

Misconception in Interpreting AlBasmah, the Quranic Expression ‘Bismillah AlRahman AlRahim’ (بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم)

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Abstract—This paper goes through the problems that encounter the translators and interpreters of the Holy Quran particularly the Basmalah. Misinterpretation of the Holy Quran’s expression (بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم) has been a controversial issue for centuries by now. This is partly because most of the Quranic words and expressions are peculiar to the Arabic language and partly due to their particularity to specific denotations used in this Holy Book of Islam. This has been a problematic issue in many attempts of translating the expression into different languages for a long time. Yet no translator, Islamic scholar, or religious and educational institutions undertook the responsibility of scrutinizing the deep conception of the expression (بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم) seriously. Doing so, some of such cliché interpretations even cause unintentional blasphemy according to the Quranic concept. Accordingly, the present study not only sheds light but reconsiders the keywords of these misinterpretations. It focuses on the real meanings and divine parts of speech used by this expression (بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم).

Keywords— Allah, Al Rahman, Al Rahim, Beautiful Names, God

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Islamic Holy Quran, the expression بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم (pronounced Bismillah [with short vowel sound/i] Al Rahman with short vowel sound/I) Al Rahim [genitive form] denotes references to Allah’s Beautiful Names. They are given to mankind in order to define the real identity of Allah (Hassan, 2017). Billions of Muslims throughout the world use this expression not only at the beginning of their recitals of the Holy Quran, but also in their every-day language; they repeat it whenever they start doing anything like opening doors, shops, or doing business and talking shop (Dictionary.Com). In brief, it is the most widely used expression among these billions (Hassan, 2017).

Yet, almost all the translators have been using the English expression (In the Name of God the [Most] Merciful Most Gracious [Compassionate]) in targeting the source Islamic expression بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم. Hence, we face a problem in translating these names. Among many causes for mistranslating the Basmalah there is a problematic issue in the Arabic language itself; As the Arabic language is highly rhetorical and inflectional, most of the names may be used as adjectives and

vice versa (Yasmeen. 2021); Salih, for example, is a popular name in Arabic; it is also used as an adjective meaning ‘good’, Kareem is a proper name in Arabic, and it also means ‘generous’, etc. yet when you add the definite article (ال) to most of them, they mean nothing but names as is the case with the English language; when the definite article ‘the’ is applied to certain adjectives they become nouns such as ‘the good’, the poor, the rich, etc.’ Therefore, translating names by itself is a problematic issue in the alphabets of translation code. The translator or the interpreter must be quite cautious in dealing with proper nouns especially the ones of holy titles and the Divine Being in particular.

Almost all the translations of بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم commit the same mistakes; i.e. they apply adjectives or adjectival phrases for Allah’s Beautiful names. Here, we encounter another problem which is substitution of proper nouns with adjectives, and this is quite inaccurate and inadequate in the norms of translation. Such expressions like ‘most gracious’, ‘most merciful’ are adjectival expressions in the superlative forms used as translations of the Quranic (الرحمن الرحيم) which are generally nouns, and more specifically Allah’s Beautiful Names. This is a mistake due to many reasons. Firstly, no one can substitute a proper noun with an adjective; secondly, the comparative and superlative forms can be made between or among nouns and adjectives of equivalent or parallel grounds, and according to the Holy Quran, these names are attributed and peculiar to Allah Who is One and Who has no equivalent and dissimilar to any of His creatures.

The Holy Quran gives ninety-nine beautiful names to Allah (Hassan, 2017). They are called Allah’s Beautiful Names أسماء (الله الحسنى) and the ones given in بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم are among them. This paper discusses these problematic issues in translating بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم into any language other than Arabic, particularly the English language by reason of its being the mostly used language in the world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Except for a few scholars that discussed Allah’s Beautiful Names, seminal references on this topic are only a handful sources in the academic research literature. Among these scholars there are Asma Afsaruddin’s article “Allah” (2022), Hassan Ali’s “Names of Allah” (2017). Yasmeen’s “The Difference Between Allah’s Names and Attributes” ((2021), in addition to a few other articles. These papers manifested the concept of God in the Islamic terms of monotheism. Other

sources are written in the standard Arabic language. These shall be referred to in more details in the discussion.

