

A Critical Review of Thomas Cleary's English Translation of Holy Quran (The Essential Quran, 1993) Based on "Imam Ghazali's Six Aims" of Quran

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Abstract

History has witnessed certain English translations of Holy Quran crafted by oriental scholars. These translations began in sixteenth century under orientalist movement and continued till date. On the contrary, one of the modern times twentieth century English translation of Holy Quran (selected Surahs) was produced by Thomas Cleary.¹ This translation surfaced as fresh breath of air in history of English Quran translation. Cleary translated 39 selected Surahs and their handful verses from Quran in the light of six aims of message of Quran narrated by Imam Ghazali. The translation is produced with the purpose of providing short and easy passage to witness non-Muslim reader to understand the crux of message of Quran. The Poetic diction and rich vocabulary make this translation more powerful and a recommended reading. The brief review conducted in this study also summaries a critical analysis of some of the short comings and lapses in this translation.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Quran Translation, Essential Quran, Jewels & Pearls, Six Aims.*

Introduction

Quran is one of the most widely read and followed book around the world not only by Muslims but also by the people of other religions. There have been numerous Quran translations in English over the last few centuries

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both by Muslims and Orientalist translators around the world. Most of these English translations are prejudiced, full of mistakes and focused on making alteration in teachings of Quran produced with mala-fide intention by some Oriental Scholars in west. However, history has witnessed the Quran translation of Thomas Cleary (1993) which appeared on the horizon as a fresh breath of air being a partial translation of selected Surahs. The translation of Thomas Cleary is much sensible and honest in terms of translating Arabic text to English which makes it unique and acceptable for both Muslims and Non-Muslims in comparison to other Orientalist English Translations of Quran.

The above referred oriental Scholars/translators tried to create history of their own while portraying the revelation of Holy Quran. They expressly believed as mentioned in their translations that Qur'an is not the word of God sent to Muhammad (PBUH), but it was created by him personally. Muhammad (P.B.U.H) was influenced by Christian and Jewish religious teachings² and he wished to protect his nation from grave sins by creating a book like Quran. Such a book shall drive the ignorant Arabs from darkness into the light of true guidance.

This study covers the review of translation of Quran ("THE ESSENTIAL KORAN; The Heart of Islam") authored by Thomas Cleary. This translation consists of selected Surahs of Quran translated from Arabic to English. The views of Cleary about Islam and Quran, Arabic Language, History of revelation of Quran, life of Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and Surah Selection for translation have been discussed briefly keeping in view the different sections of the book. Further a critical review of the Arabic verse translations, errors or mistakes, sources and notes used for Arabic to English translation is also an essential part of our study.

Literature Review

The Oriental English translations of Holy Quran were largely conducted under the Umbrella of Orientalism movement. Firstly, it is important to understand that "orient" and "occident" are two different concepts. Edward W. Said explains that people called "Orientals" do have academic specialization in eastern civilization, culture, history, society etc.³ Edward W. Said also believes that one of the tools used for domination over eastern civilization, Culture, or society by west. The term "Occident" refers to the people who specialize regarding the western civilization⁴. The orientalism

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is such a sensitive and important concept that has always been point of great concern and focus on terms of literary warfare against Islamic history, art, and religion. The conspiracy against Islam and Quran has been strongly supported by Jews, Christians, and other religions/sects. This is also evident from opinion of Thomas Right⁵ who writes that (Muhammad) was the greatest enemy of Christianity and his birth right after two months of Attack on Makkah by "Abraha" was a bad omen for Christians. Further, one of the Oriental scholars, P.K Hatti⁶ elaborates that enmity between Christians and Muslims is a continuous phenomenon and was initiated by Muhammad (PBUH) at the Battle of Mu'tah. Gibbon⁷ mentions that a war was started (Battle of Mu'tah) merely as a protest for killing of a messenger. Most of the Orient Scholars are of the European decent and believe that Orient (Eastern Civilization) is inferior to Western civilization. Another Orient Scholar named Kirby⁸ explains that main cause of Crusades was Muslim attack on Jerusalem. This prejudiced Orient mindset gave rise to an organized movement called orientalism and this movement spread more in west where Islam did not penetrate as much as in the East.⁹ The basic purpose of initiation of this movement was to confuse masses regarding teachings of Quran and Islam.

