



**A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON SELECTED ANTHROPOMORPHIC VERSES IN  
THE TRANSLATION OF THE QUR'AN: MOHAAMMAD ASAD'S THE  
MESSAGE OF THE QUR'AN AS MODEL**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is an attempt to investigate on translation of anthropomorphic verses in the Qur'an as rendered by some English translators, with a focus on Muhammad Asad, it is a translated copy of the Qur'an. It also assessed how some English translators handled some anthropomorphic terms such as 'wajhullah, literally 'face of Allah' which fall within the realm of the ambiguous verses in the Qur'an. The need to undertake this study is necessitated by the fact that the translator (Asad) was not an Arabiy by native. In addition to that, he was a convert who only became well grounded in Islam after he embraced the religion. So, it will be interesting to prose into his interpretation of such highly sensitive term of the Qur'an. To the greater extent, his interpretation will explore whether or not his former faith has some influence on his thought and to what extent the influence of his sources of works have impactful his translation. To achieve this purpose, a combination of analogical and exegetical methods shall be used.*

### **Introduction**

One of the greatest difficulties that the Qur'an translators have faced is rendering those verses in which, material, anthropomorphic qualities have been attributed to Allah. Khair (2020) given the deep knowledge of theological dimensions of the concept relating to God, this has been a challenging area, which has also been the centre for attention and diverse opinions by the philosophers, theologians and the exegetes. It also has direct implications for Qur'an translation. El-sayed (2017). This study attempts to investigate the problem faced by English translation of the Quran while rendering the anthropomorphic verse with special emphasis on the message of the Qur'an by Muhammad Asad. Only one anthropomorphic image is selected as model (*wajih Allah*)

the sake of Allah. In order to have more space to bring other translator views on the concerning image of the sake of Allah from different exegetical works.

The anthropomorphic verses referred to those verses in the Qur'an that contain the images been used to refers to certain part of Allah as it is been used in both the Qur'an and Hadith to describe Allah. Example, when Allah says in the Qur'an describing Himself as having a hand, face, or sitting on the throne etc. El-sayed (2017). The debate and expression that establish the attributes of God where images have been attributed to Allah or where it state that He will be seen by the believers hereafter became a subject of controversial among theologians who specialized on *Tawhid*. Haleem (2004) those expressions may lead to anthropomorphism.

The three major Schools that trend in this study are: the traditionalist, who also refers to as literalist or *Salafis*. (They had been described as a group who are at the mainstream of the teaching of companions of the prophet). Hussein (2001). To them all those images must be affirmed has been used by Allah without any effort of adopting *ta'wil*. To them, this would save any translator from ascribing to Allah what He did not ascribe to Himself Also, it would enable them to avoid going to any issue related to faith which may eventually create confusion that can damage the Muslim's doctrine and turn a believer to atheism.

The second groups that trend in this issue are the *Muta'zilites*. This group believe that those verses with images or attribute of God can be allegorically interpreted and discuss with full explanation to enable the readers have vivid view of their esoteric meaning with the help of allegorical allusion. William (2008) the third trend is primarily known by some Muslims as Asharites who try to maintain balance between the first and second groups with some exception. The Asharite like the mutazilite continued to use allegorical interpretation with respect to the anthropomorphic description of God attribute, however they tried to construct theology which in some existence close to that of traditionalist.

### **The Entomology of the terms “Anthropomorphism”**

According to Longman English Dictionary, the term anthropomorphism is defined as “the idea that gods, animals, or object have human forms or qualities or the belief that God can appear in a human or animal form.(1978)In the Encyclopedia of psychology and Religion, anthropomorphism is explained as “The portrayal of the gods and spiritual powers beyond and in the World as having human appearance and qualities. It is critically reversed the saying that “human were made in the images of God” To the God is made in the image of humans” Oliver (2006). However in the Encyclopedia of Religion, etymology of the term anthropomorphism is derived from the Greek Word “anthropos” (human being) and “morphe” (form).In addition to its explanation, Anthropomorphism is a modern term attested since the eighteen century, denoting the practically universal tendency to form religious concepts and ideas on a more basis level. The idea has a long history to Western through Ancient Greek, including patristic, literature referred (contemptuously) to “anthropomorphism” meaning people holding anthropomorphic ideas of the divine (Encyclopedia of religion 2005).

