

An Analysis of the Urdu Tafsīr Works

Mohd Mahboob*

ABSTRACT

The literal meaning of *Tafsīr* is to express and to explain something. In conventional terminology, it stands for the explanation and elucidation of the *Qur'ānic* verses. It provides the exegete with a framework using which he can interpret the meanings of the Quranic verses and also present a sufficient and appropriate explanation of the verses. During the period of the pious caliphate, Islam reached different parts of the globe by crossing the boundary of the Arabian Peninsula. Different countries and several communities embraced Islam, the region of *Sindh* was also brought within the limits of the Islamic rule. The conquest of Sindh led to the establishment of the Muslim government in the region. Gradually, the population of Muslims increased throughout the Indian subcontinent and it naturally resulted in the dissemination of Islamic teachings, also keeping in mind the specific circumstances of this country, common ethos of its inhabitants, and their mental capacities, thereby calling for a new perceptual approach that needed to be employed in this regard. Several books related to the *Qur'ānic* sciences and the *Qur'ānic exegesis* were written apart from the books concerning *Ḥadīth* and Jurisprudence, histories, and biographies. Apart from Arabic and Persian languages, these works were also compiled in other local languages including Urdu. Although Urdu language is of a much recent origin than other languages of the world, a large number of the *Qur'ānic* translations have been written in this language. The *Qur'ānic* teachings, *Qur'ānic* commandments, anecdotes in the *Qur'ān*, miracles of *Qur'ān*, *Qur'ānic* sciences, *Qur'ānic* excellences, *Qur'ānic* arguments, history of *Qur'ānic* compilation and the history of *Tafsīr* writing and *Mufasssirun*, etc. are the major topics of interest in which contributions have been made in the Urdu language. Against this backdrop, the purpose of the present study is to present a comprehensive and concise analytical account of some major *Tafsīr* works that have been authored by Muslim scholars in Urdu from the emergence of this language till recent times.

Keywords: Tafsīr, Translations, Urdu, Modern Exegeses.

* Research Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, AMU. Aligarh, 202002.

Introduction

Even though Urdu is of a much recent origin in comparison to other Indian languages, due to its immense beautiful qualities and abilities, it has become deeply ingrained among the cultural and academic atmosphere of India in a very short period. Speakers of the Urdu language can be found throughout the country. Several Indian regions provided a conducive environment for its growth, and very soon, its clout and supremacy over other modern Indian languages were accepted. Muslims, in particular, developed a special affinity towards it, and since the people speaking it were present in every part of the country, it came to be seen as the *lingua franca* concerning religious matters as well.

The Quran is the actual Word of God (Allah) which has multiple aspects and its recitation is considered worship in Islam. It is the fundamental book that forms the basis and core of all Islamic sciences. Since it was revealed in the Arabic language, non-native speakers couldn't be expected to firmly grasp its meanings until they learned the language themselves or developed a medium to convey those meanings. Therefore, in order to propagate the *Qur'ānic* teachings to as many people as possible, an incessant effort was made to translate it and write its *Tafsīr* into other local languages.¹ The learned intellectuals and scholars of India focused on presenting its meanings to the masses in the common, simple, and intelligible language of Urdu so that a large group of the country could understand and benefit from it. However, the completion of this task demanded a daunting and unconditional sacrifice on the part of these exegetes despite which, out of natural curiosity, instead of unraveling its mysteries and finding solutions for social problems, new challenges surfaced ahead on account of faulty interpretations. To repudiate these misleading interpretations, the authentic scholars of the time paid heed to it and tried their best to remove the uncountable complications created by the people with vested interests, which were included in the name of *Qur'ānic Tafsīr*.