These Orient scholars also elaborated allegations regarding preservation and compilation of Holy Qur'an. The compilation of Quran after the death of Muhammad (P.B.U.H) was also one of the bases of these allegations against authenticity of this message of God bestowed upon Muhammad (P.B.U.H). They believed that content or text of Qur'an has been altered and it has omissions and errors in the Original Arabic text. The Surah arrangement of Qur'an has been criticized by Oriental translators. Few of them have suggested or developed a chronological Surah arrangement on their own instead of traditional Surah arrangement of Quran¹⁰.

Before the Quran was translated in English; the translations of Oriental Scholars were published for years in different European Languages. The first of them was the translation of Quran produced by Peter the Venerable (Abbot of Cluny)¹¹ in Latin language in 1143 A.D. The English translations of Holy Qur'an began in 16th century initially in west and these translations are continuing till date. The most widely read and recognized translations of Quran are seven which were produced in last five hundred years. These translations have been widely published and accepted in Europe and west. These translations include Alexander Ross (1649), George Sales (1734), J.M Rodwell (1881), E.H Palmer (1880), Richard Bell (1939), A.J Arberry

(1955), N.J Dawood (1956) respectively. All these translations are full of mistakes, omissions, change of Surah arrangements and other errors but have been widely promoted and published in west till date.

Further, a few of the scholars belonging to the fraternity of Oriental scholars have attempted to translate the Quran (Full text translations and partial translations). Some of the famous translations among them include Thomas Cleary (1993), Anees Shroosh (1999) and Alan Jones (2007) as discussed in my P.H.D dissertation. However, the question that needs to be answered is regarding the quality of Thomas Cleary's English text translation of Classical Arabic. Further, the questions regarding the role of his impartiality or prejudice, knowledge of Arabic language, history of Revelation, Life of Muhammad (P.B.U.H) is also addressed in this study through a critical analysis of this book.

Research Methodology

This piece of research is based on the research technique of comparative and content analysis. The relevant literature content in form of articles, books, publications, and internet have been reviewed comprehensively. The Quran Translation of Thomas Cleary (Selected Surahs) have been thoroughly analyzed in detail. The contents of his book ("THE ESSENTIAL KORAN; The Heart of Islam" have been thoroughly analyzed including

- 1) The Views of Cleary about Islam and Quran, the circumstances of revelation of Quran, Arab History, and culture at the time of revelation
- 2) The selection of Surahs and mode or basis for such a selection and the rationale behind choosing these Surahs
- 3) The critical analysis of English text and errors omissions including a conceptual analysis regarding quality of Quran text translation

- **Review of Oriental English Translation (Thomas Cleary-1993)**

Following is the detailed review of English Translations of Quran by Thomas Cleary which contains introduction of this book and author's life and work. A brief review and precise critical analysis about different sections of the book, its content and author's ideology of Quran and Islam have been discussed.

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- **Review of Introduction Section of Book**

English language has been a source of propagation of Holy Quran. Although, it is mostly used by Oriental English translators, whose translations are biased, guided by the orientalist movement. However, the translation of Thomas Cleary appeared on the horizon of Oriental English translations as a breath of fresh air in 1993. The actual name of this translation is "THE ESSENTIAL KORAN; The Heart of Islam".

This translation is based on selected important Surahs of Holy Quran. Thomas Cleary has selected 39 Surahs from Quran for translation. Further the book includes sections like Table of contents, Introduction, Surah's translations, notes, and bibliography. The important concepts included in the book are critically reviewed to provide an in-depth insight on Thomas Cleary's translation. This book was published by Harper Collins Publishing Company in United States of America.¹²

- **Cleary's Views about Islam and Quran (Introduction Section):**

Cleary's views about Islam and Quran have been incorporated in the introduction section of his translation book. Cleary believes that Quran is the sacred book of the religion of Islam and Islam is the religion that advises submitting of one's will to God. Cleary elaborates that the selection of Surahs has been made to introduce non-Muslims to the charisma, glory, and grandeur of this sacred book of Quran.

Cleary explains that Quran is the book that has become more important with time. It may be more appealing to non-Muslims as it is an amalgamation of faith and reason. He specifically mentions that post-Christian secular mind may receive long awaited piece of advice through harmony of faith and reason taught by Quran. Islam does not ever ask for blind faith, but it allows to incorporate logic and reason for everything. It advises to observe nature, happenings, and incidents around us and then extract knowledge and evidence from it to construct or build reasoning.¹³

Cleary believes that people in West consider religion and science as two different and opposite things, but this conflict does not exist in Islam, which promotes science and logic placing emphasis on learning and gaining knowledge. This harmony of faith and reason helped civilization to construct a knowledge base in different fields including history and ancient

cultures. These Islamic knowledge bases developed by Islamic scholars/scientists/researchers were the actual support to drive the West out of ignorance and darkness. However, West and Europeans, unfortunately ignored Islam after getting out of ignorance. It was also the inability of European church to consider science and religion as opposites which was the underlying fact for this ignorance for centuries. Islam promoted science and knowledge in fields of social science, philosophy, and natural sciences.

