

Online Paratexts and the Challenges of Translators' Visibility: a case of women translators of the Quran

Rim Hassen

University of Cambridge, U.K.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to assess the visibility or invisibility of women translators of the Quran and to determine which influential elements have been stressed and highlighted in the online paratexts, in order to generate the target reader's interest and to attract her/him towards the first English translations of the Quran by individual women. I will argue that there is a deep divide between the online paratextual elements surrounding translations produced by women living in Muslim-majority countries and those living in the West. A second important thread is to explain the reasons for this divide and expose the various politics, ideologies and powers that have, in my view, played a key role in shaping the content of the online paratexts.

KEYWORDS: gender, online product descriptions, Orientalism, paratexts, Quran translations, women translators.

Introduction

Lawrence Venuti (1986; 1995) coined the expression 'the translator's invisibility' to refer to the translator's position and activity in contemporary Anglo-American culture. He suggested that if a text is successfully domesticated or acculturated, the translator becomes invisible.¹ In addition to reflecting the transparency of the text, the translator's invisibility places the author as the *only* original creator. Many translation theorists have, however, challenged this notion of authorship by claiming equal creative rights for the translator. For instance, feminist translators' emphasis on their role as co-authors and co-creators presented a direct challenge to the translator's invisibility and drew attention to the "translator-effect" – the mark each translator, as a gendered individual, leaves on his/her work (von Flotow 1997:35). To ensure their visibility, feminist translators have used various tools, including paratextual elements such as prefaces, introductions, annotations and so on.

The aim of this paper is to explore the concept of the translator's visibility/invisibility in the context of women's translations of the Quran² by examining the online paratextual elements surrounding their works. In this paper, the term visibility is used to refer to the translator's attempts to assert her feminine identity by adopting gender-conscious methods and strategies. This would involve highlighting her feminine voice and challenging the dominant patriarchal discourse. In contrast, the term invisibility is used here to refer to the concealment of the translator's feminine identity and the absence of a distinctive feminine voice. In addition to exploring the visibility or invisibility of women translators of the Quran, this paper also aims to determine which influential elements have been stressed in order to generate the target reader's interest and to attract him/her towards the first English translations of the Quran by

¹ Venuti (1986, 1995) argued that in order to achieve a transparent translation and thus ensure his/her invisibility, the translator will have to adopt domesticating strategies by bringing the foreign text within the literary and linguistic norms of the target culture.

² Because there are various transliteration systems for Arabic, some words are spelled differently in this paper. For instance the term 'Quran' is also transcribed as 'Qur'an' and 'Koran', 'Mohammed' as 'Muhammad' and *hadith* as *hadeeth*.

individual women,³ especially given that the task of translating the Quran into English has been dominated by men for four hundred years.

I will argue that the contents of paratexts introduce two types of women translators: 'invisible' as opposed to 'visible'. I will also argue that the examined paratexts expose a deep divide between translators living in the United States and those living in Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia and Iran). In the final part of the paper, I will draw on media and other responses to the translation in an attempt to explain the reasons behind this divide and discuss the price women translators of the Quran have to pay for their visibility/invisibility. First, it is necessary to introduce the four women who translated the Quran into English.

English translations of the Quran by women

The first published English translation of the Quran by a woman is probably *The Quran, Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meaning* by Umm Muhammad or Aminah Assami. Her translation was published in 1997 by Dar Abul-Qasim⁴ under the pseudonym of Saheeh International. Umm Muhammad is an American who converted to Islam while following an intensive study of Arabic in Syria. Later she moved to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where she continues to teach religious subjects. There is little information available on her life and her works before she converted to Islam, but according to her website,⁵ Umm Muhammad has authored and revised more than seventy Islamic books in English, mostly for Dar Abul-Qasim. According to the same website, the pseudonym 'Saheeh International,' used to refer to Umm Muhammad, is also the name of a group of three American female converts to Islam who joined together in 1989 to edit Islamic literature in English submitted by authors to Dar Abul-Qasim. They later began to produce their own works. This group includes Umm Muhammad (translator and author), Amatullah J. Bantley⁶ (director) and Mary M. Kennedy⁷ (English editor).

The second woman to translate the Quran into English is Camille Adams Helminski and is titled *The Light of Dawn*. Published in 1999, this partial translation contains 365 selected verses from the Quran for daily meditation. Like Umm Muhammad, Camille Adams Helminski is an American convert to Islam. As a writer, her work is interested in the history of women in Sufism, and in 2003, published a book titled *Women of Sufism, A Hidden Treasure* which focuses on the role women played in Sufi history and stresses the equality of women and men in the Quran (Helminski 2003:xv).

³ In addition to the four women translators discussed in this paper, there are five women who have translated the Quran in collaboration with male translators (see Zidan and Zidan 1991; Ahmed and Ahmed 1994; Omar and Omar 1997; Bewley and Bewley 1999; and Yuksel et al. 2007). In this paper I deliberately focused on the four works exclusively translated by women, because the male-female collaboration could have various significances. On the one hand, it could signal the gender-egalitarian position of Islam, where men and women have equal rights to engage in the reading, interpretation and translation of the Sacred Text of Islam. On the other hand, this collaboration could confirm patriarchal gender roles, where women need approval and endorsement from a male member to publish their work. Moreover, in the team translations it is difficult to determine whether gender-related decisions were taken by the male or the female translator.

⁴ The place of publication is not given, but the publisher Dar Abul-Qasim is based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

⁵ <http://www.saheehinternational.com/> (accessed 25 January 2008)

⁶ Amatullah J. Bantley converted to Islam and moved to Jeddah in her early twenties. In 1995, she founded 'The Path to Knowledge', which held exclusive distributorship for Dar Abul-Qasim publications in the USA for five years.

