

# Chapter 7

## **Social Agency and Translating the Qur'an: The Case of Laleh Bakhtiar's *The Sublime Qur'an* and 4:34**

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### **Introduction**

The Qur'an is the most influential text translated from Arabic, and as such any new translation thereof demands careful examination. This paper will focus on one recent contribution to the growing volume of Qur'anic translations in English: *The Sublime Qur'an*, by Laleh Bakhtiar. After first introducing Bakhtiar's goal in publishing *The Sublime Qur'an*, her thought provoking rendering of 4:34 will be studied in great detail and placed in context with earlier English translations of the same passage, as well as commentary from the vast *tafsiir* (exegetical) literature. We will then proceed with an analysis of *The Sublime Qur'an* as an example of social agency from within the Muslim American community in the twenty-first century. This analysis includes addressing a number of questions. Generally speaking, who has the authority to interpret sacred text? Specifically, how do we understand Dr. Bakhtiar's decision to translate 4:34 in the manner she does? What is her intention and motivation for doing so? What will this translation's impact be for Muslims and non-Muslims in terms of their respective understandings of the Quran and Islam? Additionally, the notion of 'translation *qua tafsiiir*', will be considered and placed in context. *The Sublime Qur'an* stands out as a landmark stage in the expression of Muslim identity in the twenty-first century, and sets the stage for a dramatic reinterpretation of how Muslims and non-Muslims alike understand Islam in the modern era.

Translating sacred text is an act of social agency because it is literally creating a new way for human beings to access – both individually and collectively – texts that are central to the believer's identity as well as the outsider's understanding of the given tradition. *The Sublime Qur'an*, translated into English by Laleh Bakhtiar in 2007, stands out as particularly worthy of analysis as a case study of translation as social agency.

### **What is *The Sublime Qur'an*?**

Laleh Bakhtiar spent seven years researching and preparing *The Sublime Qur'an* before its publication in 2007. This time was not simply spent reworking old

translations, but instead dedicated to building a foundation for a new approach. Citing the lack of internal consistency in translating the same word in the same context that she found in earlier translations, Bakhtiar consciously employed a systematic method whereby she decided on an exact rendering from Arabic into English for each word. This meant that any word, from the most basic particle to the most obscure participle, would be rendered in precisely the same manner each time. To compare, she states that

English translations put emphasis on interpreting a Qur'anic verse without precisely representing the original Arabic word. For example, in one translation, the English verb 'to turn' is used for over forty-three different Arabic words and the noun 'sin,' twenty-three (Bakhtiar: [www.sublimequran.org/](http://www.sublimequran.org/)).

The hope of Bakhtiar's method is that through standardizing the language, the reader will be able to find corresponding terms between Arabic and English with greater ease. Words are inserted in parenthesis where needed for proper English usage. Bakhtiar cites this method as formal equivalence, used by the translators responsible for producing the King James Version of the Bible.

Bakhtiar's new approach alone, combined with the fact that this is the first translation of the Qur'an into English by an American woman, would be due cause for increased attention from popular media. This attention could only be intensified by Dr. Bakhtiar's decision to translate Surah 4:34 in such a way that it diverges significantly from previous translations into English.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, she renders the imperative *اضْرِبُوهُنَّ* *aDrabuuhunna* as "go away from them," meaning that husbands should go away from their wives. First, this is quite different from the translation commonly found, which renders this section as 'hit them.' The use of the root *Daraba* as 'to hit or to strike' is much more common than 'to go away from.' Second, in order for one to see the clear link between the Arabic text and the new translation, one would expect the preposition *min* *من*, or 'from' between the verb and its object *هِنَّ* *hunna* (3<sup>rd</sup> person feminine plural) (Lane, Vol. 5). Dr. Bakhtiar does provide rationale for her decision at both linguistic and theological levels; however, it may be more beneficial first to see the entire verse so as to put this single line in more context. The reader will notice first that Bakhtiar inserts the parenthetical notation (f) so that the audience understands when the pronouns in question refer only to women (*هِنَّ* *hunna*), as opposed to masculine and often generic pronoun (*هم* *hum*):

Verse 4:34:

Men are supporters of wives because God has given some of them an advantage over others and because they spend of their wealth. So the ones (f)

who are in accord with morality are the ones (f) who are morally obligated, the ones (f) who guard the unseen of what God has kept safe. But those (f) whose resistance you fear, then admonish them (f) and abandon them (f) in their sleeping place *then go away from them (f)*; and if they (f) obey you, surely look not for any way against them; truly God is Lofty, Great (Bakhtiar 2007, italics inserted).