### Challenges of Translating the Anthropomorphic Verses of the Quran

According to A .Muhammad (2018).The basic features whereby, any translator could adopt while making translation of anthropomorphic in the Quran has not been stated in the teaching of Islamic theology this has however, pose some difficulties for most translators in rendering the meaning of some anthropomorphic verses in the Quran properly. One of the major contending issue is that the Quran itself in many places in the chapters of the Quran uses anthropomorphic terms to describe God such as references to His “Hand” or “Face” and at the same time the Quran is also emphatically denies ideas that there are similarities between God and human-beings. It is clearly stated that He is like nothing that we know. This definitely has subjected some scholars to adopt their reason to give the interpretation of this verse through the use of the allegorical knowledge. A. Muhammad (2018). Since Allah Himself invites the believers to ponder and reflect over the meaning of verses of Quran 4 verse 82 elucidate on this as read;

Will they not then ponder on the Quran? if it had been from other than Allah they would have found therein much incongruity.....’’.to add Arabic text of the Quran’’

On the other hand, the anthropomorphic images of Allah according to *at-Tahaw*’s views, refers to action, movements and body organs. That is why they are different from the names and attributes of God. The anthropomorphic images are not abstract and are considered unseen “*Ghaib*”. The traditionalists belief that Muslims are expected to believe and accept the anthropomorphic verses which contain the images of God without discussing their how-ness, feature, or shape. At-tahawi (2013).

It should be observed here that, in the early century of Islam this particular problem has generated a serious and extensive debate which contributed to the emergence of the early theological debates.For instance, *Imam Ahmad bn hambala* leading Traditionalist/literalist leader believed that these attributes should be literarily interpreted. A Ahmed(2017).Similarly Islamic scholars such as *Bagawi, Ibn-Taymiyya and Ibn Kathir* also preferred literal reading of such verses. Thisview was overwhelmingly opposed by the rationalists which was championed by the mutazilites and their allies like maturidis, they argue that those verses require any translator to read them metaphorically Hussein (2002) In addition to that some well known exegeses, such *ar-Razi of Tafsir al-Kabir, Zama-Khashari Muhammad Abdullah of Tafsir al-mannar and al-Baydawi* had views that are more similar to that of the mutazilite they submitted that verses that related to God’s attributes that seems to be ambiguous by assign to God the attributes of man require extra form of interpretation. Sheechoo (2004)

At this point, the translators face a lot of challenges when it comes to the translation of verses like this some are confused and felt into the dilemma of whether to adopt the literal (word-for-word) translation or the functional “interpretive one” or to adopt option of interchangeable between the two methods when necessary and according to the context. Meanwhile, for the purpose of intellectualism the translator has to justify the reason why he adopts such a translation method

rather than the others. All of the aforementioned points have put many translators into serious challenges with the fear of not going to mislead their readers.

### **Opinion of Traditionalist and Rationalist on Anthropomorphic verses translation.**

It is a tedious job to look into different Quran exegetic work without having full knowledge of each exegeses doctrinal and ideological belief of their authors. As indicated before, exegeses are classified into two major types in regarding to anthropomorphic discussion, The Traditionalist and the Rationalist. The term Traditionalist according to ibn Taymiyyah is referred to those exegetes who translated the Quran with help of other verses of the Qur'an (*Tafsir al-Quran bil-Quran*) or the use of Hadith (*Tafsir al-Quran bil-Hadith*) or with the consensus of the companions of the Prophet (The *Sohabah*) or their followers (The *Tabiun*). The rationalists are those who belief and adopted the allegorical interpretation of verse of the Quran mainly when it has to do with the anthropomorphism. Ibn Taymiyyah (2012).