History of *Tafsīr* Writing in Urdu

It is reported that some Persian converts requested Salmān al-Fārisi, a prominent companion of the Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.), to translate some portions of the *Qur'ān*, which he then sent to them.² With the expansion of Islam in different non-Arab regions, the local people of those areas felt the need for the *Qur'ān* to be

translated and explained in their native languages. Consequently, scholars started writing commentaries of the *Qur'ān* for non-Arabs in their languages. These languages include *Persian, Turkish, Urdu*, and Central Asian languages, etc. The companions of the Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.) had already endeavored the translations of the *Qur'ān* in other languages. Salmān Fārsi translated *Surah al-Fātiḥah* into the *Persian* language first, for the people of his nation. Now, this translation is not available.³ The earliest Hindi translation is reputed to be the one ordered by Raja Mahruk of Kashmir, in 270 AH, who ordered the Muslim ruler of *Sind*, 'Abdullaah ibn 'Umar, to translate the *Qur'ān* for him. 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar sent a Muslim scholar who was an expert in many Indian languages and helped Raja Mahruk understand the fundamentals of Islam and translate one *Qur'ānic* chapter, *Sūrah Yāsīn*, only.⁴

The translations of the *Qur'ān* in the Urdu language started in the sixteenth century C.E. (10 century A.H.),⁵ initially of only a few verses or select *Sūrah*. In the seventeenth century C.E., the translations of the *Qur'ān* were supplemented by brief marginal notes as *Tafsīr*. These *Tafāsīr* are preserved in different libraries. Maulvi 'Abd-al-Haq⁶ has discussed some of these *Tafāsīr* in his book *Qadīm Urdu*. For example, the translation and interpretation of the last juz of the *Qur'ān*, i.e. *Pārah 'Ammā Yatasā'alūn* has been translated in the late 10th century A.H. or the beginning of the 11th century A.H. According to some scholars, it is considered the oldest translation of the *Qur'ān* (in Urdu). The features of this interpretation are not a significant and simple addition of some of the descriptive words. The translator is unidentified.

The translation of *Surah Yūsuf* is also estimated in the late 10th century A.H. or at the beginning of the 11th century. It is in the *Gujrāti Urdu* language.

Another *Tafsīr*, *Tafsīr-e-Ḥusaini* of Kāshif Hārwi has been translated into the oldest Deccan language. However, the translator and interpreters are unknown. It is estimated to have been written in the late 11th century A.H. or the beginning of the 12th century A.H.

Interpretation of the *Qur'ān* from *Sūrah Maryam* till the end along with *Chahal Ḥadīth* has been preserved in the *Āsīfīa library Hyderabad*. It includes the translation and interpretation *Surah Maryam, Surah Tāhā, Sūrah Yāsīn, Sūrah Sāffāt Sūrah Ṣād, Sūrah Zumar and Pārah 'Ammā*. It is estimated to have been

written in the 11th century.⁷ Maulvi ‘Abd-al-Ḥaq has discussed one more ancient *Tafsīr of the Qur’ān*, which is written in the 13th century A.H. by Shah Makhdūm Ḥusaini.⁸

The first scholar to translate the *Qur’ān* into the Urdu language is said to have been Maulānā Muḥammad Mu’azzam Sambhali in 1719 C.E. in Northern India. It was named *Tafsīr-i-Hind* and was incomplete. It got destroyed during the invasion of Nādir Shah.⁹ Some other scholars opine that the first *Tafsīr* was written by Shah Murādullah Ansāri in 1770 C.E. It is the interpretation of *Pārah ‘Amma*, entitled *Khudā’i Ni‘mat*, also known as *Tafsīr-e-Murādiyah*, but it also remained unfinished. After 26 years of Shah Walī‘ullah’s *Persian Tafsīr Faṭḥ al-Raḥmān* (1837 C.E.) and before twenty-one years of Shah ‘Abd al-Qādir’s *Mūziḥ-al-Qur’ān* it acted as a foundation stone for other translators. *Tafsīr-e-Murādiyah* has emerged as a literary composition of great taste. This *Tafsīr* represents the exemplary language of that period (i.e., the end of the 18th century). Although Urdu prose used to be entirely rhythmic and throbbing during this period, yet it emerged with serene and facile language.¹⁰