To compare this with an English translation that is viewed quite highly with academic circles, A.J. Arberry's rendering of this same verse, first published in 1955, is below:

Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another, and for that they have expended of their property. Righteous women are therefore obedient, guarding the secret for God's guarding. And those you fear may be rebellious admonish; banish them to their couches, *and beat them*. If they then obey you, look not for any way against them; God is All-high, All-great (Arberry 1955).

Each follows the Arabic text and establishes a three part plan of action for husbands to follow when their wives are disobedient. Bakhtiar cites Edward Lane's famed Arabic to English lexicon as the source of her inspiration, and goes so far as to include an image of the relevant pages from the lexicon on her website. Indeed, she makes the claim that if there are 25 possible meanings available for *Daraba*, then why should Muslims choose one that is inconsistent with both the Qur'an and the Sunnah (the record of the Prophet's words and actions)(Bakhtiar: [thesublimequran.org](http://thesublimequran.org))? Bakhtiar stresses that this verse cannot be fully understood without making reference to Chapter 2, verse 231 in the Qur'an that also address the ways husbands should conduct themselves with their wives, this time when contemplating divorce. For comparison, Bakhtiar's rendering is below, followed by Arberry's.

*The Sublime Qur'an:* 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; and hold them (f) not back by injuring them so that you commit aggression, and whoever commits that, then indeed he does wrong to himself; and take not the Signs of God to yourselves in mockery; remember the divine blessing of God on you and what He sent forth to you of the Book and wisdom; He admonishes you with it; and be Godfearing of God and know that God is knowing of everything.

*The Koran Interpreted:* When you divorce women, and they have reached their term, then retain them honourably or set them free honourably; do not retain them by force, to transgress; whoever does that has wronged himself. Take not

God's signs in mockery, and remember God's blessing upon you, and the Book and the Wisdom He has sent down on you, to admonish you. And fear God, and know that God has knowledge of everything.

The two are quite similar with regard to word choice and meaning, while naturally the stylistic variance reflects writers separated by almost fifty years (2007/1955) and different variants of English (American/UK). There is certainly agreement that husbands should not injure or harm their wives while contemplating divorce, regardless of whether or not the marriage is maintained or dissolved. One of Dr. Bakhtiar's central tenets is that the traditional understanding of 4:34 simply is too inconsistent with 2:231 for it to make sense. Additionally, as a faithful Muslim, it conflicts with her understanding of the Prophet Muhammad's values as expressed in the Hadith (oral traditions regarding the Prophet Muhammad's sayings and actions), which are subsequently explicated in the Sunnah. This call for consistency is not universal, and may even be construed as an attempt to make the Qur'an – and this verse in particular – more palatable to Western non-Muslim audiences. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the prolific Islamic Studies scholar, was quoted in media coverage related *The Sublime Qur'an*, that he "is not apologetic about why the Qur'an says this," going on to note that there are passages in the Bible that advocate stoning people to death (MacFarquhar: 23)<sup>ii</sup>. Still, there is substantial discussion of and effort within the *tafsiir* corpus to resolve the potential tension between the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's recorded comments and attitudes towards the question of whether or not husbands are permitted to beat their wives.<sup>iii</sup> At this juncture we turn to discuss the variety of responses to this verse within the tradition.

### **An Overview of Responses to 4:34**

As noted above, Bakhtiar is certainly not the first scholar to tackle 4:34 and all of its complexities. Indeed, one of the leading figures in the development of Islamic jurisprudence, the jurist Al-Shafi'i (d. 820), gave considerable thought to the issue. Kecia Ali states:

Muhammad's *sunnah* governs the way Shafi'i discusses Q 4:34, rendering what is a straightforward textual permission or command into something that should, in fact, be avoided as much as possible. This illustrates [one of Al-Shafi'i's strategies] in reconciling the evidence on striking women: differentiating between what is allowed and what is preferred. Despite the eventual permission for striking, Shafi'i still discourages it through his selection and presentation of Sunnah evidence. While the Qur'anic revelation necessitates a new Sunnah (to abrogate the explicit prohibition "Do not strike God's female servants"), this new Sunnah is clearly only grudgingly

accepting of male use of the permission to strike. Thus, for Shafi'i, the Prophet's words "The best of you will not strike" contain "an indication that striking them is allowed; [it is] not obligatory to strike them." In this context, Shafi'i alludes to the Prophet's personal behavior (Ali: 148).<sup>iv</sup>

Al-Shafi'i's thinking here is remarkably similar to Bakhtiar, who as we shall see below, puts greatest weight in the Sunnah for the theological foundation of why she chooses to translate 4:34 as 'go away from' instead of 'to hit'.