⁷ Mary M. Kennedy converted to Islam and moved to Jeddah in early 1987. In 2009, she returned to continue her work with Saheeh International after a leave of several years.

The third English translation of the Quran by a woman is titled *The Holy Quran: Translation with Commentary*; it was undertaken by Taheereh Saffarzadeh and published in 2001, in Iran. Saffarzadeh (1936-2008) the first and only Iranian woman to translate the Quran into English was an Iranian poet - she published fourteen volumes of poems - writer, university lecturer and translator. As translation theorist, Saffarzadeh is the author of ten books on the principles of translation regarding literary, scientific and Quranic texts, including *Translating the Fundamental Meanings of the Holy Quran* (1999) on English and Persian translations of the Quran.

The final and the most recent English version of the Quran by a woman, *The Sublime Quran*, was translated by Laleh Bakhtiar and published in 2007, in the United States. Bakhtiar is an American author and translator, who converted to Islam during her stay in Iran while taking classes on Islamic culture and civilization taught in English at Tehran University. She is the author of many books on Islamic unity, architecture, psychology and moral healing, and has also translated into English over thirty books on Islam and Islamic beliefs. Like Helminski, Bakhtiar devotes much of her work to the history of Muslim women. In 1998, she published a book in collaboration with Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, titled *Encyclopaedia of Muhammad's Women Companions and the Traditions They Related*.

This brief introduction reveals that women translators of the Quran live/d and work/ed in countries in which different denominations of Islam are practiced, such as Sunni (Saudi Arabia), Shia (Iran) and Sufism (United States). The fact that they are all Muslims distinguishes them from their male counterparts who include Muslims and non-Muslim translators. Moreover, they are divided between two geographical, cultural and religious zones: namely the United States and Muslim majority countries, which could influence how they frame their translations through their paratexts.

Women's translations of the Quran and online paratexts

The Internet is increasingly one of the key tools for enabling readers to access and exchange views and information about texts and authors. It is also becoming one of the major sites for purchasing books. To help readers make their choice, online bookstores usually accompany a product with a short synopsis offering a brief overview on the text's content. Because these short texts are designed to ensure the product's marketability, they have the capacity to frame and package a text in a specific way in order to target specific readers and convey a specific message. Online sources fulfill many of the primary functions Genette attributes to paratexts (1997), such as attracting readers, drawing them toward and into the book and providing information on the translator and his/her work that is often unavailable in the work itself. Moreover, because they allow readers to look "inside and outside the text", online sources fit perfectly within Genette's category of epitext, which consists of all additional texts supporting a specific book such as interviews, letters, reviews and so on (1997:2, 5).

The online sources discussed in this paper, consisting mainly of excerpts from product descriptions, have been retrieved from online bookstores, publishers' websites and sources designed for translators. Given the wide range of online bookstores selling English translations of the Quran, I will limit my study to the most popular such as Amazon.com and specialised Islamic bookstores such as Islamicbookstore.com, Halalbooks.com and Kitaabun.com. In examining the online sources, I will focus on what Genette defines as the 'factual paratext', which "consists of a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received" (1997:7). One of Genette's examples is the gender of the author, which, in his view, has the potential to

influence the reader's reception of a given text. Genette draws attention to the effect the author's gender could have on the reception of his/her work, by raising an interesting question, namely, do "we ever read 'a novel by a woman' exactly as we read 'a novel' plain and simple, that is, a novel by a man?" (ibid.). This leads us to the question of whether the translator's feminine gender is a significant element in the packaging and framing of her work. And if not, what other elements are used to package and introduce these translations? Before answering this question, it is important to point out that the paratexts' contents and form are rarely decided uniquely by translators. There are other decision makers, such as publishers, editors and various institutions, who play a key role in influencing and shaping the paratexts of a given translation. At each of these stages, information, context and references can be negotiated, suppressed and even censored. Because the points of intervention occupied by the translator, the publishers and other agents cannot always be identified, in this paper I will focus on the four women translators, whom I introduced in the previous section.

Umm Muhammad's translation is probably the first English translation of the Quran by a woman to be marketed online. Readers can find her work in various online bookstores including Amazon.com, Kitaabun.com and Islamicbookstore.com under the pseudonym of 'Saheeh International.' Interestingly, online paratexts accompanying her translation rarely contain any information about the translator herself. For instance, this is how Kitaabun.com presents and describes Umm Muhammad's rendition:

This acclaimed translation of the meanings of the Holy Quran has set new standards of readability and accuracy, for the benefit of everyone needing a resource of the Quran in English. Readers will appreciate the clear, modern English, the smooth flow of sentences, and the concise footnotes which give necessary information but allow uninterrupted reading of the main text. The scholars and translators of *Saheeh International* have paid careful attention to authentic sources of *hadeeth* and *tafsir* and have made comparisons with previous classic English translations. The result is a highly accessible and reliable work that can be used by anyone wanting to study the authentic meanings of the Holy Quran.⁸

Umm Muhammad's name is not mentioned in the above product description. The information that her work was undertaken by a group of "scholars and translators" not only conceals her feminine identity but also omits the fact that Umm Muhammad's collaborators are all women. Because various agents are involved in the creation of the paratexts, it is very difficult to determine whether Umm Muhammad chose to hide her identity, or if this was imposed on her. While the translator's identity is suppressed, other elements such as conformity with classical Islamic religious texts, *hadith*⁹ and *tafsir*¹⁰ are highlighted. Equally emphasised are the clarity, fluency and accuracy of the translation.