Cleary believes that European church could not distinguish between sacred and secular. This opposition of science and religion has affected the whole world. The learned, knowledgeable, and thinking people including scientists are looking for solution to the problems created by divide between religion and science. However, Cleary explains that Quran is the solution to all these problems. The reason is that Quran accepts the search for knowledge and understand the importance of science and learning. Further, Quran is the book that also place emphasis on humility, ethics, conscience, and reverence along with scientific research for humanity to grow.¹⁴ However the humanity sometimes is not able to consume exponential growth and progress and forgets the reality of their existence. As it is stated in Quran that

كَلَّا إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِرَبِّهِ لَكَنَّاظٍ ﴿٦﴾ أَنْ رَاءَهُ اسْتَعْتَضَىٰ ﴿٧﴾

“Humankind does indeed go too far
In considering itself to be self-sufficient.”¹⁵

Further Cleary explains this verse in short notes as “Comparatively recent ideas of the world and universe as mechanical systems that humanity can alter with impunity and ultimately master reflect the truth of this Quranic description of human egotism.”

Here, we can see somewhat impression of great Islamic scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation of Quran in terms of theses pacific verses as elaborated below from which Cleary also benefitted.

Nay, but man doth
Transgress all bounds,
In that he looked
Upon himself as self-sufficient.¹⁶

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The secular people living in Europe who do not believe in religion may also benefit a great deal from Quran as elaborated by Cleary. If they don't want to consider religious knowledge and facts, there are so many other learning opportunities while reading the Quran for them.

The first and foremost benefit is that they will come to know about culture, mindset and ethical values of Muslims who are one-fifth or more of total population of the world. This will be beneficial being citizen of multi-religion and multi-ethnic world that we interact with, while we are living here. Peace is the key to development of humanity. After the fall of soviet communism, this fact is now more understandable. We will be tolerant towards Islam being non-Muslims if we read and understand Quran, which is the second benefit of reading this Holy book.¹⁷

Further, reading the Quran is more specifically beneficial to non-Muslims to understand the prejudice that they are commonly exposed to while being introduced to Islam. Reading Quran will allow us to construct true picture of Islam in our minds and counter the prejudice being conveyed to us against Islam. We need to understand the difference between factual reality of Islam and prejudiced western opinion for which Quran is the best source.¹⁸

Cleary's Elaboration on Quran as "The Book of Revelation" (Introduction Section)

The meaning of the word Quran are considered as "Recital" or "Reading". The Quran itself narrates that it contains revelations and it's a "word of God" sent on Prophet Mohammad as the Torah and Bible were sent to Moses and Jesus. The Quran confirms the validity of these previous revelation books, which were the predecessor of Quran as translated by Cleary as:

And we sent the book to you
With truth, conforming
The scripture before it
and safeguarding it.
So, judge between them
By what God has revealed.¹⁹

The message conveyed by Quran includes clarification and confirmation of messages of these previous revelation books. Quran is a Unique book of revelation that carries classical tradition of being propagated through a prophet and written in the light of full history of earlier Prophets and revelation books of religions of past. The history of humanity and even before has been covered by Quran. The message of earlier revelation books has been gathered in Quran from time immemorial. Any addition or deletion of verses in previous revelation books have been set right by Quran. That is why the Quran is called not only a reading or recital but also a reminder and a criterion. Cleary elaborates while quoting an Islamic scholar Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah.

“Quran repeats the messages of old revelation books like Gitta, Vedas, Buddha, and other Prophets as a reminder. Quran also adds to these messages to meet modern day social and religious requirements of humankind. The Quran teaches ethical values and concepts of social justice. It differentiates between truth and falsehood. It does not advise condemnation of other religions; however, it clarifies between hypocrisy and true faith.”²⁰

Cleary once again quotes the same Islamic scholar Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah explaining that “Quran is the Hakam, or it is the criteria to decide between Hindu & Hindu, Budh & Budh, Christian & Christian and it has successfully done that. The Quran adopts the practice of differentiating between followers of same religion instead of the religion themselves to avoid biasness religiously. If Quran has adopted the way of biasness and dogmatic sarcasm and prejudice, then it could not have become source of inspiration and guidance for all the humanity”.²¹

Cleary quotes another great scholar Idrees Ali Shah.

