parray, T. A.) the numbers of entries mentioned are 193, 724, 1008, 1113, 1625, 1853-1855 (p. 225).

Thus, Sajid Shaffi’s 21st Century Quranic Studies in English: A Bibliography—which has numerous reader-friendly features—is a treasure house of the works/scholarship on the Quranic Studies produced from 2000 onwards. It helps the budding researchers to get a clear idea of what has been, and is being written/explored, on different aspects of the Quranic Studies. It gives an idea of the trends and developments that have occurred, since the last decades, in this particular field of study. A useful resource, it will be helpful equally to the students and academicians of Quranic Studies in general, and particularly to those who are eager to venture for research into the Quranic studies field.

The publication of such works not only reveals the KANCQS’s commitment to ‘the advancement of academic excellence in teaching, research and publication’, but also justifies, very fairly and optimally, the Centre’s objectives of providing ‘an academic forum for scholars whose academic interests focus on any aspect of the Quran’ and in enabling the students of the Quran ‘to gain or renew their acquaintance with the latest developments in the field of Quranic Studies’. It is hoped that the Centre keeps progressing and publishing more and more in the areas falling in its objectives and thus fulfilling its commitment as well as purpose of its establishment.
References

i For details see Centre’s website: www.amucqs.com


v This section is based on my previously published review on this work: Tauseef Ahmad Parray, “Introducing Sajid Shaffi’s Bibliography on 21st Century Quranic Studies Scholarship”, *Kashmir Reader*, 11th June 2018, Monday, p. 9

vi Sage Jr Woolworth Wm, “A Bibliography of Koran Texts and Translations”, *The Muslim World*, 17:3 (July 1927), pp. 279-289