These selected elements are also stressed in another product description placed on Islamicbookstore.com, in which it is stated that:

⁸ http://kitaabun.com/shopping3/product_info.php?products_id=403 (accessed 20 January 2008)

⁹ The *hadith* refers to statements attributed to the Prophet Mohammed, which were transmitted orally through many Muslim figures, before being finally written down by male Muslim scholars.

¹⁰ The *tafsir* or exegesis deals with different aspects of studying the Quran including the grammar, syntactic analysis, and rhetoric of the Quran.

Saheeh International checked many previous translations verse by verse against accepted Arabic *tafseer* and revised the wording accordingly in clear, contemporary English. This is a well-regarded English translation, often advertised and distributed via *Al Jumuah Magazine*.¹¹

In addition to emphasizing the accuracy of the work and its reliance on traditional Islamic religious sources, this short synopsis reveals a key detail, which links Umm Muhammad's translation and *Al Jumuah Magazine*, a monthly Islamic knowledge-based magazine targeting Muslims in the West. With an estimated global readership of 100,000, this magazine is funded by *Al-Muntada al-Islami* Trust, a London-based charity that defines itself as "a mainstream Islamic organisation following the understanding and principles of *Ahl-us-Sunnah*¹² *wal-Jamah* [followers of the *sunnah*]" and is guided in its work by "respected scholars (*ulema*)".¹³ An endorsement by a conservative religious institution gives Umm Muhammad's translation more credibility. These selected elements, however, present Umm Muhammad as an invisible translator, whose own voice is erased in order to stress the importance of classical religious sources and the accuracy of the translation.

Interestingly, similar elements are highlighted in Saffarzadeh's translation (2001), the only work of the four discussed in this paper that has limited availability in most online bookstores. Although it has been in circulation since 2006, this translation has only just appeared on Amazon.com. The product description, placed in the Editorial Review section, is very short and concise:

Beautiful book. The Quran translated by Taheereh Saffarzadeh. A must for those who want to have a good English *mirror* translation of the Quran.¹⁴ (my emphasis)

The term 'mirror' suggests a word for word, a faithful and an accurate approach to the source text, which in turn suggests a minimum level of individual interpretation by the translator. Even though Saffarzadeh's name is clearly mentioned in the product description, this does not ensure her visibility as a woman translator since the majority of readers in English speaking countries are unfamiliar with Persian names and may not be able to immediately understand that the name refers to a female translator. What is also significant is that, even though Saffarzadeh is the first and probably the only Iranian woman to have translated the Quran into English, this information is not mentioned in the product description. Saffarzadeh's invisibility becomes more evident when we compare the content of her product description with that of Helminski's and Bakhtiar's, where we discover a completely different style.

On her publisher's website, Helminski is introduced as the "first woman to translate a substantial portion of the Quran into English".¹⁵ Her work is then described as follows:

¹¹ <http://www.islamicbookstore.com/b5269.html> (accessed 25 May 2008)

¹² The *sunnah* is one of the key Islamic supporting texts, which were developed after the Prophet's death in order to set up guidelines on how to interpret the Quran. The *sunnah* consists of various narratives about the Prophet Mohammad's life and of statements attributed to him (*hadith*).

¹³ http://www.almuntadatrust.org/home/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=25&Itemid=40 (accessed 25 May 2008)

¹⁴ http://www.Amazon.com/Holy-Quran-English-Translation-Commentary/dp/9648317011/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1274453483&sr=1-3 (accessed 12 June 2008)

¹⁵ http://www.wisemuslimwomen.org/muslimwomen/bio/camille_adams_helminski/ (accessed 12 January 2008)

The Light of Dawn is a daybook of inspiration composed of some of the most essential verses taken from all 114 chapters of the Quran offered in a fresh, lyrical, and gender-inclusive translation.¹⁶

In various online bookstores such as Amazon.com and Newhalalbooks.com similar points are highlighted. Readers are informed in the following short synopsis that:

These selections from the Quran—featuring gender-inclusive language—will appeal to non-Muslims and students of comparative religion as well as practicing Muslims and Sufis.¹⁷

Interestingly, in the product descriptions introducing Helminski's translation there is no mention of authenticity, accuracy or conformity with classical Islamic religious texts. There is also no reference to any Islamic religious institution supporting or endorsing her work, as is the case with Umm Muhammad. Instead, the product descriptions stress the translator's feminine gender and her use of gender-inclusive language. The focus on these selected elements stresses the translator's visibility and promotes her gendered position. Similar selected elements are highlighted in the online paratexts introducing Laleh Bakhtiar's translation. This is how 'Islamcity.com' introduces her work:

This is the first edition of the Quran (Koran) translated by an American woman. This modern, inclusive translation refutes past translations that have been used to justify violence against women. The translation was undertaken by Dr Laleh Bakhtiar, Lecturer on Islam at the Lutheran Theological Seminary connected to the University of Chicago. She has translated 25 books and written 20 on Islam and Sufism. The hallmark of this translation is its modern and inclusive language.¹⁸

The same description could also be found in 'authorssden.com', which adds that:

Dr Bakhtiar has also challenged the translation of the Arab word *idrib* traditionally translated as "beat" and often used as justification for abuse of Muslim women. She sees multiple possible translations of *idrib* and has developed a theological argument that refutes the use of "beat" as the accurate translation for the famed passage 4:34 in the Quran that has historically justified such violence.¹⁹