“Quran has a piece of advice for everyone like ancient Sufis believed that Quran is the book of Sufi teachings. The historians find history lessons in it. It contains advice for pagans and nominal Christian or Jews which an orthodox or rigid mind cannot understand. It is a great piece of psychological advice also”.²²

A great advantage of Quran is also that it invites us to understand our own existence in context of nature and universe. It simply makes us to better understand purpose of life.

The Background of Emergence of Quran (Introduction Section):

Cleary explains in the introduction of his translation that The Quran was revealed upon prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). Muhammad (P.B.U.H) was born in 570(C.E) in Mecca which was noble city for Arabs. There were different Arab clans living in different areas of Arab and one of the noblest clans was Quraish. The clan of Quraish was also the custodian to shrine of Mecca which was a sacred place. It was believed that Mecca was built by Prophet Ibrahim. Muhammad was orphaned at an early age. He developed a good reputation of trusted and wise young man till the age of twenty-five, and at that age, he married a businesswomen "Khadija" whom he worked for as a trader.²³

By the age of forty, Muhammad (P.B.U.H) established himself as a mature man of truthful and honest character. He used to go to a mountain cave (Hira) outside Mecca for meditation when he received his first revelation. He was fearful and went back home to his wife Khadija" informing her of the incident. She reminded him of his great virtues and assured that he was a good person and God will bless him. She also took him to her cousin who was a Christian. He listened to the verses of revelation from Muhammad and confirmed that it was a message of God as the similar message was also sent upon Jesus and Moses. The Islam was firstly embraced by immediate family members of Muhammad including a free slave "Zaid", his wife Khadija, his cousin Ali and shortly after them his longtime friend Abu Bakar²⁴.

The revelation stopped for a while after first one but continued again later. This new Muslim movement soon became popular in Makkah and its surroundings. The Islam challenged the theory of polytheism and Muhammad preached that there can be only one God. Islam became a great threat to power and politics of Quraish. Islam attracted slaves, converts from other religions and the poor who were victim of ignorance. The Quraish continued their torture on Muslims for ten years. Finally on the advice of Prophet Muhammad, Muslims migrated to Abyssinia where a Christian king was in rule. He listened to Muslims and protected them. The chiefs of Quraish tribe were so desperate that they attempted to assassinate Muhammad but remained unsuccessful. Finally, Mohammad had to escape from Mecca in 622 C.E to Medina and this is the year from where all the dates (Hijri) of Islamic Calendar are counted.²⁵

The prophet migrated to city of Medina and lived there but his enemies were after him. During a decade of his stay in Medina, Muhammad led Muslims to several wars, which they won by defeating large enemies outnumbering Muhammad's companions. Muslims won due to loyalty and devotion to Islam and not due to crushing military power. Muhammad made a pilgrimage to Mecca in seventh year of emigration. In the very next year, he entered Mecca with a huge number of Muslims and was not opposed by anyone. He cleared Ka'bah from idols and announced worship of only one God. He also preached practice of charity, fasting and prayers. Muhammad was a complete role model for all humanity in terms of religions, social and economic affairs of human life.

Classical Arabic as Language of Quran (Introduction Section)

Cleary opines that it is a well-known fact that Arabic verses cannot be completely translated into any other languages due to unique and comprehensive nature of Arabic language. The Arabic language is so rich in vocabulary, grammar and idioms as compared to all other language. Arabic language was already comprehensively developed and that's why it was chosen by God as language of Quran. The classical Arabic was the language of Quraish, who were guardian of Makkah city. It was already considered as Holy language and was used by sacred and high-class people of Mecca who believed to have been belonged to Adam and Eve. The only language that is one of the most historic and primitive language and shows signs of being constructed originally. The Arabic is built on the principles of Mathematics and no other language has this honor. The ideas being explained in Arabic seem to have been evolving logically around a stem.

Cleary explains that while translating the verses, it is not possible to convert a saturated and rich language like Arabic into English. He says that he must add notes to his translation to cover Arabic text in English language. Therefore, they may also be considered as parts of translation. Notes were necessary to make the reader understand the bases of Arabic text and its subsequent derivation in English.