The word God is mostly defined in major non-Arabic sources such as encyclopedias and dictionaries which tackle this word and its denotations among different religions, sects, and cultures. The following may shed light on a few of these concepts.

1. "In monotheistic concepts, God means the "Supreme Being, the Creator and the Major Entity of Faith. God is understood as omnipotent, omniscient with eternal being. Among His characteristics, God is of transcendence quality". (Encyclopedia Britannica)
2. In Theism concept, "God is the creator and sustainer of the universe."
3. In Deism concept, "God is the creator, but not the sustainer of the universe." (Merriam Webster Dictionary).
4. Pantheism has a rather different concept; "God is the universe itself." (Merriam Webster Dictionary).
5. For the Atheistic concept, God "is an absence of belief in God, while, (Encyclopedia Britannica)
6. "Agnosticism deems the existence of God unknown or unknowable." (Merriam Webster Dictionary)
7. God has also been conceived as the source of all moral obligations, and the "greatest conceivable existent" (Merriam Webster Dictionary).
8. In the Hebrew Bible and Judaism, the names of God includes Elohim, Adonai, and others. Yahweh and Jehovah, possible vocalizations of YHWH, are used in Christianity (Encyclopedia Britannica).
9. In the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, one God coexists in three "persons" called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Encyclopedia Britannica).
10. In Islam, the name Allah is used, while Muslims also use a multitude of titles for God. (Merriam Webster Dictionary)
11. In Hinduism, Brahman is often considered a monistic concept of God. (Encyclopedia Britannica).
12. In Chinese religion, Shangdi is conceived as the progenitor (first ancestor) of the universe, intrinsic to it and constantly bringing order to it. (Encyclopedia Britannica).
13. Other names for God include Baha in the Bahá'í Faith, Waheguru in Sikhism, Ahura; Mazda in Zoroastrianism; and Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa in Balinese Hinduism. (Encyclopedia Britannica).

As for the two other names of Allah in the Basmalah that are "Al Rahman" and "Al Rahim), there are no attributions for them except in the Islamic scholar literature.

III. DISCUSSION

In the beginning, there is no problem in translating the prepositional phrase (بسم) meaning (باسم). This phrase is composed of two attached parts of speech: the preposition (ب) which is equivalent to the English prepositions (with) and (in). The second part of speech is the noun (إسم) [isim], then come the Divine Name Allah (الله) with light /l/ sound is the Almighty Allah (Bismillah). As the issue is so, we may translate this prepositional phrase into English "In the Name" without

causing any translation problems. Our major problems lie in translating the Beautiful Names of Allah. They are as follow:

A. Allah (الله)

The first problem may encounter the translator is the word (Allah الله). The misconception, which is the main cause of misinterpretation, of this word lies in translating it to the word (God). In Islam's Holy Quran this concept is entirely different from other religions' concept of God. Dictionaries and encyclopedias define the word God differently according to the various faiths that use the word.

According to dictionaries, in most monotheistic religions, the word (god) means the creator and ruler of the universe and source of all moral authority; the Supreme Being. In Christianity, it denotes Trinity. But in certain other religions, it means a superhuman being or spirit worshipped as having power over nature or human fortunes; a deity, e.g. "a moon god". Hence the word (god) is used in terms of any pagan, atheist or secular references to refer to someone or something being worshipped by a group of people; so we have tens of gods and goddesses used in Greek and Roman mythologies. The word also refers, when attached or collocated to other words, to certain secular concepts like godfather, god of war, etc.

Our major concern here is how all the translators have misinterpreted the Quranic word (الله) into various languages by reason of their misconception of the word. In the Holy Quran, the word (الله) is defined as "God (or Lord) of all the realms / or worlds of the universe" as it is stipulated in the first verse of Surah Al-Fatihah "الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ" (الفاتحة: 2) meaning (Praise be to Allah, the Lord/ God of the Worlds) (Chapter 1: 2). So, how could the word God connote and cover the whole concept of the Quranic Verse? The word God falls short in delivering the Almighty's message to the mankind. The message that is decoded as [How dare ye my subjects worship other gods (substantial or imaginary) not Me while I am the Lord of all gods and realms of the Universe. Hence, the word God is very limited to the Quranic concept of Allah.