For another source in this debate, we turn to the medieval commentator Zamakhshari (d. 1143), who discusses the ever important *asbab al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation) for the verse. In the most detailed account available, we learn that a man slapped his wife, whose father then remonstrated with the Prophet Muhammad that his was a noble daughter, undeserving of such treatment. The Prophet Muhammad replied that a form of retaliation (*qisas*) should apply, however 4:34 was revealed before this *qisas* could take place. The Prophet Muhammad responds to the revelation by saying 'We wished something and God wished something else. What God wishes is best,' thus revoking the retaliation (al-Zamakhshari 1998: Vol 2, 67).<sup>v</sup> This episode lays the groundwork for a legal and theological framework in which the action is permitted by God, but regretfully so according to the Prophet. Late nineteenth century Egyptian religious leader and reformer Muhammad Abduh argues that this is a permission that amounts to virtual prohibition and states that he had been guided to this ultimate prohibition before coming across the Prophetic traditions indicating it (Rida: 16). Popular Islamist leader Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) cautioned that a man may only strike his wife in order to 'protect the family against collapse' (Qutb: 137).

It is not difficult for the observer to note that commentaries from the medieval and modern period alike do not quibble with the normativity of men as supreme and dominant over women. However concerned they may be with fair treatment for disobedient women as outlined in 4:34, the central premise of male domination expresses the "natural" order of things" (Mahmoud: 540). Mahmoud goes on:

If we follow the exegetical tradition and read the verse sequentially this would be the point when the husband is permitted to beat his adamantly and tenaciously disobedient wife. The permission is simply expressed by the verb "*adribuhunna*" without any qualifications. As in many instances of Qur'anic exegesis the unspecificity of a Qur'anic construction is made specific by the extra-Qur'anic material. In dealing with this verse, the exegetes follow two strategies to qualify

the verb "*adribhunna*": a "limitation" strategy and a "virtual abrogation" strategy. What is described here as a "limitation" strategy is a reading of the beating measure that has achieved a near-consensus status among exegetes and jurists. Pushed to its logical extreme, this can turn into what may be described as a "virtual abrogation" strategy (Mahmoud: 544).

Insertion of extra-Qur'anic material such as Abdullah Yusuf Ali's 'and beat them [lightly]' is an example of the 'limitation' strategy. The notion that 'the best of you' would not strike their wives is an example of the 'virtual abrogation' strategy. According to Mahmoud, while the 'limitation' strategy dominates exegetical analysis of this verse, the 'virtual abrogation' tactic is the only way to forge a path whereby the Muslim community may understand that its sacred text does not grant permission for any manner of domestic violence (Mahmoud: 555).

Predictably, modern Muslim feminists have taken different approaches to understanding this verse and placing it in both historical context and a theological framework more conducive to their worldview. Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist whose work has pushed considerable boundaries, argues that Islam was originally an egalitarian venture that was quickly hijacked by misogynists even while the Prophet Muhammad was still alive. Egyptian scholar Leila Ahmed makes a similar case; both she and Mernissi deploy a combination of sociological and historical arguments, both decrying the tragic nature of the turn taken early on by the early Muslim community with regards to the role and rights of women therein. Amina Wadud, an American convert, tackles the issue from a very different viewpoint, namely that of issuing a quasi-*tafsiir* of her own, the groundbreaking work *Qur'an and Women*. While Wadud argues for a more inclusive sense of gender as expressed within the Qur'an on grammatical and theological terms similar to that of Bakhtiar, there is one notable point of divergence between them. Wadud includes a glossary of selected terms at the outset, where she renders *Daraba* as simply 'to strike,' and does not hint at any other possible meanings (Wadud: xxv). Instead, Wadud writes that a more inclusive understanding of the text is more logical on the grounds of a 'unified revelation' (*tawhid al-wahy*), whereby our understanding of the Qur'an should be grounded in a holistic understanding of the text as it expresses itself (Wadud: xii). This is a well rounded version of the tried and true model of *tafsir al-Qur'an b-il-Qur'an*,<sup>vi</sup> that is, interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an. Thus it is possible for new interpretations of the text to come forth without issuing necessarily new translations (Wadud: 11).<sup>vi</sup>