Cleary Elaborates that a single word in Arabic can be used in many contexts. This is the beauty of Arabic language that one word used in different places is always in a different context. Cleary also quotes Imam Ghazali ²⁶ that "There is no repetition in Holy Quran as repetition refers to no further benefit, learning or new message which is not true in context of

Quran and its Arabic verses. Every verse of Quran conveys a different meaning keeping in view the context and circumstances. So, a single word can represent a bunch of concepts in different contexts in Arabic".²⁷

Cleary quotes Muslim scholar Seyyid Hussein Nasar who explained that: "Expression of Quranic text is very strong, and it attracts admiration from all readers. The language has become so rich, dominant, and powerful as soon as it became recipient of the message of God. The Example can be taken of a wave in the ocean that hits rocks on the shore and scatters into small water particles. Same in the case with Arabic, when used by God Himself, the Arabic became rich, colorful, poetic and mesmerizing as a language. The term "scatter" may be confusing to some of the people in west who does not know the Arabic and richness of its vocabulary to be used in different context at same time. However, if given proper logic and reasons everyone can understand the meaning of verses of Quran"²⁸.

Rational for Selection of Surahs from Quran (Introduction Section)

The verses of Quran are extremely rich and vigorous in meaning .it is sometimes difficult to understand for new reader who is westerner. So, Cleary believes that he has selected Surahs of Quran which will help new reader to understand the message of Quran through these Surahs that are of extreme importance in providing central theme of Quran. Cleary also points out to certain characteristics of English language that perform their role while translating Arabic text into English. First, Arabic language includes extension like classical Arabic, scared or standard Arabic whereas English language contains no such extensions or elements, we do not also find universal English neither there are any common literacy ethics in English. Another problem is that English does not provide rich vocabulary to intensify the attributes of God rather it uses generalized terminologies, whereas Arabic language provides variation as well as intensification while explaining attributes of God.²⁹

One other aspect of English language is that we do not find a suitable third person pronoun for referring to God or pointing to his blessings. However, Arabic does have rich expressions while referring to God. Further, the Arabic language provides richness to portray God in a prolific manner whereas the English language portrait of God may not be very attractive.

Therefore, new generations of Jews and Christian imagine God as an “Angry Old man” and feel no interest in religious teachings.

Moreover, third person pronoun in English may refer to masculine while in Arabic this issue of Masculine and feminine does not surface. So many women in their societies in west have not been attracted towards monotheism because of masculine image of God as introduced to them in west.³⁰

Cleary elaborates that he has used word “God” as third person pronoun in place of “HE or Him”. So, it may become easier for the western audience to understand the message. In Arabic, third person pronoun of “HUWA” and “HU” are used while referring to God. So, Cleary have hinted at replacing “HUWA” and “HU” with “God” or “truth” as third person pronoun while translating from Arabic to English. Therefore, he believes that while translating from one language to another, one must be careful about these things including use of proper referral terms, vocabulary, grammar, and context of the message. One must be conscious of the fact that power of references may not equalized in different language. The vocabulary or referral terms used in one language may not be as powerful as are being used in another. So, the translator must choose the reference vocabulary in other language as much closer as the one being used in original text. So, it’s of great importance that translator should first try to find out powerful referral terms which are equally strong to be used to refer towards the referent (God) for which pronoun is being used. Cleary explains that Quran has used so many referral terms to refer to God, however he believes that the word” GOD” will be more suitable as third person pronoun for “Allah”.³¹

It should also be observed that Quran uses different first person singular and plural pronouns to refer to God like (We/Our/Us) or sometimes (I/My/Me). The pronoun “You” has also been used by Quran to address God. So, while reading of Quran you can see this shifting of first, second and third-person pronoun in a short recitation from Quran or within a small span. Similarly, the pronoun “you or they” have also been used to address humanity in Quran. Here we observe the richness of Arabic language and divine power which made Arabic look like a miraculous language. The shifting of pronouns may be the most interesting phenomena in Quran’s Arabic verses.³²

The Six Aims of Quran by Imam Ghazali (Introduction Section)

Cleary further explains that the selection of surahs made by him in his translation is based upon "six aims" of Quran identified by Imam Ghazali. Cleary shortly elaborates on six aims of Quran in introductory section of his book as under.

1-Knowledge of God:

The knowledge of God encapsulates the attributes of God, the essence, miracles, and the work of God. Ghazali's aim was to make men better by leading them from a merely national acquiescence in the stere-typed creed of Islam to a real knowledge of God³³

***Jewels of Quran (Relevant Surahs):**

The surahs dealing with attributes of God are called "Jewels of Quran" by Ghazali.