In chapter 5 of the Holy Quran, Isa (Jesus), Son of Maryam, invokes Allah using both words (Allah, our God), saying, "قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ اللَّهُمَّ رَبَّنَا أَنْزِلْ عَلَيْنَا السَّمَاءَ تَكُونُ لَنَا عِيدًا" (المائدة: 114) meaning, "Isa (Jesus), son of Mary, said, 'Oh Allah, our God (Lord), send down upon us a table from heaven that will be for us a feast.'" (114)

In Arabic, the word "god" can be interpreted as (رب) meaning:

1. any god/ lord sacred or secular, as in:

"يَا صَاحِبِي السِّجْنِ الْبَابُ مُتَعَرِّضُونَ خَيْرٌ أَمْ اللَّهُ" (يوسف: 39) meaning "O comrades of prison (my inmates), are separate gods better or only Allah" (Ch. 12: 39).

2. Someone in charge like (رب العمل) meaning "employer" as in:

"وَقَالَ لِلَّذِي ظَنَّ أَنَّهُ نَاجٍ مِّنْهُمَا اذْكُرْنِي عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ" (يوسف: 42) meaning "He said to the one whom He thought would be saved from prison, remember me when you are with your god." (Ch. 12, Vs. 42); here, the word god is meant to be the king as a person in charge.

3. In Arabic language the word god is used to mean Guardian or parent (رب الأسرة)

I. 4. (إله) MEANING ANY GOD OR LORD TO BE WORSHIPPED BY PEOPLE, AS IN (البقرة: 255) "اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومُ" MEANING: "ALLAH, THERE IS NO GOD BUT HE, THE LIVING, THE ETERNAL." (2: 255); AND "وَرَبَطْنَا عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ إِذْ قَامُوا فَقَالُوا رَبُّنَا رَبُّ الْأَرْضِ لَن نَدْعُوَ مِنْ دُونِهِ" (الكهف: 14) (إله) MEANING: "AND WE WITHHELD THEIR HEARTS AS THEY ROSE UP AND SAID, 'OUR LORD IS THE GOD OF THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH, WE SHALL NOT WORSHIP OTHER GODS INFERIOR TO HIM; IF WE HAD SAID OTHERWISE, WE WOULD HAVE BEEN SAYING UNFAIR AND ABSURD SPEECH'" (CHAPTER 18:14)

5. Or, (آلهة) meaning (gods) the plural form of god; it also means the feminine form (goddess) and plural of the feminine form (goddesses); i.e. "أَتَجِدُ مِنْ دُونِهِ إِلَهًا إِنْ يَرِثُنَا الرَّحْمَنُ بِضَرْبٍ لَا تُغْنِي" (يس: 23) meaning: "Shall I worship other gods inferior to Him; If Al Rahman wants to do me harm, their intercession is of no use to me" (Chapter 36: 23); and "وَاتَّخَذُوا" (مریم: 81) meaning "And they worshipped other gods inferior to Allah" (Chapter 19: 81).

All these cognitive evidences prove that the word (God) can by no means replace the divine word Allah (الله) in translation, but can replace the Arabic words (إله، آلهة، رب) covering all the concepts that those words refer to. The two Beautiful Names that can never give adjectives or any other nouns or pronouns are Allah and Al Rahman. So, in the Arabic language, using these two Beautiful Names for other people must be accompanied by the pre-modifier (Abdul, or Abdil عبيد) as inflectionally pronounced, meaning (slave or subject of). These can be seen in such names like Abdullah, Abdurrahman), because these words stand for the main morphemes Allah and Al Rahman, that are attributed to Allah Who is the Sole worshipped Divine and Supreme Being in the Holy Quran (Al-Sallabi: 2020).

B. Al Rahman (الرحمن)

The second problematic issue is the word Al Rahman (الرحمن). The word الرحمن is a seriously problematic one not only in translation, but even in Arabic. The word Al Rahman الرحمن has no equivalence in Arabic. For this reason the Islamic scholars have never reached a conclusive and unified interpretation to this word. Some of them claim it to mean that there are one hundred mercies attributed to Allah and that only one of them belongs to the earthly creatures and that is Al Rahim meaning All Mercy (Al-Sallabi: 2020). In this case we face two terms: one is Al Rahman (الرحمن), and the other is Al Rahim (الرحيم); a very good example is the first surah (chapter) at the beginning of the Holy Quran: "الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ" (الأنعام: 54) meaning "Praise be to Allah, God (Lord) of the Worlds, Al Rahman Al Rahim." (Chapter 1: 2-3).