As discussed above that God Himself revealed many verses to teach oneness and to present view that He is spared from the anthropomorphist and mythology. This argument is contained in Surat-Ikhlās verse 1-4.

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ ۝ ۱ ٱللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ ۝ ۲ لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ ۝ ۳ وَلَمْ يَكُن لَّهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ ۝ ۴

(1) Say: He, Allah, is One. (2) Allah is He on whom all depend, (3) He begets not, nor is He begotten, (4) And none is like Him.

Based on the explanation above it can be known that oneness of God is not similar to anything in existence. Despite, there are some statements and arguments that are contrast to the verses above, the argument of some group who believe that God's existence is not similar to anything (the *mujassimun*). This group was pioneered by *Dawud al-Jawaribi* who claims that "God is body, flesh and blood. He has parts of body, like two hands and two feet, head, tongue, two eye and two ears, Nevertheless, He is a different body compare to other beings. Uthaymayn in his book (*Sharih al 'Aqidat al-wasatiyyah*) (2012) added that comprehending the anthropomorphic verses is not liable to imagination or mental reasoning though, he rejected the argument of the rationalist whom believed our Faculty of reasoning is an endowment from Allah that is enough to understand everything in the scripture. He said:

"Everything that mind is the basic of criteria upon which the anthropomorphic images are comprehended is an error, our minds cannot absolutely judge Allah".

The above statement of Ibn Uthaymayn is the stand of Majority of Salafi scholars who oppose all other doctrines like Al-Ash'arites, Al-Jahmis, mu'tazilites and others who think that the anthropomorphic images that appeal to mind are affirmed and those which do not appeal are rejected all it depend on mind and human reason. *Ahlu-Ta'wil*. The rationalists assume that Allah neither has a face, an eye, a hand, nor established on the throne, nor descended on the first heaven. They distort the meaning of these images and call it *tawil* (interpretation). Ibn Taymiyah (2012). The salafi traditionalist represented by Ibn Taymiyah, thinks that the mind must not used to understand such images by trying to introduce *Takyif* description about status of God,

interpretation by given body description. In short, there is no role for the mind in understanding the images according to the Salafi belief.

There are many definition of Tawil according to the modern Rationalist. One of the leading definition of the term was what given by Al-Ghazali in his book *Al-Moshtashfa* (1322 AH) as the probability of a specific meaning in a context due to the existence of evidence or co-text that supports a meaning rather than the surface meaning." By application of *ta'wil* means shifting from the outer surface meaning to the metaphorical meanings Al Ghazali (1904). It means to derive deeper meanings and ensure that interpretations remain coherent with the broader principles of Islamic thought and law. In another view, ibn Hazm al-jazahiri (1950) also defined *Ta'wil* as "transferring the commonly used surface meaning to another one if there is linguistic evidence.

This however led some scholars to categorize *Ta'wil* into two major ways namely: rejected *Ta'wil* and approved ones. The condition of *Tahrif* rejected *Ta'wil* are:

- (a) It does not have evidence from the Qur'an or Hadith.
- (b) It does not have evidence from the knowledge of Arabic language.
- (c) Not accord with Islamic jurisprudence

The approve *Ta'wil* must possess the following three conditions.

- 1- Evidence from Qur'an and Hadith
- 2- It must be in line with the basic Arabic language.
- 3- It must accord with Islamic jurisprudence.

These conditions were later expanded by traditionalist to enrich those who are dabbling into discussion on anthropomorphic verses in knowledge and understanding. These following are the additional term that related to anthropomorphic. El Sayyed (2017)

**Takyyif:** the term means to belief that status of the attribute of Allah are this and that, or asking question about the status of attributes of God. Meanwhile, the traditionalist they affirm the anthropomorphic images of Allah but not asking their howness.