The translation of Shah ‘Abd al-Qādir’s (d. 1814) *Mūziḥ-al-Qur’ān* is considered the primordial one among all the prevalent translations of the *Qur’ān*. It acts as a foundation stone for the other translators. The translation possesses a profound feature that while paraphrasing from Arabic, such appropriate words of Urdu have been used beyond which words are difficult to find. However, the meaning of the respective words below them, prosaic expression, and understandability are the main features of this work.¹¹

The translation of Shah Rafi’uddīn (1749-1817) is the third translation of the *Qur’ān* in Urdu. The translation of Shah ‘Abd-al-Qādir is considered to have maintained dexterity and tenacity in his work, despite the complaint with respect to the subjection to words. The translation of Shah Rafi’uddīn was published firstly with ‘Abd-al-Qādir’s *Tafsīr Mūziḥ-al-Qur’ān* in the year 1840 C.E. by one of the oldest publication houses of Calcutta, *Islamic Printers*. Later on, a number of its editions were published by various publications, and it is being published to date.¹²

Thus, it is worth mentioning the fact that *Mūziḥ-al-Qur’ān* is considered as the first phraseological translation of the *Qur’ān* into the *Urdu language*. It is a matter of coincidence that Shah Rafi’uddīn is the founder of the literal translation,

likewise, Shah ‘Abd al-Qādir is credited to be the originator of the idiomatic or phraseological translation. Therefore, the commendation of the paramount complete and full-fledged translation comes into these brothers.¹³

The translation of Shah ‘Abd-al-Qadir was published in the year 1829 C.E./1245A.H. from *Delhi* followed by the one of Shah Rafi’uddīn in the year 1840 C.E./1256 A.H. from *Calcutta*. The choice of decent, prevalent, and appropriate terms or words by Shah ‘Abd-al-Qādir made his translation gain the utmost popularity among the masses, and even its acquiescence can be seen. Moreover, Maulānā Maḥmūd al-Ḥasan has taken Shah ‘Abd al-Qadir’s translation as a foundation, which is a testimony to its preeminence and acceptance among all.

Later on, these translations, particularly that of Shah ‘Abd al-Qādir and Shah Rafi’uddīn became premier of work for other translators and interpreters. This is an astounding fact that Urdu, although, is a juvenile language among all the erudite language of the world, yet no other language gets the credit to have abundant translators of the Quran as Urdu has.

The colonial rule of *Great Britain* put an end to the movement of *Islamic sciences* by forming schools for modern education for *Qur’ānic Exegetics*. The important interpretations of the *Qur’ān*, compiled in the Sub-continent during thirteen century of *Hijrah*, are *Mūziḥ-al-Qur’ān* by Shah ‘Abd-al-Qādir, son of Shah Wali’ullah, *Fataḥu’l-Mannān* Known as *Tafsīr-e-Ḥaqqāni* by ‘Abd-al-Ḥaq Ḥaqqāni. Footnotes upon old Arabic *Tafsīr* were written like *Al-Kamālain* annotation of *Al-Jalālain* by Salāmu’llāh Rinpuri and annotation of *Al-Jalālain* by *Turāb ‘Ali*. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Salām wrote a commentary of the *Qur’ān* in two volumes in the Pashto language.¹⁴

Nineteenth Century’s Works

One of the most notable *Tafsīr* in the nineteenth century C.E. is *Tafsīr-e-Qur’ān* written by Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khan. It deserves consideration on account of the revolutionary status of Sir Sayyid in the Urdu language and literature. Sir Sayyid undertook to write the commentary on the *Qur’ān* from a rational angle but could not complete it. His rationalist point of view was considered as an outrageous interpretation by the mainstream Muslim scholars. His commentary of the *Qur’ān* not only remained incomplete but also did not gain popularity among the people.

This commentary was published in seven parts. The first part was published in 1880, the second in 1882, the third in 1885, the fourth in 1888, the fifth in 1892, the sixth in 1895, and the seventh part was published after his death in 1904. Its second edition was published in two volumes by Dr. 'Ābid Raḏā Baydār in 1998 at the centenary celebration of Sir Sayyid from *Khuda Bakhsh Oriental public library, Patna*.