The key details emphasized in the above product descriptions are the translator's gender, nationality and her new interpretation of the word *idrib*. Like Helminski, Bakhtiar is also introduced as a woman, in this case the "first American woman to translate the Quran into English", which suggests both a feminine and a Western perspective. Furthermore the clear emphasis on her new translation of the Arabic word *idrib* reveals that the translator not only seeks to assert her own distinctive voice, but that she openly challenges previous and existing interpretations approved by Islamic religious authorities. This highlights the difference

¹⁶ <http://www.sufism.org/books/lightdawn.html> (accessed 12 January 2008)

¹⁷ <http://www.Amazon.co.uk/Light-Dawn-Daily-Readings-Quran/dp/1570625972> (accessed 10 January 2008)

¹⁸ https://www.islamcity.com/bazar/action.lasso.asp?PageCurrent=8&-db=Bazaar&-lay=Product&-format=detail.asp&-op=eq&Buy_Flag=X&-op=cn&search=qf_QETO&-Max=1&-sortorder=descending&-sortfield=feature&-find (accessed 25 May 2012)

¹⁹ <http://www.authorsden.com/visit/viewwork.asp?id=33169> (accessed 17 May 2012)

between the selected elements introducing/framing translations by Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh on the one hand, and Helminski and Bakhtiar on the other. It also raises questions such as: why is the translator's feminine gender suppressed/concealed in some product descriptions and highlighted in others? And how might their invisibility/visibility affect and define the reception of their translations?

Women Quran translators' visibility/invisibility: reasons and implications

The paratexts of women's translations of the Quran introduce two types of female translators, 'visible' as opposed to 'invisible'. Their different selected elements place their translations in two contrasting frames: one that promotes the conservative Islamic discourse and one that seems to challenge it. Because this divide is consistent with the geographical location, we need to consider the translators' socio-cultural and ideological environment as one of the main reasons for their contrasting approaches to the paratexts. Translators, like all individuals, are influenced by their socio-cultural surroundings, and are therefore subject to constraints and norms dictated by their societies (Hermans 1985; Lefevere 1992). This means that translators performing under different conditions often adopt different strategies, and ultimately come up with different products (Toury 1995). Moreover, as pointed out by Toury:

'translatorship' amounts first and foremost to being able to *play a social role*, i.e., to fulfill a function allotted by a community – to the activity, its practitioners and/or their products – in a way which is deemed appropriate in its own terms of reference. The acquisition of a set of norms for determining the suitability of that kind of behavior, and for maneuvering between all the factors which may constrain it, is therefore a prerequisite for becoming a translator within a cultural environment (1995:53).

Consequently, Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh, who live/d and work/ed in conservative Muslim countries, might have chosen to remain 'invisible' in the online paratexts, in order to fulfill their social role.

This is also noticeable in the translated texts themselves, where both translators have attempted to remain as close as possible to the source text. For instance, while Helminski and Bakhtiar use inclusive language, Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh make no attempts to balance or to challenge conventional language use. On the contrary, they seem to choose male-centred translations of key words such as 'father,' 'son' and 'man,' which to today's readers could give the impression that the Quran is essentially a patriarchal text. In the following examples (chapter 91), for instance, there are clearly two different tendencies: Umm Muhammad (Example 1) and Saffarzadeh (Example 2) use male-centered language, while Helminski (Example 3) and Bakhtiar (Example 4) consistently avoid exclusionary terms:

- (1) I swear by this city [i.e., Makkah]
And you, [O Muhammad] are free of restriction in this city
And [by] ***the father* and that which was born of [him]***
We have certainly created ***man*** into hardship.
* Said to be Adam. (Saheeh International 1995: 886).

(2) I swear by this [Makkah] City
And you are native of this city
And the ***Father and the Son****
Verily, We created ***man*** [Adam] in
The space [somewhere between the sky and the earth]
Does man think that Allah the One [the Ahad] has no power over him?
* Ibrahim and Ismail who built the Sacred House of Ka'bah in Makkah City by
Allah's command (Saffarzadeh 2001: 1164).

(3) I call to witness this land
In which you are free to dwell
And the bond between ***parent and child***
Truly, we have created the ***human being*** to labor and struggle
Does he think that no one has power over him (Helminski 2000: 196).

(4) No! I swear by this land;
You are a lodger in this land;
By one who was your ***parent***,
And was procreated
Truly We created the ***human being*** in trouble.
What? Assumes he that no one has power over him? (Bakhtiar 2007: 697).

The online paratextual descriptions of Umm Muhammad's and Saffarzadeh's translations as well as their linguistic choices, as seen in this example, reflect the conservative Islamic view of femininity, where women have to remain in the private sphere. Their invisibility in the paratexts (and the invisibility of women in the text itself) arguably consolidates the power and authority of the dominant conservative discourse.

Moreover, since Islamic religious institutions consider the *sunnah* and *tafsir* as paramount in Quran translation, Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh had to stress the importance of these classical religious texts. In 1925, Sheikh Hasanayn Makhluf, former Mufti of Egypt, wrote a treatise where he distinguishes three categories of translation: (1) equal literal translation, (2) unequal literal translation and (3) interpretative translation. He defines equal literal translation as "word for word translation", where every translated word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph in the target text should be identical to the original in meaning, grammatical composition, structure style and rhetoric. The second type "unequal literal translation," is defined as the translator's attempt to replace each word with its equivalent in the target language where possible. The third is not a direct translation of the Quranic text itself, but a translation of its interpretation. He then concludes that the first two types of translation are impossible and inadequate in the case of the Quran. Interpretative translation is only legitimate if the commentaries are provided by authoritative Quran interpreters²⁰ and based on the *sunnah* and *tafsir*. Thus, emphasis in the online paratexts on these authoritative texts positions the translations of Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh within the accepted, conservative norms of the discourse.