The quotation of Imam Malik on this serve as evidence as read thus:

"الاستواء معلوم والكيفية مجهول وسؤال عنه حرام"

"His majestic sitting on the throne is known His howness is unknown,  
Asking about it is forbidden" Al alkai (2012)

Another term is "*Tamthil*" this means to belief that attributes of God are like attributes of His creatures. This seems to be welcomed by the two major contending. The phrase "بغير تكيف" *Bi gayri Takiyyif* means that the traditionalist deny any one claiming if having any knowledge of it conditions, Allah alone knows the state of His attributes it is said in suratul-al-shurah v: 11

"... لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ"

Meaning: "Nothing like a likeness of Him";

Another term that similar to *ta'wil* is **Ta'til:** this means according to proponent of *Ta'til* to assume that Allah is greater than having hand, eye and face etc. M A Ibrahim (2002)

**Analysis of Anthropomorphic verses on face of Allah as contained in "the message of the Quran" by Muhammad Asad.**

As discussed earlier, the Quran described Allah with some qualities that seem human-like. In general term anthropomorphism involves attributing human characteristic to non human entities, including deities. In Islam Allah is described as transcendent and beyond human attributes. Therefore, the rationalists believe that anthropomorphic descriptions are generally avoided to maintain the distinction between the Creator and the creatures. Regarding the translation of the anthropomorphic verses, translators have found to have engaged themselves in serious problems of how to render it meaning M H Ibrahim (2002). The Quran uses anthropomorphic terms to describe Allah, which can be comprehended as a means of making divine concepts more relatable to humans. Meanwhile in Islamic theology the description should not be taken literally, as Allah is beyond human attributes and limitations.

### **The term face of Allah in the Qur'an and its different meanings**

There are more than 10 places in the Quran where “the face of Allah” reoccurs in the Quran, the term appears often in contexts discussing Allah’s mercy, guidance, or the importance of seeking His pleasure. Only five will be discussed in this study to be able to accommodate other English translation of the Quran. It is therefore divided into two categories; the first categories of verses refer to the face of Allah which according to many exegetes means to seek approval, reward and Allah’s satisfaction. The traditionalists at this point still maintain their belief that all images should be interpreted without been trying to apply rational reasons or metaphor in it translation. The other categories according translators of the Quran refer to metaphorical interpretation such as “the *Qiblah* of prayer of Muslims”. These two categories were analyzed base on Asad explanation in his translation of the Quran with the aid of some other translations for the purpose of comparism. Hussein (2012)

1. Suratul-Kahf (the cave) verse 28

وَأَصْبِرْ نَفْسَكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ بِالْعَدْوَةِ وَالْعِشْيِ يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَهُ...

**Asad Translation:** “And contain thyself is patience by the side of al who at morning and at evening invoke their sustainer, seeking his countenance”.

**Yusuf Ali translation:** “And keep yourself [Oh Muhammad] patiently with those who call on their lord morning and afternoon, seeking his face”

**Abdelhaleem Translation:** “Content yourself with those who pray to their lord morning and evening, seeking his approval”

**Hilali and Khan Translation:** “And keep yourself [Oh Muhammad] patiently with those who call their lord[ i.e your companions who remember their lord with glorification] morning and afternoon seeking his face”.

**Sayyid Qutub Translation:** “And contain yourself in patience with those who call on their lord morning and evening, seeking his countenance”.

2. In another surah: Suratu-Ar-Rum (The Roman) verses (38-39).

...ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ لِّلَّذِينَ يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ...

**Asad Translation:** This is the best for all who seek God Approval.

**Yusuf Ali Translation:** “That is the best for those who seek Allah’s countenance”.

**Abdelhaleem Translation:** “That is best for those whose goal is God’s approval’

**Hallali and Khan Translation:** “That’s best for those who seek Allah’s countenance”

**Seyyid Qutub Translation:** “This is the best for those who seek God countenance”

3. Suratul Al-layl (The Night) verse (20)

إِلَّا أَتَّبِعَاءَ وَجْهِ رَبِّهِ الْأَعْلَى

**Asad Translation:** For the countenance of His sustainer

**Yusuf Ali Translation:** “Except only the desire to seek the countenance of his lord, the most high”

**Abdulhaleem Translation:** “For the sake of his lord”

**Hilali and Khan Translation:** “Seek the countenance of his lord”

**Sayid Qutub Translation:** “Only out of a longing for the countenance of his lord”

4. Suratul Ar-Rad

وَالَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا أَبْتِغَاءَ وَجْهِ رَبِّهِمْ ...