2-Path of God:

The second aim defined by Imam Ghazali is the path of God. It is the path that refines your soul and removes the rust. So, the enlightening or light of God clearly reflects in a purified soul.

***Pearls of Quran (Relevant Surahs):**

Ghazali calls the relevant Surahs of the path of God as "Pearls of Quran".

***The Importance of 1st & 2nd Aim:**

Cleary discusses that Imam Ghazali has declared clearly regarding importance of 1st two aims. Ghazali believes that the Knowledge of God and path to God are most important aims of Quran. Cleary elaborates that he has selected "one-fifth" of total "Jewel Surahs" in Quran for this book. Similarly, he has also selected "one-fifth" of "Pearl Surahs" for translation from this book.³⁴

3-The Human Attainment to God:

The third aim is about the situation or condition of an individual at the time of attainment to God. This condition of spiritual fulfillment is represented or symbolized by a “Garden”. Further, Ghazali also discussed the concept of separation or alienation from God which is addressed by term “Spiritual bankruptcy”, and it is symbolized by “Hell” or Fire”. So, the Surahs explaining relation or attainment to God are discussed under third aim.

4-Travelling the Path of God:

The fourth aim represents the condition of people who travelled God’s path like great prophets or leaders. The Surahs under fourth aim also represents the condition of the people who deviated from the God’s path. So, by choosing to live or deviate Gods path, one gets the reward accordingly as either he falls in misery or gets priceless blessings.

5-Rejection of Truth and Self-Deceit:

The fifth aim includes Surahs that are about people who rejected the truth. They built evidence on basis of falsehood and self-deceit to deny the true message of God. These Surahs beautifully explains hypocrisy, suspicion, allegations, and unproven assumption of people rejecting the truth.

6-Essntial Requirements of Stages of Journey to God:

The Surahs discussed under sixth aim provide guidance for journey to path of God and requirements at each stage. These Surahs explain connection between society and life, and the life of one’s spirit. It explains how to attain enlightening with balance of self and the material world.³⁵

Translation Arrangements of the book: (English Translation of Verses)

In the last Para of the introduction section of his book, Cleary explains that he has kept the division of surahs as is represented in Quran’s verses. For instance, Cleary translated first verse of Surah Al- Fātiḥa in English as under.

“All Praise belong to God,

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Lord of all worlds,

The Compassionate, the Merciful,

Ruler of Judgment Day,

It is you that we worship,
And to you we appeal for help,

Show us the straightway,

The way of those you have graced,
Not of those on whom is your wrath,
Nor of those who wander astray."³⁶

We can observe that Cleary has kept the division of verses same as in original Arabic text of Quran rather than joining them or making amalgamation. Further, the English translation of verses have been arranged to keep smooth recitation flow and understanding of the reader. Cleary says that he has also used original Arabic diction wherever was possible. Cleary also mentions that he has designed this version of selection of Surahs in English to be read out loud for understanding and absorption. As it is a great characteristic of Quran that it should be read with attention and great care to understand and observe the message and instead of carelessly skimming through it. So, the recitation with peace, calm and composure will yield great results to intelligent readers³⁷.

Critical Analysis Summary of Thomas Cleary's Quran Translation

Since the content of this selected Surah translation book has been briefly reviewed. There are some very critical aspects that a reader must know before reading the book. These critical aspects are detailed as under.

1. In the introduction, Cleary has mentioned regarding selection of Surahs for this translation based on six aims of Imam Al-Ghazali. However, he does not mention that he also further shortened Surahs by translating their selected verses. He also does not provide any base for selection of these verses from the chosen Surahs for English translation. For instance, he begins the translation of one of the selected Surah (Al-Maida /The Table) from verse no 44. He does

- not point out the theoretical background for not translating verses (1-44) of same Surah.
2. It is important to know that this book conveys a message of Quran which depends upon 39 Surahs only out of one hundred and fourteen Surahs. We know that every Surah of Quran contains an important and unique message. So, it's also critical to convey complete messages of Quran to westerner /non-Muslims to whom he intends to impart teachings of Quran.
 3. IN the translation section, Cleary has used rich vocabulary and poetic diction which is evidence of his knowledge command over English language. However, the readers in general are not academic scholar translators or authors. So, it may not be easy for an ordinary reader to comprehend this complex English Language translation.
 4. It is a known fact that Arabic text of Quran cannot be completely translated in any other language which is also the case in English. Although Cleary has crafted this selected surah translation well in translation section. However, he has made some mistakes while translating attributes of God into English. For example, he translated Al-Rehman and Al-Rahim as the beneficent, the compassionate respectively instead of the most compassionate and the most merciful,³⁸ as translated by great Islamic Scholar Mohar Ali. Further, Cleary translate verse 14 of Surah (al-A'lā/ The Highest)

قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَنْ تَزَكَّى

“Happy are those, who have purified themselves”³⁹

Whereas a great scholar Pickthall has translated it as

“He is **successful** who growth”⁴⁰

- Cleary has used the word “happy” instead of “successful” which does not provide complete understanding and meaning of the verse.
5. In the Notes Section, Cleary has used notes to support his English translation of chosen verses. There are two important factor which should be mentioned here. Firstly, Cleary has not provided short notes of all the verses, he has translated. For example, he translated verse (1-19) of Surah (The Highest /Al-Alaa) but provided notes of only two verses (13&19). It raises the Question that on what purpose Cleary has chosen verses to be supported by short notes. Secondly providing short notes to verses may generalize the meaning of a specific verse revealed in a specific content.

6. In the Introduction section, Cleary have based his translation on six aims of message of Quran narrated by Imam Ghazali. However, Cleary did not brief about Imam Ghazali's persona and accomplishments as a great Islamic scholar. So, a western/ non-Muslim ordinary reader who does not know Ghazali may not consider his work a strong base for Surah selection keeping in view the English translation purpose.
7. Cleary has also explained that he has used Arabic words from Quran text where he did not find a suitable English vocabulary replacement while translating. This may create complications for ordinary reader who does not know Arabic.
8. Cleary did not also mention individual and places names while elaborating on the emergence of Prophet and Quran in the introduction section of book. For example, he mentioned "Waraqah bin Nawfal" as "Khadījah's cousin" instead of using his real name. It may be confusing for the people not having knowledge of History
9. While having a look at the references section, Cleary has mentioned Oriental scholar Naseem Joseph Dawood, whose translation is considered debatable due to misinterpretation/ mistakes /omissions. This may raise a doubt that Cleary may have made mistakes/omissions in his selected Surah translation by following N.J. Dawood. Further, Naseem Joseph Dawood although admits the supremacy of Quran but declares it a controversial issue to consider Quran as God's word or Muhammad as prophet of God which is evident from his following words; "Finally, I should point out that in the forgoing paragraph, I have endeavored to confine myself to a bear outline of the facts regarding the genesis of Koran and its subsequent preservation, without touching on such controversial issues as the nature of Mohammed's Prophet hood and its theological sources. It is the work itself that matters; and the intelligent reader, if allowed to approach it with the free and unprejudiced mind, should be able to form his own opinions."⁴¹

Conclusion

We can conclude that content and purpose of Cleary's translation apparently seems an honest effort in terms of translating the Holy Quran from Arabic to English. His knowledge of the subject and language makes him an extraordinary translator. However, his choice of English vocabulary to translate classical Arabic text may not be extraordinary but still he made

a great effort to author a book on selected surah translation of Holy Quran. His translation doesn't seem to be a part of Orientalist conspiracies as compared to his predecessor who deliberately distorted the Message of Quran while translating it into English. In fact, Cleary has insisted that message of Quran is essential for peace and harmony of the entire world. So, one must read this selected surah translation of Cleary keeping in view the critical aspect reviewed above.

Endnotes

¹ Thomas Cleary was born in 1949. He lived in Oakland California; He has a P.H.D in East Asian Languages and civilization. He completed his study from Harvard University, University of California Berkeley. He specialized in Eastern philosophy. He is an Author and translator by occupation. He is a prolific author and translator of more than 80 books. These books are related to Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and Muslim classics. He has translated books of Pali, Sanskrit, Arabic, Japanese, classical Chinese, and old Irish into English. Names of some of his books are mentioned hereunder.

1. The Wisdom of the prophet: The sayings of Muhammad
2. The Quran: A new translation
3. The Essential Koran: The heart of Islam.

In one of his interviews, he said to Sonchi.com "My work is not connected to any personal, political, or Sectarian associations or alliances, (Interview with Thomas Cleary by Daniel Burton - Rose, Monday 16 november, 2009.).

<http://sonshi.com/cleary.html> (retrieved Sunday, May 2, 2021)

²Rodwell, M.A, EL KORAN; The Quran translated from the Arabic, The Surahs arranged in chronological order with notes and index, Second Edition, Bernard Quaritch, London, 1876, preface, p.11,12 and14

³ Edward W. Said, Orientalism western conceptions of the Orient, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1978, p.2

⁴ Edward W. Said, Orientalism western conceptions of the Orient, UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1978, p.2

⁵ Wright, Thomas, Early Christianity, London, 1940, p: 109.