Tafsīr-e-Fatḥu'l-Mannān by Maulānā 'Abd-al-Ḥaq Ḥaqqāni ibn Muḥammad 'Amir ibn Shamshu'ddīn bin Nūru'ddīn, is also known as *Tafsīr-e-Ḥaqqāni*. This great work is not only a translation and explanation of the *Qur'ān* but also an encyclopedia of the *Qur'ānic* sciences. Maulānā is considered one of the most erudite scholars in this field. In his work, he not only deals with the meaning of the *Qur'ān*, *Hadith*, and *Fiqh* but also gives conclusive discussions on subjects like chemistry, history, geography, and so on. His *Tafsīr* can be divided into many sections of knowledge. He has used parentheses with skill, which has enhanced the continuity and clarity of his work. He has communicated his erudition in a simple style. The context of every revelation has been mentioned. He has discussed the beauties and opulence of the language of the *Qur'ān*. He has also answered the objections and the doubts of the detractors of the *Qur'ān*. The first seven volumes of this *Tafsīr* were published from 1887 C.E. /1305 A.H. to 1895 C.E. /1313 A.H. The eighth volume which comprises translation and explanation of "*Pārah 'Ammā*" was published from *Mujtabā'i Press* in 1900 C.E. /318 A.H. Subsequently, many editions were published. A concise *Tafsīr-e-Ḥaqqāni* with translation was published by *Matba'-e-Hāmi al-Islām, Delhi* in 1911 C.E. /1330 A.H.

In addition to the above *Tafsīr*, other important interpretations of the *Qur'ān*, compiled in the Sub-continent during the nineteenth century are *Tarjama wa Tafsir Ra'ūfi* of Shah Ra'ūf Ahmad Ra'fat.(1832), *Jam 'e-al-Tafsir* of Nawāb Qutbuddin Bahadur Dehalvi (1872), *Tarjama wa Tafsir Faiḏ-al-Karīm* of Qāzi Sibghatullāh Mufti C, Mufti Maḥmūd and Maulānā Nasīruddīn Muḥammad (1863), *Tafsīr Iksīr A'azam* of Maulānā Muḥammad Iḥtishamuddin Muradābādī (1898), *Tafsir-e-Qādri* of Maulānā Fakhruddin Aḥmad Qādri Firangi Maḥalli (1866), *Ghayat-al-Burhān* of Ḥakīm Sayyid Muḥammad Sayyid Ḥasan Amrohi (1894), *Khulasa-al-Tafsir* of Maulvi Fataḥ Muḥammad Tā'ib Lucknowi (1823), *Gharā'ib-al-Qur'ān* of Maulwi, Deputy, Ḥafiz Naḏīr Aḥmad (1890), etc.¹⁵

Twentieth Century's Works

Among the commentaries and exegeses of Qur'ān written in the twentieth century CE, *Bayān-al-Qur'ān* has an important and special vantage. It is a compelling and momentous feat of interpretation of the Qur'ān. It has been undertaken by Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Ṭḥānwī (1863-1943) with extraordinary clarity, whose only purpose is to make better Muslims out of good Muslims. He strived to transform Muslims towards excellence in faith. Ṭḥānwī realized that due to the impact of the *British* rule, the influence of western philosophy and civilization was spreading rapidly among the Muslims and impressing them with the western lifestyle. This was also due to the lack of religious education, which caused the authority of Islam to wane in their hearts. Western progress, culture, and civilization influenced them to the extent that it was taking them closer to ignorance. The pro-western free mind was causing them to turn away from the Islamic *Shari'ah* and the Islamic way of life. Another development that was troubling Maulana Ṭḥānwī was the emergence of some misguided pseudo-reformers, who were alienating many Muslims from the *Qur'ān* and *Ḥadīth* and bringing them towards un-Islamic practices.