**Asad Translation:** For their sustainers countenance

**Yusuf Ali Translation:** “Seeking their lord’s countenance”

**Heleem Translation:** “For the face of their lord”

**Hilali and Khan Translation:** “Seeking the countenance of their lord”

**Sayid Qutub Translation:** “Seeking the countenance of their lord”

5. Suratul Insan

إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ...

**Asad Translation:** For the sake of God alone”

**Yusuf Ali Translation:** “Seeking Allah’s countenance only”

**Abdulhaleem Translation:** “For the sake of God alone”

**Hilali And Khan Translation:** “Seeking Allah’s countenance only”

**Sayyid Qutub Translation:** “For the sake of God alone”

**Exegetical Works**

Exegetes like *Qurtubi*, *as-samarqandi*, *as-zamakhshari*, *al-bagawi*, *Ar-Razi* and others have the same view on the meaning of the image of face of God. It may interpret the anthropomorphic image of face as” seeking Allah satisfaction’. In a similar context *Abdulrahman sayuti* in his tafsir, *tafsir jalalayn*, interprets it as “desiring through their worship, in another hand, some contemporary Islamic Scholars who are leading traditionalist like *ibn uthaymin*, *ibn khathir* and other affirmed the term ‘face of God here to make his face without questioning howness. A Bariq (2018) Meanwhile, Asad rendered same face in many verses divergently, in some verses, like what we have in verse 28 of *suratul- khaf* he interpreted the face their as “his countenance “as he did in *suratul layl* verse 20 and *suratul r’ad* V.22 only in *suratul-insan* he interpreted face to mean sake. The divergent handling of same term “face of Allah” show that Asad” translation did not categorized under the literal translation who denied application of tawil in translating the anthropomorphic image of God.

It should be noted here that the literalist also to some extent belief that it could be better to handle such an image by following more flexible translation that deliver the literal meaning of the verse and in addition the implied meaning may be given in footnote or within text-writes but with the main translation of verse that should be rendered literally because no one has the meaning except Allah and He is rich in using any choice of word. In spite of this, most other translators of the Quran apart from Asad including Yusuf Ali whose translation has largely accepted by majority of traditionalist also followed the flexible approach in translating anthropomorphic image of God (face) as translated in his translation of the Qur'an (وجه) in different verse with different interpretation.

The second group of the face image Q2 verse 115

Q2 V115                      ...فَأَيُّمًا تُولُؤُوا فَنَّمَّ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ...

**Asad translation:** "and wherever you turn, there is God's countenance"

**Yusuf Ali Translation:** "Wherever you turn there is Allah's face"

**Sayyid Qutub Translation:** "Wherever you turn there will be the face of God"

**Abdulhaleem Translation:** "Wherever you turn there is His face"

**Hilali And Khan Translation:** "So wherever you turn there is face of Allah"

The literalist/traditionalist at this particular verse are somehow in line with the interpretation method that fall under the accepted *Ta'wil* because it is in line with the rule of Arabic language and it affirms that Allah has a face without discussing its size, color, or any of its details, to them, this opinion meets the condition of the approved *ta'wil*. El Sayed (2017) Different books of Tafsir such as *At-Tabari*, *as-zakhshari*, *As-suyuti* and *ibn al-Jauzi*, *As-samar qandi* commented on that "the face of Allah" in these verses mean 'the self of Allah' or "Allah Himself" without denying that Allah has a face that suits His majesty and Higher. Sivry and Sulayman (2002).