Helminski and Bakhtiar on the other hand, who live in the United States, did not have to comply with these rules and regulations. They both overlooked religious requirements and

²⁰ Authoritative Quran interpreters are Muslim scholars who are recognised by Islamic religious institutions, such as Al-Azhar University (Egypt), as authorities in Quran interpretation. They often rely on medieval exegesis and explanations from Al-Tabari, Al-Qurtubi, and from Sahih Al-Bukhari.

focused mainly on their own visibility as women translators. This is also noticeable in their prefaces and introductions as well as in the translated texts. Helminski, for instance, takes various measures, including the use of footnotes and gender inclusive language, to make the feminine visible in language and to reduce the patriarchal tone of the target text. For instance, this is how Helminski translates verse 6:102:

Such is God, your Sustainer: there is no god but **Hu**,²¹
 the Creator of everything: then worship **Him/Her** alone –
 for it is **He/She** who has everything in **His/Her** care.
 No vision can encompass **Him/Her**,
 but **He/She** encompasses all human vision:
 for **He/She** alone is Subtle Beyond Comprehension, All-Aware.
 Means of insight have now come to you
 from your Sustainer through his divine Message.
 Whoever, then chooses to see,
 does so for the benefit of his/her own soul;
 and whoever chooses to remain blind,
 does so to his/her own harm. (Helminski 2000: 27)

In addition to introducing the pronoun *Hu*, Helminski uses the combination ‘He/She’ to refer to the Deity and alternates between these pronouns without any apparent logic or reason - it is difficult to know if this is related to the context or the meaning of the verse - except that the pronoun *Hu* is used as an equivalent translation of the Arabic term ‘*Huwa*’ (He). As Plaskow points out, in order to re-establish an egalitarian image of the Deity, many feminists have adopted an aggressive program for replacing masculine pronouns for God with gender neutral or even explicitly feminine forms: God is now referred to as ‘She,’ ‘She/He,’ ‘S/He,’ or by alternating ‘He’ and ‘She’ in different paragraphs (1990:141-2). Although - and maybe even *because* - this strategy does not allow for a fluent reading of the translation, the use of ‘He/She’ to refer to the Deity is very important, especially since, as far as I am aware, Helminski’s translation is the only English translation of the Quran which refers to the Supreme Deity of Islam in this way.

Similarly, Bakhtiar stresses her feminine voice by using the letter (f) to highlight the feminine gender of words referring to women. In her translation, the unusual presence of the letter (f) creates a stronger effect on the reader and stresses the feminine visibility in the text. This is the ultimate goal for feminist translators, as asserted by de Lotbinière-Harwood, who in her own work “used every possible translation to make the feminine visible. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world” (1990:9). This is how Bakhtiar translates verse 2:231:

And when you divorce wives
 and they (f) are about to reach their(f) term,
 then hold them (f) back honorably
 or set them (f) free honorably
 but hold them (f) not back by injuring them
 so you commit aggression
 (Bakhtiar 2007:41).

²¹ Helminski explains in a footnote that *Hu* is “the pronoun of Divine Presence” and that, although it is a masculine pronoun, this is a grammatical gender as “it is universally understood that Allah’s essence is beyond gender or indeed any qualification” (2000:5).

Helminski's and Bakhtiar's translation choices seem to reflect their position as Western converts to Islam who occupy an in-between position, where they need to negotiate between conservative Muslim conceptions of femininity on one hand, and Western perceptions of gender on the other. Moreover, as Anna Livia explains, in the process of translation, if the social expectations/norms of gender in the target culture are very different from those of the source culture, translators have to deal with these differences. She adds that "in their dual role as linguistic interpreters and cultural guides", translators "must decide what to naturalize, what to explain, and what to exoticize" (2003:154). Helminski and Bakhtiar's visibility could be an attempt to "naturalize" Muslim perceptions of gender relations to the norms of their culture of origin.

The problem, however, is that their visibility could have the effect of 'exoticizing' their positions. Indeed, Helminski's and Bakhtiar's claim to be the first 'Muslim women' to translate the Quran fits perfectly within Orientalist assumptions about Muslim women. It also fits within the same marketing strategy used to frame and publicize various literary works by and about Muslim women. Mohja Kahf sums up these Orientalist conventions in three main stereotypes: the first depicts the Muslim woman as "a victim of gender oppression", the second portrays her "as an escapee of her intrinsically oppressive culture", and the third represents her as "the pawn of Arab male power" (Kahf 2000:148).²²

The effects of women Quran translators' visibility are mostly seen in the considerable media attention given to Bakhtiar and her translation in the United States, Europe and a number of Muslim countries.²³ In the few months before and after the publication of her translation, her story occupied the headlines in several online versions of newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *The Herald Tribune* and *The New York Times*, and Bakhtiar was invited to appear on US TV shows such as *Everywoman*, in order to defend her new interpretation of the Quranic verse 4:34; Bakhtiar translates the word *daraba* as 'to go away from them' which challenges the

²² Interestingly, translated books confirming such stereotypes have proven to be particularly popular among Anglo-American readers. For instance, Nawal el-Saadawi's non-fictional and fictional works such as *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980) and *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) in which she denounces Muslim women's oppression and inferior status in Islamic societies were successfully received when published. Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (1992) was equally successful (see Amireh 1996:10).