Tafhīm-al-Qur'ān is another famous *Tafsīr* of our times, and a unique contribution to contemporary *Tafsīr* literature. The uniqueness of *Tafhīm* lies in the fact that it looks upon the *Qur'ān* as a Book of guidance (*Hidāyah*). As such, the *Qur'ān* has been approached as the mainspring for guidance, destined to play a decisive role in the reconstruction of thought and action of institutions and society, as was the case when it was revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (S.A.W.). The function of *Tafhīm* is not to dwell primarily or mainly on literary beauties and legalistic niceties, which have not been ignored but to develop an understanding of the *Qur'ān* as the source of guidance.

Its author is Sayyid Abu'l-A'ala Maudūdi (1903-1979) who was a great scholar, revivalist, politician, thinker, as well as a leader of Islamic movements in the *Indo-Pakistan Sub-continent*. Abu'l-A'ala Maudūdi's influence went far beyond the boundaries of *Indo-Pakistan*, where he made a very perceptible impact on the course of events. Besides making an important contribution to Islamic thought in this age, he inspired a whole new generation with the teaching of Islam. The movement for the revival of Islam, "*Jamā'at-e-Islami*," founded and launched by him in 1941 C.E. ranks among the foremost in the world. No student of modern

history can be indifferent to Abu'l-A'ala Maudūdi's status and contribution to the current Islamic revival that is steadily emerging in the world.

Abu'l-A'ala Maudūdi started translating the *Qur'ān* in February 1942 C.E. at the age of thirty-nine. It took him five years to complete the translation and interpretation up to *Surah Yūsuf*. After that, in October 1948, under the Public Safety Act, he was sent to the Central Jail in Multan. During this period, he got the opportunity to complete his work. The preface of the first volume of *Tafhim-al-Qur'ān* bears the date 11th September 1949. He completed his interpretation of *Qur'ān* in 1973 C.E. when he sought to retire from the leadership of the *Jamā'at*. *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* is the greatest product of his life which was dedicated to the glorification of the Lord and engaged in honest intellectual inquiry through a robust scholarship to establish the supremacy of the truth as revealed by *Allah* and as practiced by His Prophet ﷺ. *Tafhīm al-Qur'ān* has been published in six volumes. The first volume appeared in 1950 when Abu'l-A'ala Maudūdi was in prison, and the last one appeared in 1973. His *Tafsīr* encompasses various significant, thought-provoking dimensions and issues.

Abu'l-A'ala Maudūdi emphasized that the *Qur'ān* is a book of a movement. It presents a message, invites the whole human race to the view of reality and social justice, organizes those who respond to its call into an ideological community, and enjoins upon this community the necessity to strive for the socio-moral reconstruction of humanity, both individually and collectively. The *Qur'ān* cannot be correctly understood unless it is viewed in the context of the proper framework.

In addition to the above *Tafāsīr*, from among the important interpretations of the *Qur'ān* compiled in the sub-continent in modern times, some more works of Urdu tafsīr are as follows: *Tarjama Muḏihāt-al-Furqān wa Tafsir-e-Wāḥidi* written by Maulānā Waḥīduzzaman (1905), *Tarjama Furqān Ḥamīd* of Maulwi Muḥammad Insha'allah (1910), *Muḏih Furqān Ḥamīd* of Maulānā Maḥmud-al-Ḥasan Shaikh-al-Hind (1918), *Kanz-al-Iman* of Maulana Aḥmad Raḏa Khan (1911), *Tarjuma-e-Qur'ān* of Khwaja Ḥasan Niḏāmi Dehalvi (1924), *Altāf-al-Raḥmān-bi-Tafsīr-al-Qur'ān* of Maulānā 'Abdul Bāri Ferangi Maḥalli (1925), *Tarjama wa Tafsir e Muḥammadi* of Maulānā Muḥammad bin Ibrāhīm Juna Garhi (1933), *Tarjama wa Tafsir Bayān-al-Subḥ'ān* of Maulānā Sayyid 'Abdul-Dā'im Jalāli (1939), *Tarjama wa Tafsir Tashil-al-Qur'ān* of Maulwi Firozuddin

(1943), and *Al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm-m'a Tarjama wa Tafsīr* written by Maulānā 'Abdul Mājīd Daryābādi (1952).¹⁶