The influence of the verse's traditional understanding is by no means restricted to Muslims living in Muslim majority communities. A prime example comes in a 2007 German court case where a judge ruled against a Moroccan woman's case for seeking a speedy divorce from her husband on the basis of the beatings she had suffered at his hands and his repeated threats to her life. The judge denied the woman's request on the grounds that women in Morocco routinely receive this treatment from their husbands, that the Qur'an sanctions said treatment, and that the man in question had a solid claim that his wife had dishonored him by not wearing the veil even though the family had lived in Germany for eight years. The judge in question was removed from the case following the publication of her decision by the woman's counsel, however the fact that the ruling was issued in the first place is the key point of relevance to our discussion here. Dunn and Kellison note that the judge was not a member of the *'ulama* (scholars trained to interpret sharia), nor a *qaDi* (judge) in a court where Islamic law is applied (Dunn and Kellison: 12). By contrast, she is an official of a civil court in a democratic country where citizens' rights are based on the constitution, and not the sacred text of any religious group. Thus translations such as *The Sublime Qur'an* address the perception that the Qur'an, and by extension Muslims, sanction domestic violence.

Another example from the realm of international treaties and law comes in the form of the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (UIDHR), issued in 1981 as a response to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adapted by the United Nations in 1948. The UIDHR establishes an Islamic foundation for human rights as found in the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In *Islam and Human Rights*, Ann Elizabeth Mayer discusses differences between the two documents, as well as the subtle, yet significant, differences between the official English translation and the original Arabic text. The original Arabic text of the UIDHR references 4:34 in Article 20, entitled "Rights of Married Women," while the English translation does not (Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights). Mayer explores the apologetic nature of the UIDHR and the writers' reasons for not including sections specific to single men, single women, or married men; concluding that

To do so would make it all too obvious that they were endorsing a tradition, patriarchal system in which the law supports male control over females and a regime of male privilege in matters of marriage and divorce. For example, if they catalogued as rights of the husband his entitlements to beat his disobedient wife, have four wives at a time, and to have sexual intercourse regardless of his wife's wishes unless she has religiously acceptable grounds for her refusal, this would give their whole scheme the retrograde appearance that they were seeking to avoid (Mayer: 105).

Part of Bakhtiar's goal is to challenge the perception that the types of 'entitlements' outlined above are indeed licit under a proper understanding of the Qur'an and Sunnah. That her view diverges from that of the tradition, particularly as found in the *tafsir*, brings our discussion to the next key question, namely that of how we assign authority to various commentaries and translations when the visions expressed by the respective exegetes are at odds with one another.

### **Who has the authority to translate the Qur'an?**

Assessing the legitimacy of any translation of sacred text often traces back to questioning the authority of the translator to render the text in question from one language into another. This authority may be derived from a variety of means, including membership of a caste of scholars trained in the religious sciences. In the case of Islam, this largely refers to knowledge of the Qur'an, Hadith, Sunnah, and Fiqh (jurisprudence). From within the community of faith, there may be a question of prioritizing a translation of one's own denomination as opposed to that produced from a different group, especially if the other denomination is not deemed fully valid. It may derive from recognized expertise, that is to say that the translator is acknowledged to be fully proficient in the relevant languages and knowledgeable of similar cultures, and as such the translation produced is deemed credible. Are translations by believers more valid than those issued by outsiders? This is an especially relevant question when discussing the matter of translating the Qur'an into European languages, where there the encounter between European Christendom and Islam is long marked with equal parts intentional slander and tragic misunderstanding.<sup>vii</sup> To what extent is more validity assigned to translations issued by believers identified as 'Arab' as opposed to non-Arabs? Believers and non-believers? Scholars and members of the general public? These and other questions underpin our assessment of any translation, and especially so in the case of *The Sublime Qur'an*.