The word Al Rahman (الرحمن) is a proper noun and we cannot derive any adjectives from it. There is a whole surah (chapter) in the Holy Quran called by this name (Chapter 55). Besides, in the Holy Quran, there is a verse that co-links the two Holy words Allah and Al Rahman; سورة الإسراء: "قُلِ ادْعُوا اللَّهَ أَوْ ادْعُوا الرَّحْمَنَ أَيًّا مَا تَدْعُوا فَلَهُ الْأَسْمَاءُ الْحُسْنَى" (الآية: 110) meaning "Say, 'Call upon Allah or call upon Al Rahman.' Whoever you may invoke, to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names" (Chapter 17: 110). According to Al-Sallabi (2020), this means that no creature can be named by the word

(Al Rahman), because it is solely attributed and affiliated to the Divine Being just like the word (Allah).

Al Rahman is a recurrent Beautiful Name in the Holy Quran, Once scholars scan the word, they may find it stipulated in so many chapters and verses; i.e. "وَمَا أُنْزِلَ الرَّحْمَنُ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا" (يس: الآية 15) meaning: "And Al Rahman has not revealed anything; you are but lying." (Chapter 36: 16); and "الَّذِي خَلَقَ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ" (سورة طه: 5) meaning "Al Rahman has settled on the throne" (Chapter 20: 5); and "طِبَاقًا مَّا تَرَى فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِنْ تَفَاقُوتٍ" (المك: 3) meaning "...Who created the seven heavens in layers. You can never behold disparity in Al Rahman's creation..." Chapter 67: 3); and "يَرَوْنَ إِلَى الطَّيْرِ فَوْقَهُمْ صَفَعَتْ وَيُفَضِّنَنَّ مَا يُمَسِّكُنَّ إِلَّا الرَّحْمَنُ إِنَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ نَصِيرٌ" (المك: 19) meaning "Do they not see the birds above them, spreading out their wings and folding them in? No one upholds them except Al Rahman. Verily, He is the All-Seer of everything" (Chapter 67: 19).

In all the above stipulations from different chapters and verses, the two Holy Names Allah and Al Rahman are literal and contextual synonyms (ZENG. 2007. p.1) and they have no equivalents neither in Arabic nor in any other language. This means that they must be treated as proper nouns and not to be translated into any other language whether as names or as any part of speech. Hence, considering both proper nouns Al Rahman and Al Rahim as synonyms then translating them to English as the adjectives "merciful and compassionate or gracious" is like committing a very serious mistake both in concept and in process.

C. Al Rahim (الرحيم)

The word "rahim" in Arabic language is an adjective for the noun rahma رَحْمَة and the verb is rahema or rahama رَحِمَ أو رَحَّمَ (Al-Sallabi: 2020).. As an adjective it means merciful or kind, as a noun it means mercy or kindness and as a verb it is to mercy or to have mercy upon some body or something. It can also be used as a noun and proper noun derived from the adjective; i.e. (He is merciful meaning: إنه رجلٌ رحيم (euthanized): الموت الرحيم). It can be used as a proper noun, e.g. رحيم رجلٌ جيد, meaning: (Rahim is a good man). In the Holy Quran, it is used likewise; i.e. as a noun, the word Rahma رَحْمَة (mercy) in "فَقُلْ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ" (الأنعام: 54) meaning: "So say, 'Peace be upon you.' Your Lord (God) has decreed mercy upon Himself." (Chapter 6: 54).

As an adjective, the word "rahim رحيم" is used when Allah bestows on His Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) with one of His highest attributes which is being merciful "لَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَغُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ..." (التوبة: 128) meaning: "Indeed, there has come to you a Messenger from among yourselves ... to the faithful, kind and merciful..." (Chapter 9: 128). Yet this word is considered a proper noun once you add to it the definite article (ال). So the word Al Rahim الرحيم is not only considered a proper noun, but rather one of Allah's Beautiful Names. Here the issue takes another turn.