⁶Hatti, P.K, History of the Arabs, London, Macmillan, 1968, p: 47,147

⁷ Gibbon, Edward, The Decline and fall of Roman Empire, New York, The Modern Library Edition, Vol: ii, p:680

⁸ Kirby, Jesus or Christianity, New York, 1929, p: 97.

⁹ Dr. Farhat Naseem Alvi, A Review of Book" The Crises of Islam" by Banned Lewis, Al-Adwa, Dec 2012, 27-37, p-295

¹⁰Bell Richard, THE QURAN, Translated with a critical re-arrangement of Surahs, T and T Clark, Edinburgh ,1937, Vol.1, preface, P. v

¹¹ James Kritzeck, *Peter the Venerable & Islam*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, America, 1964, Page.51-66

¹² Thomas Cleary, *The essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins publisher, New York ,1993

¹³ *Ibid*, p. vii

¹⁴ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins publisher, New York ,1993, p.148

¹⁵ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, (chapter Recite, 96: verse 6-7), Harper Collins Publisher, New York ,1993, p.148

¹⁶ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *An English Interpretation of The Holy Quran*, (chapter Al-'Alaq, 96: verse 6-7), S.H Muhammad Ashraf, Publishers-Exporter Lahore, Pakistan, 2010, p.1016

¹⁷ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York ,1993, p. viii

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. viii

¹⁹ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam* (chapter The Table 5: verse 46-50) p.45

²⁰ Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah, *Islamic Sufism*, Samuel Weiser publisher, New York, 1971, p.41

²¹ *Ibid*.p.43

²² Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, Doubleday, New York, and London, 1964, p.441

²³ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York ,1993, p. xi

²⁴ *Ibid* p. xi

²⁵ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, p. xii

²⁶ Here it is important to write some lines about. Abu Hamid Muhammad al Gazali al-Tusi (c.1056 -1111). He was one of the most prominent and influential philosophers, theologians, jurists, and mystic of Sunni Islam. In his time the

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continued progress of the Isma'ili's (connected with the famous assassins) the spread of irreligious doctrines and the increasing religious indifference of the masses not only filled Ghazali and Sufi friends with profound grief but determined them to stem the evil with the whole force of their philosophy, the ardour of vital conviction, and the authority of noble example. Some of his important books are named as: 1- *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-Dīn*, 2- *Al Ghazali on knowing our self and God*, 3- *The Alchemy of Happiness*, 4- *The confessions of Al-Ghazali*.

²⁷ Muhammad Abdul Quasem, *The Jewels of the Quran: Al-Ghazali's theory*, Kegan Paul International, London, 1984 p.23 et passim. (This is the translation from Ghazali's (*Jawāhir al Quran*). In the first part, Imam Ghazali describes the way to understand the Quran, its principal aims and how all branches of Islamic knowledge are based on it. The second part contains more than 15000 verses from the Quran which Imam Ghazali divides into rubies relate to our cognitive function and refer to the essence of God, his Names, Qualities and Acts. The verses he describes as pearls refer us to the straight path and the divine urging us to follow it. The pearls engage our practical function).

²⁸ Seyyid Hussein Nasar, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* Allen & Unwin publishers, London, 1988, pp.47-48

²⁹ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York, 1993, p. xv

³⁰ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York, 1993, p. xv

³¹ *Ibid*, p. xvi

³² Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York, 1993, p. xvi

³³ Abu Hamid Muhammad al Ghazali, *Kimya-e-Sadat, The Alchemy of Happiness*, Ghazali. Islamic Book Trust, London 1909, p. xv

³⁴ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York, 1993, p. xvii

³⁵ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, New York, 1993, p. xvii

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. xi

³⁷ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins Publisher, (chapter The Opening ,1: verse 1-7) New York ,1993, p. xviii

³⁸ M. Mohar Ali, *The Quran, and the Orientalist*. Norwich, UK, Jamiat Iḥyā' Al-Sunah,2004, pp.332-334

³⁹ Thomas Cleary, *The Essential Quran, the Heart of Islam*, Harper Collins publisher, New York ,1993, p.138

⁴⁰ Pickthall Marmaduke, *The Holy Quran with English Translation*, edition 8, Qudrat Ullah & Co. Lahore, Pakistan, p.843

⁴¹ Dawood, N.J, *THE KORAN*, Penguin Books ,1956, Willingham, April, Introduction p.12

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