In terms of membership in a learned caste, Bakhtiar is not a member of the *'ulama*, but is instead operating as an independent scholar. As for a denominational affiliation, she associates most closely with Sufism. She assures visitors to her website that she is "most certainly a Muslim woman... schooled in Sufism which includes both the Jafari (Shia) and Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafii (Sunni) points of view...While I understand the positions of each group, I do not represent any specific one as I find living in America makes it difficult enough to be a Muslim, much less to choose to follow one sect or another" (Bakhtiar: thesublimequran.org). Thus Bakhtiar claims good standing both in

terms of her knowledge and the nature of her faith, which is inclusive of all Muslims. One criticism of *The Sublime Qur'an* is that because Bakhtiar does not *speak* Arabic, that she then is not qualified to translate the Qur'an. Dweik and Shakra state, "It is recommended that the translator of religious texts should be well versed in the two languages and the two cultures (Arabic and English) so as not to miss any fragment or component of the meaning of the collocations existing in religious texts." While she admits that she is "unlettered in Arabic," Bakhtiar references her years of tutoring in Classical Arabic as the source of her linguistic expertise (Bakhtiar: [thesublimequran.org](http://thesublimequran.org)). She responds that other translators whose native language is not Arabic have not faced the same criticism, concluding that, "If you go through all the criticisms, when it comes down to it, the only difference is ...I'm a woman" (Scrivner: A21). While she may not have spent significant time living in an Arabic speaking country, certainly living in Iran constitutes exposure to a culture where Islam features quite prominently. This highlights part of the debate surrounding credentials, authority, and legitimacy.

We have stated that the Qur'an may be considered to be the most influential Arabic text, but the transnational element of Muslim identity means that it is much more than an Arabic text. The Qur'an is experienced daily by hundreds of millions of believers for whom the Arabic language is comprehensively unintelligible except that it is understood to convey religious or spiritual truth.<sup>viii</sup> Additionally, we should not operate under the false assumption that all native Arabic speakers understand the language of the Qur'an perfectly. As Khaleel Muhammad notes, "Even for native Arabic speakers, the Qur'an is a difficult document. Its archaic language and verse structure are difficult hurdles to cross. Translation only accentuates the complexity" (Mohammed: 13). Indeed, the extent of the gap even between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Colloquial Arabic (*'amaya*) is such that many university students from the United States travelling to an Arab country for the first time complain that no one understands them, that they are laughed at by native Arabic speakers, and that at times they feel as if they have not learned 'real' Arabic. The Arabic of the Qur'an is removed even further than MSA from the *'amaya* used by native speakers for daily life. The difference is akin to the gap between modern colloquial English and late 16<sup>th</sup>/early 17<sup>th</sup> century Shakespeare, or perhaps even Chaucer's Middle English as found in *The Canterbury Tales* (composed between 1387 and 1400). The last two are recognized by speakers of the latter as being 'the same language,' but certainly not anything that one would use in typical communications.

When evaluating translations of the Qur'an, one finds a wide range of styles. Each will be evaluated linguistically and theologically, but the range available ensures that some distinctions may be made on the grounds of personal preference alone. Specific to 4:34, some readers may object to Bakhtiar's rendering on linguistic grounds, while others may do so for theological reasons. By contrast, *The Sublime Qur'an* may receive praise from different readers on the same grounds for which it is rejected by others. Additionally, there is much contestation regarding the issue of whether the right to derive new meanings should be limited to a select few. Parties interested in having the 'best' translation possible will evaluate each new version, accepting and discarding as they see fit. This raises the question: to what degree is *The Sublime Qur'an* accepted?

### **Response to the new vision**

*The Sublime Qur'an* has elicited both praise and criticism from various Muslim organizations within North America. Mohammad Ashraf, the head of the Islamic Society of North America (Canada) stated that his organization would not sell the book in its bookstore, in part because Dr. Bakhtiar did not receive her training at an institution properly accredited to dispense the requisite expertise, such as the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia (Scrivner, A21). A clear indication that this was by no means a dominant view within the organization as a whole came by way of a public statement from the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) requesting that Ashraf retract his threat to ban the sale of *The Sublime Qur'an* from his bookstore, adding that Bakhtiar's translation of 4:34 is in keeping with the translation issued in 2003 by Dr Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, Rector of the International Islamic University of Malaysia, in a 2003 special edition of *Islamic Horizons*, "ISNA's flagship publication" (Mattson: [www.isna.net/articles/Press-Releases/PUBLIC-STATEMENT.aspx](http://www.isna.net/articles/Press-Releases/PUBLIC-STATEMENT.aspx)). The reception from non-Muslim circles has been quite positive, as cited by letters to the editor received in response to coverage of the translation published in *The Toronto Star*. Readers commended Dr. Bakhtiar's "courage for wading into an area that Muslim men think is theirs and theirs alone", while also stating that unless there is a "reciprocal section" about how women should treat disobedient men, "then it seems that no creative interpretation...will lead to any good for women" (Berger: AA07).