²³ It is worth pointing out that Bakhtiar is the most visible and mentioned translator online in comparison to the other three. In addition to her own website, where she lists some of her books and offers readers the possibility to contact her and raise questions or send comments, the translator uses different social media to promote her translation; she is on Facebook, Youtube and Twitter. On Youtube, there are various video recordings of her reading the preface of her work, explaining her approach to Quran translation and conducting interviews with other scholars regarding her new interpretation of the word *daraba*.

patriarchal view that men have the right to discipline and to punish their wives.²⁴ Even though it is one of eight other English translations of the Quran undertaken by or with the participation of female translators, this translation is the only work to have been labeled as 'feminist'. Ali Eteraz was among the first to point out the 'feminist' elements in Bakhtiar's work in an article published in the *Guardian*, entitled 'Beyond Islamic Enlightenment' (2007). In this article, the writer and activist draws a strong link between Islamic feminism and Bakhtiar's translation by arguing that Amina Wadud's seminal book *The Quran and Woman: Rereading Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1992), "opened the door to the first feminist translation of the Quran" (ibid.).²⁵ Like Eteraz, many of Bakhtiar's supporters and critics have sought to assess her work in relation to Islamic feminist discourse, even though the translator herself refuses to describe her work as feminist.

In another article in the *New York Times*, 'Verse in Koran on beating wife gets a new translation' by Neil MacFarquhar (2007), Bakhtiar's position as a female translator, her rendition of the word *idrib* and her views on Muslim women's position in Islam are made more political. The article focuses on Bakhtiar's critics who questioned her knowledge of the Arabic language and Islam. MacFarquhar writes that:

Bakhtiar expected opposition, not least because she is not an Islamic scholar. *Men in the Muslim world*, she said, will also oppose the idea of an *American, especially a woman*, reinterpreting the prevailing translation. "They feel the onslaught of the West against their religious values, and they fear losing their

²⁴ Verse 4:34, also known as the 'wife beating verse', is one of the most controversial and contested verses in the Quran with regards to gender roles in Islam. It occurs in chapter four of the Quran *An'nisa* (The Women) and covers two main themes: male superiority over women and husbands' rights to discipline their wives. There are several key gender-related terms in this verse, including the word *idrib* (from the Arabic root-word *daraba*). Conservative Muslim scholars and translators interpret this word as 'to beat', to argue that husbands have the right to beat their wives in case of disobedience. Al-Tabarai for instance explains that the "verse saying that men are in charge of women means that they can discipline them, put them in their place when it comes to their duties towards God and towards their husbands, and this is because Allah has given authority to some of you over others" (quoted in Memissi 1991:158). Islamic feminists, on the other hand, have argued that verse 4:34 does not give husbands the permission to beat their wives. Riffat Hassan, for instance, has explained that the root-word *daraba*, which has been generally translated as "beating" is one of the commonest root-words in the Arabic language with a large number of possible meanings (1999:354). Moderate Muslim translators, such as the father and daughter team Mohamed Ahmed and Samira Ahmed, have translated the word *daraba* as 'to desert' or 'to abandon' (Ahmed & Ahmed 1994:1). Probably one of the most interesting interpretations of this word was provided by Ahmad Ali, who offers make-up sex instead of beating:

Men are the guardians of women as God
Has favoured some with more than others, and because
They spend of their wealth (to provide for them).
So women who are virtuous are obedient to God
And guard the hidden
For God has guarded it
As for women you feel are unyielding'
Talk to them persuasively
Then leave them alone in bed (until they are willing)
And then have intercourse with them.

If they open out to you, do not seek an excuse for blaming them (1984:78).

²⁵ An African-American convert to Islam, Wadud criticizes male-centered interpretations of the Quran and provides a new reading, which in her own words "would be meaningful to women living in the modern era" (1992:1). She does so by first highlighting the patriarchal influence of mediaeval methods of Quranic exegesis and the consequences it had on rules and regulations concerning women. Secondly, she turns her attention to the re-interpretation of key Quranic verses and terms like *daraba* in order to reveal the egalitarian meaning conveyed by the Sacred Text.

whole suit of armor,” she said. “But women need to know that there is an alternative” (2007; my emphasis).

The suggestion that Bakhtiar has faced opposition because she is not just an American but also a woman, constitutes the central argument of this article. The author starts by building a series of binary oppositions between Bakhtiar and Muslim men on one hand and the Muslim World and the West on the other. Bakhtiar’s use of the expression “men in the Muslim World,” instead of simply “Muslim men” underlines the gap between the two cultural zones and alludes to the unequal gender relations in the “Muslim world” where men maintain their dominance by controlling religious knowledge. We cannot be certain about the extent to which Bakhtiar’s comments have been fine-tuned to sound more provocative and critical of “men in the Muslim World”. What is certain, however, is that her statement contains some questionable points. First, the suggestion that “men in the Muslim World” will oppose a translation by an American seems to contradict the fact that there are already well received translations by American translators, such as the recent version by Thomas Cleary (2004). Secondly, the author and the translator seem to ignore the fact that many of Bakhtiar’s opponents were Muslim female scholars such as Omima Abou-Bakr, a professor at the University of Qatar who disagrees with Bakhtiar’s translation and has even expressed her criticism in a US televised debate in *Everywoman* broadcasted in April 2007.