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, it was discussed how the process of *Tafsir* writing had begun during the time of the Prophet and his companions, and in the third century A.H., like other sciences, it also became an independent stream of Islamic science. Islam is a religion in which teaching and preaching occupy a central position. When it spread beyond the boundaries of the Arabian land, the Muslims there used the local languages for preaching and making the native population acquainted with Islamic teachings. Several books comprising Islamic teachings and *Qur'ānic* commandments were written in the local languages and the *Qur'ānic Tafsir* and books related to the elucidation of *Aḥādīth* were also compiled. When Islam arrived in Iran and Central Asia, the *Qur'ān* also was translated into Persian, and commentaries were compiled. In India also, the scholars wrote more books and *Qur'ānic* commentaries in Arabic and Persian. Later, the translations and commentaries of the *Qur'ān* were also written in the languages of this country. Due to the abundance of regional languages in India, translations emerged in every area and region here, which is why we now find commentaries and translations of the *Qur'ān* in Hindi, Gujarati, Deccani, Telugu, Malayalam, Kashmiri, Marathi, and Bengali. Since Urdu has been the most popular and developed language here, there has emerged a large collection of commentaries in this language. The work of translating the *Qur'ān* dates back to the 16th century C.E. when the Urdu language was still in its infancy and printing press was not yet established. In later centuries, it increased at a rapid pace. Even now, Urdu is one of the languages in which most of the translations, commentaries, and interpretations of the *Qur'ān* have been made.

Notes and References

¹ Tafsir refers to exegesis, usually of the Quran. A Quranic *Tafsir* attempts to provide elucidation, explanation, interpretation, context or commentary for clear understanding and conviction of God's will. Principally, a *Tafsir* deals with the issues of linguistics, jurisprudence, and theology.

² Al-Sarakhsi, *Al-Mabsūt*, Beirut: Dar al-kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1988.

³ Saud 'Alam Qasmi, *Minhaj Tarjumah wa Tafsir: Shah WaliAllah, Ibn e Taymiyah, Sir Sayyid, Farahi, Abul kalam Azad, aur Digar Mufasssirin wa Mutarjimin-i-Quran ka Mawaznah*, Aligarh: Faran Academy, 2002, pp. 18-19.

⁴ Khatoon, Uzma, *A critical Study of Select Urdu Tafasir of 20th Century*, 2015, Department of Islamic Studies Aligarh Muslim University Aligarh (India), p. 37

⁵ Salih Abd al-Hakim Sharf al-Din. *Qur'ān Hakim kay Urdu Tarājim*. Mumbai: Maktabah Sharf al-Din. 1984. p. 82.

⁶ Abdul Haq (20 April 1870 – 16 August 1961) was a scholar and a linguist, whom some call *Baba-e-Urdu* (*Father of Urdu*). Abdul Haq was a champion of the Urdu language.

⁷ Jamil Naqvi, *Urdu Tafasir (Kitabiyat)*, Islamabad: Muqtadrah Qaumi Zaban, 1992, p. 23

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.23

⁹ Maulwi Abd al-Haq, *Quran Number Sayyarah Digest*, Idarah Mutala'ah wa Tahqiq, vol. III, 1970, P.217.

¹⁰ Ikhlāq Husayn Qasmi, *Quran Majeed ki Tafsir Chaudah sau Baras Me*, Article: *Tafsir Muradiyah ek Jaizah*, Delhi: Maktaba Jamia Limited, 1905, p. 200; See also, Sayyid Hamid Shattari, *Quran Majid kay Urdu Tarajim wa Tafsir ka Tanqidi Mutala'ah 1914 tak*, Hyderabad, 1982, pp. 99-112.

¹¹ Sayyid Hamid Shattari, *op .cit.* pp. 140-147

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.175-180

¹³ Maulwi 'Abd al-Haq, *Purani Urdu me Quran Majeed kay Tarajim wa Tafasir*, Saiyyarah Digest (Quran Number), Vol.2, Lahore, 1970, p. 177.

¹⁴ Salih Abd al-Hakim Sharf al-Din. *op. cit.* pp. 169-198

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 202-266

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 272-364