To be clear, improving the lives of Muslim women through this translation is one of Bakhtiar's goals. This mission became clear to her shortly after the first public presentation of her findings in November 2006 at the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity (WISE) Conference, where 150 Muslim

women from around the world gathered to discuss the possibilities of forming a Women's Islamic Council. She writes:

At the end of the session, two Muslim women approached me. They said that they work in shelters for battered women and that they and the women in the shelters have been waiting for 1400 years for someone to pay attention to this issue through a translation of the Quran. The heavy weight of responsibility suddenly fell upon my shoulders. I had to publish my findings as soon as possible so that, with the Will of God, one less woman: wife, mother, sister, daughter, cousin, friend, in general, or Muslim wife, in particular, would be beaten at all and especially not in the Name of God; so that by initiating a dialogue, the minds of the exclusivists will awaken to consciousness and conscience; they will counsel those husbands who place their hand on the Word of God and give themselves permission to beat their wives, that they have neither the legal nor the moral right to do that. It is the prayer of all women throughout the world that all future translations of the Quran, in whatever language, will revert the interpretation back to the legal and moral principles of the Quran and Sunnah of the blessed Prophet, *inshallah*. God knows best (Bakhtiar: thesublimequran.org).

This personal testimony is perhaps the strongest evidence that *The Sublime Qur'an* is an example of translation as social agency. Dr. Bakhtiar seeks to improve the lot of Muslim women around the world now and in the future. She hopes to endow certain parties within the Muslim community with 'consciousness and conscience'.

*The Sublime Qur'an* received additional approval when best-selling American author Dave Eggers chose it as the translation to be used when citing the Qur'an in his recent nonfiction work *Zeitoun*. The work chronicles the story of an Arab American Muslim family from New Orleans in the weeks before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In the acknowledgements section at the book's conclusion, Mr. Eggers states that many translations of the Qur'an into English were consulted, and that the quotations in the book are evidence that "the Qur'an contains very powerful and surpassingly beautiful language, and this English edition reflects that beauty exceedingly well" (Eggers: 355). That Mr. Eggers does not specify the translation being used until the 'fine print' section of his book is not surprising; to do otherwise would detract from his flowing prose. However, it is making quite a statement that of all the translations available to him; he chose this most recent version. In so doing, he provides a two-fold legitimization for Bakhtiar's work: explicitly in terms of her style and word choice, and implicitly by sanctioning the theological viewpoint that Bakhtiar states specifically she hopes to convey through this version.

While improving the audience's understanding through crafting beautiful sentences in English may be applauded from a strict literary approach, we have noted that Bakhtiar's goal is much deeper, and includes improving the lives of Muslim women. As to the criticism that she may be 'changing' the Qur'an, she responds accordingly:

There is no change in the Arabic. The change is in our perception, our interpretation. The understanding of "go away" is a **revert interpretation** to how the blessed Prophet understood it. Whoever believes in and follows the Sunnah should logically agree with reverting the interpretation to the way that the blessed Prophet understood it (Bakhtiar: [thesublimequran.org](http://thesublimequran.org), emphasis retained from original).

This is an example of what may be termed "*translation qua tafsir*," whereby new translations of the Qur'an represent new interpretations. Bakhtiar's efforts are representative of a time and place in which translation is understood to be more than straightforward rendering of meaning in one language to 'the exact same' meaning in another, and where the existence of a social or theological agenda is quite transparent. Thus, Bakhtiar translates as a Muslim woman working in part for Muslim women (as well as Muslim men, and non Muslims).

Bakhtiar's claim that her translation is a 'revert interpretation' places her in the position of reclaiming the text's true or original nature. There can be no better example of *tafsir* – textual interpretation – than for the interpreter to claim to possess the truest interpretation of the text, which necessitates our discussion of 'translation *qua tafsir*' within the modern Muslim community today, as well as the related question of who exactly is considered qualified to offer said interpretation.

Still, it is curious that in her work she does not document the extensive material available, as noted above, documenting the history of interpretation around this verse specifically, and around the issue of relations between men and women in Islam more generally. The inclusion of this material would help ground her work in the broader context of the *tafsir* tradition. However, it is possible that she does not view herself in that vein, or perhaps she does not believe that her audience is interested in assessing the extent to which her work is similar to or different from that of exegetes from the medieval or modern period. By labeling her work as a 'revert interpretation,' Bakhtiar creates the impression that her translation stands outside of the patriarchal

tradition, and that it represents a touch stone of sorts for those concerned with the 'true' understanding of this highly problematic verse.