An almost identical point is raised in another article published in the *International Herald Tribune*, titled ‘US. Woman’s English translation of the Quran draws criticism’ (2007). The unnamed author, who introduces Bakhtiar as a “Muslim woman” reports that:

An English translation of the Quran — one of the first by a *Muslim woman* — has created a stir on the Internet and among Islamic scholars who argue that her limited Arabic language skills and use of a dictionary for verbatim translations raises questions about her interpretation of the Islamic Holy Text. Many are calling Bakhtiar’s work a feminist translation, but supporters say her work is being criticized because she is a woman.²⁶ (my emphasis)

S/he then goes on to quote one of Bakhtiar’s supporters, Daisy Khan, the executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, who states that “anytime you have a change like this coming from within the community, especially coming from a woman, you are undoubtedly going to ruffle some feathers”. Given the other women who have been involved in collaborative Quran translation (see Footnote 4), it is not entirely correct to say that Bakhtiar is “one of the first Muslim women to translate the Quran into English”; however, this information highlights the translator’s challenge to male dominance in the field of Quran translation and to link it to the main idea that Bakhtiar is being criticized mainly because she is a woman. Interestingly, in this article Bakhtiar’s critics are “Islamic scholars” rather than “Men in the Muslim World”. The main difference, probably, is that “Islamic scholars” are expected to judge a work based on the intellectual qualities of the translator, not on his/her gender.

While both US articles insist that Bakhtiar was mainly criticized by Islamic scholars because she is a woman, an Arabic online article published by *Asharq Al-Awsat* (*The Middle Eastern Journal*) seems to take a different view. In this article, titled ‘Al-Azhar scholars differ on an American English interpretation of the Quran about women’, the author Khaleel Mohammed

²⁶http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/700_04_10_07_u_s_woman_s_english_translation_of_quran_draws_criticism.pdf (28 May 2008)

reports that Bakhtiar's new translation of the Quran has provoked divided opinions between opponents and supporters among Muslim scholars, mainly in the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Egypt. He points out that one of Bakhtiar's main opponents is Dr Mohammed Abdel-Moneim, a professor of interpretation at the Al-Azhar University and the former President of the Al-Azhar Scientific Committee. Abdel-Moneim's criticism is mainly directed at the West rather than Bakhtiar herself. He makes no comments on her being a woman, but describes her new interpretation as a part of a "Western conspiracy" to damage the image of Islam and an attempt to justify the stereotypes and misconceptions accusing Islam of oppressing women. The Al-Azhar professor states that the call for "a new and modern interpretation of the Quran is a conspiracy against Islam to challenge and to harm it" (Mohammed 2007). Abdel-Moneim's reaction reflects the mutual distrust between some members of the Muslim World and the West, where each side has its perception of women's position in Islam. Moreover, his conspiracy theory indirectly dismisses any suggestions that "Men in Muslim World" have opposed Bakhtiar's translation because she is a woman.

The article goes on to reveal that Bakhtiar has had a number of supporters among Muslim scholars, information that seems to have remained unmentioned or rather suppressed in the US articles. One of these supporters is Ahamed Al-Sayeh, a professor of religion at Al-Azhar University and a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs in Cairo. He welcomed Bakhtiar's interpretation, arguing that there is a need to consider and to take into account the social, political and economical challenges of the current era. He agrees with Bakhtiar that the meaning of the word *daraba* or *idrib* should be revisited and reinterpreted in the light of women's concerns. The article continues to discuss other opponents and supporters of Bakhtiar. Interestingly, none of the Al-Azhar scholars named in this article raises the issue of Bakhtiar being a woman. The only person to mention it is Omar Abu Namus, an imam at the Islamic Cultural Centre Mosque in New York, who after expressing his scepticism about Bakhtiar's knowledge of the Arabic language makes an interesting comment stating that "nothing prevents a woman from translating the meanings of the Quran" (ibid.) Abu Namus' remark, which could be interpreted as an invitation for more women to translate the Quran, is probably aimed at refuting claims that Bakhtiar has been criticised because of her gender and at defending himself and other Islamic scholars against Western media's accusations of misogyny.

Finally, the reactions of the US and Arab media to Bakhtiar's translation of the Quran reveal a very interesting approach to the 'factual paratext'. They indirectly answer Genette's question: do "we read a novel by a woman" in the same way we read a novel by a man"? The heated reactions suggest that there is a difference at least on the level of reception. The media reactions also reveal how the gender of the translator has turned into a debate about "Muslim men", "the Muslim World" and "the West" rather than the translation itself. The price for Bakhtiar's visibility provides another good example of how the 'factual paratext' can positively or negatively affect the reception of a certain translation, and how it varies according to the geopolitical and sociological make-up of the community of readers among which it circulates. What is also interesting in Bakhtiar's media coverage is that in the US media, like in Bakhtiar's and Helminski's paratexts, the gender of the translator was very much highlighted and emphasised. In contrast, in the Arab Muslim media as in Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh's paratexts, the translator's feminine gender was downplayed and even suppressed.

Conclusion

In this paper, I considered the visibility/invisibility of women Quran translators through their assertiveness and their focus on their gendered position in the online paratexts accompanying their translations. The paper illustrated how online paratexts could play a key role in framing and placing a translation within a specific context in order to generate the readers' interests and to make the translator more or less visible. The examination of the online paratexts has shown that the two women translators based in Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia and Iran) remained invisible by promoting concepts of authenticity and concealing/downplaying their feminine gender, while translators living in the United States not only asserted their visibility as women translators but encoded various elements of femininity in their paratexts and in their translation. This divide, in my view, reflects an Islamic conservative perception of femininity on the one hand, and a Western perception on the other. Indeed, Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh's invisibility in the online paratexts is mainly determined by the norms and the socio-cultural constraints of their conservative environment, where the dominant voice is male. By remaining invisible, Umm Muhammad and Saffarzadeh are suppressing their own voices, acknowledging the power of the dominant discourse and asserting existing gender hierarchies. In stark contrast, women translators living in the United States have focused mainly on issues of gender and their position as women translators. Helminski's and Bakhtiar's visibility in the paratexts could be interpreted as part of the conversion process and their in-between position where they need to negotiate new gendered identities. This view, however, fits within Orientalist perceptions and exoticizes their status as Muslim women. Bakhtiar's reception among Muslim scholars in Arabic speaking countries is particularly revealing of the complex and contradictory intersections between gender and race politics traversing and disrupting the binary between the West and the Muslim world. This shows how the differential gender politics among different communities of readers impacts any easy binary between East and West.