As stipulated above, those who are familiar with Arabic grammar know for sure that there are many words in Arabic that can be used as both nouns and adjectives in the same time. Hence, most of Allah's Beautiful Names can be used as adjectives or common nouns without using the definite article (ال). This is quite true when we say such sentences like:

English Meanings	Arabic words with dual meanings and usages	Arabic sentences
Salih is a good man.	The word salih صالح is a name and an adjective meaning (good)	صالح رجلٌ صالح.
Hamid has a benign tumor.	The word hamid حميد is a name and an adjective meaning (kind or benign)	حميد لديه ورم حميد.
English Meanings	Arabic words with dual meanings and usages	Arabic sentences
Rahim has a tender heart.	The word rahim رحيم is a name and an adjective meaning (merciful)	يمتاز رحيم بقلب رحيم.
Kareem is very generous.	The word kareem كريم is a name and an adjective meaning (generous)	كريم جواد كريم.
Salam likes peace.	The word salam سلام is a name and an adjective meaning (peace)	سلام يحب السلام.
English Meanings	Arabic words with dual meanings and usages	Arabic sentences
Mumin is a man of faith.	The word mumin مؤمن is a name and an adjective meaning (having faith)	مؤمن انسان مؤمن.
Muhaymin has a domineering quality.	The word muhaymin مهيم is a name and an adjective meaning (dominant, predominant, or domineering)	مهيمن لديه طبع مهيم.
Majid achieved a glorious victory.	The word majid مجيد is a name and an adjective meaning (glorious)	مجيد حقق لنفسه نصرا مجيدا.

The list goes on to cover hundreds of such dual-function words. The problematic issue is that the translators use the adjective forms of these words and translate them into the target language instead of transliterating the nouns, and this is particularly true in regard to Allah's Beautiful Names. Therefore, they use the comparative and superlative forms for these adjectives in reference to the Divine Being. English language grammarians and linguists know for certain that the comparative and superlative forms can never be used for nouns and proper nouns; accordingly the translators commit a very serious structural mistake in using them in reference to Allah for ليس "كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ" (الشورى: 11), meaning "Nothing is like Him" (Chapter 42: 11) neither on earth nor in heavens. As there are no similar grounds for comparison and contrast, there must not be any comparative and superlative forms to be used in reference to Allah. Accordingly, using these forms is irrelevant both structurally and ethically. The ethical mistake may be taken as a blasphemy for making a deliberate comparison

between the immortal Divine Being who "Nothing is like Him" and other mortals whether subjects or objects.

There are hundreds of such proofs that undermine the authenticity, credibility and reliability of translating the Quranic expression بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ into (In the Name of God, Most Merciful, Most Gracious or Most Compassionate, etc.)

CONCLUSION

This paper shows the lexical, cognitive, rhetorical and ethical mistakes that the translators have been committing in misinterpreting the Quranic expression بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ into the English and other modern languages. The study illustrates these mistakes word by word and concept by concept. Quranic studies have only recently been translated in modern live languages, mostly done by personal and institutional efforts; yet still the Quranic issues must be given more significant attention and awareness. This is partly because the Holy Quran is of a high inflection and rhetorical as understanding its meanings require understanding of the concepts of each word and phrase used in it. The paper seeks to encourage the scholars and translators to pay further attention in dealing with its verses since it stands as for the Islamic doctrine and the main source of legislation in the Muslim world.

The study focuses on misconceptions made by translators in providing cognitive concepts to the words used in (بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ) and finds out the following mistakes in the most famous interpretations of the expressions.

1. Mistaking the real concepts of the expressions,
2. Using adjectives for Allah's Beautiful Names that are given with the define article (ال)
3. Using superlative forms with the adjectives given to the translated forms which is entirely inadequate and out of function,
4. Translating the divine word Allah into God
5. Misconception in understanding the divine word Al Rahman which is like the word Allah void of synonyms even in Arabic, the original source language.

After manifesting the problematic issues in this paper, the premium suggestion reaches the point to raise the question: why must we translate a holy and idiomatic expression بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ into other languages, and why must not we use a transliteration of it just like we do with any other scientific, religious and cultural terms and phrases? Consequently, the suggestion goes to adopt a transliterated expression of Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim (to be dictated according to the inflectional Arabic pronunciation of the prepositional phrase (Bismillah Al Rahman Al Rahim) instead of translating it in a defective way.

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