### **Translation qua tafsīr**

There is a long standing tradition of *tafsīr* within the Islamic tradition dating back to the earliest days of the Muslim community. From the outset, there was great interest in, and need for, applying the sacred text to matters emerging through the course of everyday life as well as of interest to the growing community as a whole. How could the early Muslim community settle disputes, except through recourse to the text that set them apart from all others, literally, the 'recitation' of God's words? What would they do when faced with gaps between the literal, most straight forward understanding of the text on one side, and the demands of their changing social and political reality on the other? While the Hadith tradition operates partially to fill this gap, so do the bodies of *tafsīr* and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) that are developed over the subsequent 1400 years.

Great stock is placed in commentaries from the classical, medieval and modern periods such as al-Shafi'i (d. 820 CE), al-Tabari (d. 923), al-Zamakhshari (d. 1143), 'Abdu (d. 1905), Qaradawi (b. 1926), Rida (d. 1935), and Qutb (d. 1966). All of these exegetes commented on the issue of whether or not the Qur'an permits domestic violence generally, and specifically on 4:34's contribution to the matter. At times expressing the desire to allow a husband the right to strike his wife while at the same time advising him that such an act is highly regrettable and should be avoided whenever possible. Some modern day translators such as Abdullah Yusuf Ali go so far as to insert adjectives so that the verse reads 'and beat them [lightly]' (Ali: 195). It is theologically difficult to state outright that the text itself is wrong *per se* for those operating within the tradition as well as those outside observers wishing to respect widely held values regarding the authority of the text itself. Instead exegetes and translators operating within a modern day framework holding domestic violence as morally abhorrent must instead insist that the traditional understanding and interpretation of this verse is incorrect. Similarly, it is decidedly antithetical, and thus uncomfortable, for believers to state that the Prophet Muhammad made any mistakes or was wrong in any way, so the hermeneutical move by feminist commentators has instead blamed subsequent interpreters for their misogynistic views. This narrative is attractive to many because it avoids directly addressing the existence of this, and other, verses understood as problematic from a feminist or human rights point of view.

English translations of the Qur'an are not the only ones fitting into this genre of translation *qua tafsiir*. Non-Arabic speaking Muslims have translated the Qur'an into local vernacular for centuries. Translations into African languages such as Kiswahili, Hausa, and Wolof abound with examples whereby reformers sought to make the Qur'an more accessible by providing the masses with a version in their own language. This has led to changes in the way that Arabic is used by Muslim community leaders. While learned scholars may produce treatises in Arabic for circulation with elite circles, the volume of literature produced in vernacular for popular consumption far exceeds material in Arabic (Lomeier: 406-7). Additionally, while Arabic continues to retain its 'sacrality' within Sub-Saharan Muslim communities, religious scholars hoping to achieve a large following have 'consequently stopped writing in Arabic and switched to the respective local, national and transnational languages' (Lomeier: 409).

There is an outstanding example of 'translation *qua tafsiir*' in the form of a Kiswahili translation of the Qur'an by Shaykh 'Abdallah Ali al-Farsi (d. 1982). Although he was known in Kenya in the 1970's for his pro-Wahhabi position and ties to Saudi Arabia, he rejected a key aspect of Wahhabi theology when he did not translate certain verses to reflect their anthropomorphic understanding. Specifically, Qur'an 7:54 and the question of whether the phrase "استوى على" *istuuwa 'ala* should be taken to mean that God literally or metaphorically sits on a throne. Al-Farsi renders it as 'God reigned/ruled/governed from the throne' (Lomeier" 415). Additionally:

Shaykh 'Abdallah Ali al-Farsi's rejection of the literal translation of these verses and his insistence on an allegoric interpretation was not interpreted, now, by his followers as well as his opponents in Kenya, as a purely (but well-founded) theological choice, but was rather seen, by both his followers and his opponents, as a manifestation of Shaykh 'Abdallah Ali al-Farsi's rejection of a major Wahhabi tenet of faith and, thus, implicitly, as a rejection of Saudi politics, a political turn expressed in a religious code, motivated by Shaykh 'Abdallah Ali al-Farsi's alleged (and somehow enigmatic) late-life-opposition to Saudi politics and 'Wahhabi Islam': Shaykh 'Abdallah Ali al-Farsi's followers (and opponents) were virtually unable to see a theological argument as a theological argument (Lomeier: 416).