The third group of face image includes the following verse 27:

Suratur-Rahman verses:

وَيَبْقَى وَجْهَ رَبِّكَ ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ

**Asad translation:** "But forever will abide your sustainer's self"

**Yusuf Ali Translation:** "And the face of your lord full of majesty and honour"

**Abdulhaleem Translation:** "All that remains is the face of your lord"

**Hilali and Khan Translation:** "And the face of your lord full of majesty"

**Sayyid Qulub Translation:** "Remain the face of your lord full of majesty"

In another chapter suratul- Qasas verse 88

كُلُّ شَيْءٍ هَالِكٌ إِلَّا وَجْهَهُ

**Asad Translation:** "Everything is bound to perish, save His (eternal) self"

**Yusuf Ali Translation:** "Everything will perish except His face"

**Abdulhaleem Translation:** "Everything will perish except His face"

**Hilali and Khan Translation:** "And the face of your Lord full of majesty"

**Sayyid Qutub Translations:** "Everything is bound to perish except Himself"

These third set of anthropomorphic verses are unanimously interpreted by both the literalist and the Rationalist scholars to mean the face of Allah. Most of the English translators have the same interpretation on these except Asad who choose a different word to interpret the term (وجه)face of God to mean His countenance, sustenance and eternal self.

### **Conclusion**

From the earlier analyses, it is cleared that Muhammad Asad handled the anthropomorphic image of the face of Allah divergently. Obviously from the Asad's interpretation and discussion on theological related verses in the Qur'an, the image of "face of Allah" is understandable to him and he explored all available approach to present its meaning to his readers, by adopting both the traditionalist and rationalist interpretation whenever it needed. The most important thing to him is to present the meaning of the Quran to the non-Arabic speakers in a method that the message will be assimilated. This has shown that Asad belief in freedom to move from one strategy or approach to another to ensure the implied meaning is delivered, preserving faithfulness to the contextual literal meaning. This has been linked to his sources of reference the example of Muhammad Abduh who was the co-author of *tafsir al-mannar (tafsir bir-Rayy)* an outstanding modern thinker in addition to that, *tafsir zamakhshari* who was theologically affiliated to rationalist and imam *fakhradin ar-razy* the author or *mafatihul-gayb (tafsir al-kabir)* he is known as imam of theology of Muslim. It is established that great emphasis has been laid on his *tafsir* on rational and scholastic debates. All these alone have shown the type of meaning and explanations of the Quran Asad presented as translation of the anthropomorphic verses concern in the Quran exemplifies a commitment to both fidelity to the text and nuanced understanding of Allah nature. His work encourages readers to engage into the study of the Quran in a way that they should respect its divine origins while recognizing the limitation of human language and thought.

### **Findings**

1. It is discover during the course of this research that the illustration given by Asad in his book or whatever "the message of the Quran" on anthropomorphic verses are mostly esoteric in nature and economically suit the readers.
2. The source of Asad on his translations has a great influence on his interpretation of verses such references like as-zamakhshari, Muhammad and etc. whom were known for their esoteric background.
3. In dealing with anthropomorphic verse in the Qur'an it is discovered that there are two major groups that trend in the discussion of the images in the Qur'an, the mutazilites and the Traditionalists.

### **Recommendation**

At the end of this work the researcher has suggested the following recommendations to help both the translators and the readers to be well guided most especially while translating the

anthropomorphic verses in the Qur'an. These recommendations can also be considered as guidelines or rules for translations of the Quran.

1. The anthropomorphic image like "face" in the verses of Quran may not be delivered appropriately if adopting the word for word approach of translation (semantic approach). It may lead to coherence problem as the meaning may be distorted in that case.
2. It could be better to handle such images in the Quran by following a more flexible translation that deliver the literal meaning of the verse and add in footnotes or within the text notes the implied meaning.
3. *Ta'wil* (interpretation) is not totally rejected and forbidden in delivering the meaning of the Quran as been assumed by some conservative Islamic scholars. It may be useful, or supported on the established three conditions.
4. The future translators should bear in mind that the anthropomorphic image like face in the Quran has more than one meaning and it safe to apply the intended meaning to avoid errors in the interpretation.
5. For the translators to adopt the method of rendering the anthropomorphic image through the use of esoteric, if it requires giving the literal meaning between brackets or within text note or vice-versa.

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