Author's Address:
Research Associate
University of Cambridge
Rh524(a)cam.ac.uk

References

- Ahmed, Muhamed and Samira Ahmed (1994) *The Koran, Complete Dictionary and Literal Translation*, Vancouver. Available online at [http://www.angelfire.com/realn2/qurantrans/] (accessed 2 February 2008).
- Ali, Ahmed (1984) *Al-Quran: a Contemporary Translation*, Karachi: Akrash Publishing.
- Al-Shaykh, Hanan (1992) *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Amireh, Amal (1996) 'Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Publishing in the West: Arab Women Writers Today,' *Al-Jadid Magazine* 2(10). Available online at [http://www.aljadid.com/content/publishing-west-problems-and-prospects-arab-women-writers] (accessed 22 May 2012).
- Bakhtiar, Laleh (2007). *The Sublime Quran*, Chicago: Kazi Publications.
- Bewley, Aisha and Hajj Abdalhaqq Bewley (1999) *The Noble Quran: A New Rendering of its Meaning in English*, Norwich: Bookwork.

- Cleary, Thomas (2004) *The Qur'an: A New Translation*, Chicago, Illinois: Starlatch Press, 2004.
- De Lotbinière-Harwood, Susanne (1990) Preface to Lise Gauvin's *Letters from An Other*, Toronto: Women's Press.
- El Saadawi, Nawal (1980) *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab world*, London: Zed Press.
- El Saadawi, Nawal (1983) *Woman at Point Zero*, London: Zed Books.
- Eteraz, Ali (2007) 'Beyond Islamic Enlightenment,' *Guardian Online*. Available online at [http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/ali_eteraz/2007/10/beyond_islamic_enlightenment.html] (accessed 12 May 2007).
- Genette, Gérard (1997) *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hassan, Riffat (1999) 'An Islamic Perspective', in Lebacqz, Karen (ed.) *Sexuality: A Reader*, Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press.
- Helminski, Camille Adams (2000) *The Light of Dawn: Daily Readings from the Holy Quran*, Boston: Shambhala.
- Hermans, Theo (ed.) (1985) *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in Literary Translation*, London: Croom Helm.
- Kahf, Mohja (1999) *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Kahf, Mohja (2000) 'Packaging 'Huda': Sharawi's Memoirs in the United States Reception Environment', in Amal Amireh, and Losa Suhair Maza (eds) *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, New York: Garland Publishing.
- Lefevere, Andrew (1992) *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Livia, Anna (2003) 'One Man in Two is a Woman: Linguistic Approaches to Gender in Literary Texts', in J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff (eds) *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- MacFarquhar, Neil (2007) 'New Translation Prompts Debate On Islamic Verse.' *New York Times Online*. Available online at [http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9901E6D61530F936A15750C0A9619C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=2] (accessed 2 May 2009).
- Makhluf, Muhammad Hasanayn (1925) *Risala fi Hukm Tarjamat al-Qur'an al-Karim wa-Qira'atihi wa-Kitabatihi bi-ghayr al-Lughati al-'Arabiyya* [A Letter on the Verdict of Translating and Transliterating the Holy Quran into other Languages than Arabic], Cairo: Matba'at Matar.
- Mernissi, Fatima (1991) *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Mohammed, Khaleel (2005) 'Assessing English Translations of the Quran', *Middle East Quarterly*: 58-71.
- Mohammed, Khaleel (2007) 'Tabayun ara ulama al-Azhar tujaha tafsir ameriki be al-englizia lilquran bishan al-mara.' [Al-Azhar scholars differ on an American English interpretation of the Quran about women]. *Asharq Al-Awsat Online* Available online at [http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp section=4&article=411958&issueno=10343] (accessed 25 January 2008).
- Omar, Amatul Rahman and Abdul Mannan Omar (1997) *The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text and English Translation*, Noor Foundation International.
- Plaskow, Judith (1990) *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*, San Francisco: Harper & Row.

- Saffarzadeh, Taheereh (2006) *The Holy Quran: Translation with Commentary*, Tehran: Alhoda.
- Saheeh International (1997) *The Quran, Arabic Text with Corresponding English Meaning*, Riyadh: Abulqasim Publishing House.
- Toury, Gideon (1995) *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Tymoczko, Maria (1998) 'Post-colonial writing and literary translation', in Bassnett, Susan and Harish Trivedi (eds) *Postcolonial Translation Theory*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Venuti, Lawrence (1986) 'A Translator's Invisibility', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and Arts* 28.2: 179-212.
- Venuti, Lawrence (1995) *The Translator's Invisibility: a History of Translation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Von Flotow, Luise (1997) *Translation and Gender*, Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Wadud, Amina (1992) *Quran and Woman: Rereading Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Kuala Lumpur: Fajar Bakti.
- Yuksel, Edip, Layth Saleh al-Shaiban, Martha Schulte-Nafeh (2007) *Quran: A Reformist Translation*, Brainbow Press.
- Zidan, Ahmad Abdul Munim and Dina Al-Zahraa Zidan (1991) *The Glorious Quran*, London: A. Zidan Publishing.