The question of whether the political and the theological can truly be separated in the Islamic tradition notwithstanding, this raises an excellent point for comparison between al-Farsi and Bakhtiar. Unlike al-Farsi's translation, *The Sublime Qur'an* should be understood as both a political and a theological argument. The theological aspect is clear through her claim that hers is a 'revert interpretation,' while the political aspect is contained in her expressed

goal to alter the way Muslim husbands treat their wives. Advocating this type of change is the definition of social action, and thus, *The Sublime Qur'an* is a tool of social agency.

## **Conclusion**

Dr. Bakhtiar openly states that she is choosing to provide a new interpretation that is more agreeable with her religious beliefs. As the first American woman to translate the Qur'an into English, she is deliberately swimming against the tide of tradition in order to present an understanding of God's Speech (*kalamullah*) that provides a religious foundation that establishes specific guidelines for Muslim men – and consequently guarantees certain rights for Muslim women.

Bakhtiar's translation is a sign that 'translation *qua tafsir*' is a growing field in Islam today. This tradition reflects the extent to which the Muslim community has grown and diversified. An important aspect of this diversification is the development of new voices expressing ideas and points of view that were previously impossible, unwelcome, or both. Her translation may differ from that of the tradition in myriad ways; however it stands amidst previous translations and gives voice to a growing constituency within both scholarly and popular audiences.

Translations change in accordance with believers' understanding of the faith and with broader historical context, i.e. updating text to account for changes in theology and modernity. Bakhtiar's work is an example of translation as a tool for advocating not only a revision, but in many ways 'reversion' whereby Muslims are called to slough off centuries of errant tradition in order to return to the original understanding of 4:34. Using the term 'fundamentalism' or 'radical' to describe her work may be specious or ironic, but it does merit further consideration as to whether or not *The Sublime Qur'an* – as well as similar translations issued in the same vein – will be understood as reviving elements of the tradition understood as having been lost through the passage of time and subsequent strata of interpretation. Like an archaeologist sifting through shards of pottery and abandoned ruins, Bakhtiar sifted through the tradition in order to find a vision that fit her understanding of her faith.

*The Sublime Qur'an* is a milestone – both in the field of English-language translations of the Qur'an and as a prime example of social agency on the part of the growing feminist voices within the Muslim community. It cannot be ignored, and must be studied so as to be appreciated and appropriately contextualized against the backdrop of popular and scholarly activity

surrounding efforts to interpret this tradition, communicate its values, and ultimately, to chart the path that its followers will take into the twenty-first century and beyond.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Bakhtiar is not the first person to propose this translation for 4:34. Dr. Abdul-Hamid Abu Sulayman, Tariq Suweidan, to name two scholars, have previously suggested this translation.

<sup>ii</sup> Deuteronomy 22:20-21 is one example of a Biblical passage that not only discusses, but advises stoning, in case a husband discovers that his wife is not a virgin on their wedding night.

<sup>iii</sup> See Scott and Mahmoud. For an in depth overview of the opinions held by these, and other, exegetes from the tafsir tradition regarding Qur'an 4:34.

<sup>iv</sup> Ali also discusses Al-Shafi'i's analytical framework for sifting through the seemingly contradictory sources within the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

<sup>v</sup> See Mahmoud, 538-39, for further background on the protagonists involved in this incident. He concludes that this incident has generally been accepted by classical and modern exegetes as the verse's direct 'occasion of revelation.'" Mahmoud frames his analysis primarily by framing the semantic range of possibilities for *qawamma* (to sustain) and *nushuz* (disobedience) as they figure in 4:34.

<sup>vi</sup> Wadud uses both Pickthall and Yusuf Ali translations for the majority of the Qur'anic references in her book, altering it only to change "insan" from "mankind" to "humankind."

<sup>vii</sup> See Watt and Bell, pp. 173-186 for a discussion of earliest European interest in the Qur'an dating to Peter the Venerable in the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century CE; Mohammad, 2-3 for an overview of early English translations of the Qur'an; and Loimeier, 410-11 for discussion of efforts in East Africa to translate the Qur'an into Kiswahili by Christian missionaries, amongst others.

<sup>viii</sup> See Graham, Nelson, and Sells; for work regarding the Qur'an's value to Muslims as a text *heard* compared to its value as a text *read*. Especially in the latter case, the text is experienced viscerally, thus transcending the mere confines of denotative comprehension encompassed by straightforward 'reading' of the text. This creates a context in which denotative knowledge of the Arabic language may be considered

secondary to connotative recognition of the language's power when the Qur'an is recited in public or private settings.

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