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/l]) 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 (ل) 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 سمع 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 adjetival expressions in the superlative forms used as translations of the Quranic (الرحمان 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 (الرحمن الرحيم) and the ones given in the Quran 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).

For the two other names of Allah in the Basmalah that are “Al Raham” 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 (باسم الله) meaning “In the Name” of (الله). 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 (اسم الله), 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 (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) refers, when a god is used to mean Guardian or parent (زوج). In the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, one God coexists in three “persons” called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Encyclopedia Britannica).

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 (القرآن: 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 إِنِّي أَنْبِئُكُمْ بِأُمَامٍ مُّتَفَرِّقٍ مُّتَرِجٍ مَّعَنَّا يُحْلِبُونَ أَبْنَى وَأُمَّتِي أَمْمٍ كُلِّ اسْمٍ كُنْنَا لَعَنُّهَا (اليوم 1:14)) 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:

(يوسف: 39) من عقول يدّى..., 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:

"وفافق لَهُذِي الْلَّهُ نَزَّاهُ مَنْ تَمَكَّنَ أَنْ تَفْرَغَوْا حَيْثُ مَنْ أَنَّا (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 was used to mean Guardian or parent (ربًا ربة الآسرة)
I. 4. (Al Rahman: أَنفُسّكُمْ ..... بّالْمُؤْمّنّينَ رَءُوفٌ رهحّيم) meaning: "Who is merciful... to the faithful, kind..."

The second problematic issue is the word Al Rahman (الرحمن). The word Al Rahman (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: “...Who created seven heavens...” Chapter 67: 3; and “...Who settled the throne...” Chapter 20: 5; and “...Who decreed mercy upon Himself...” Chapter 54: 25; and “...Who has decreed mercy upon Himself...” Chapter 6: 54.

As an adjective, the word “rahim” (الرحيم) is used when Allah bestows on His Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) with one of His highest attributes which is being merciful. لَقَدْ جَاءَتِ الْأُمُورُ دَوَّارًا مِّنْ “أَنفُسّكُمْ رهحّيم...” (الرحيم), 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 it to the definite article (ال). So the word Al Rahim (الرحمن) 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:
CONCLUSION

This paper shows the lexical, cognitive, rhetorical and ethical mistakes that the translators have been committing in misinterpreting the Quranic expression بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم (In the Name of God, Most Merciful, Most Gracious or Most Compassionate, etc.)

The study focuses on misconceptions made by translators in providing cognitive concepts to the words used in بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم (In the Name of God, Most Merciful, Most Gracious or Most Compassionate) 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 بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم 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.

REFERENCES


