

New Translation Prompts Debate on Islamic Verse

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Laleh Bakhtiar of Chicago set out to translate the Koran into English because she found the existing version inaccessible for Westerners.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
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CHICAGO — Laleh Bakhtiar had already spent two years working on an English translation of the Koran when she came upon Chapter 4, Verse 34.

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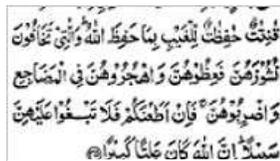
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She nearly dropped the project right then.



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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Ms. Bakhtiar spent three months translating a verse that addresses treatment of a rebellious woman.

The hotly debated verse states that a rebellious woman should first be admonished, then abandoned in bed, and ultimately “beaten” — the most common translation for the Arabic word “daraba” — unless her behavior improves.

“I decided it either has to have a different meaning, or I can’t keep translating,” said Ms. Bakhtiar, an Iranian-American who adopted her father’s Islamic faith as an adult and had not dwelled on the verse before. “I couldn’t believe that God would sanction harming another human being except in war.”

Ms. Bakhtiar worked for five more years, with the translation to be published in April. But while she found a way through the problem, few verses in the Koran have generated as much debate, particularly as more Muslim women study their faith as an academic field.

“This verse became an issue of debate and controversy because of the ethics of the modern age, the universal notions of human rights,” said Khaled Abou El Fadl, an Egyptian-born law professor and Islamic scholar at the

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The leader of the North American branch of a mystical Islamic order, Sheik Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, said he had been questioned about the verse in places around the world where women were struggling for greater rights, but most of all by Westerners.

Women want to be free “from some of the extreme ideology of some Muslims,” the sheik said, after delivering a sermon on the verse recently in Oakland, Calif.

[In Germany last week, a judge citing the verse caused a public outcry after she rejected the request for a fast track divorce by a Moroccan-German woman because her husband beat her. The judge, removed from the case, had written that the Koran sanctioned physical abuse.]

There are at least 20 English translations of the Koran. “Daraba” has been translated as beat, hit, strike, scourge, chastise, flog, make an example of, spank, pet, tap and even seduce.

“Spank?” exclaimed Professor Abou El Fadl, who has concluded that the verse refers to a rare public legal procedure that ended before the 10th century. “That is really kinky. That is the author fantasizing too much.”

Ms. Bakhtiar, who is 68 and has a doctorate in educational psychology, set out to translate the Koran because she found the existing version inaccessible for Westerners. Many Jewish and Christian names, for example, have been Arabized, so Moses and Jesus appear in the English version of the Koran as Musa and Issa.

When she reached the problematic verse, Ms. Bakhtiar spent the next three months on “daraba.” She does not speak Arabic, but she learned to read the holy texts in Arabic while studying and working as a translator in Iran in the 1970s and ’80s.

Her eureka moment came on roughly her 10th reading of the Arabic-English Lexicon by Edward William Lane, a 3,064-page volume from the 19th century, she said. Among the six pages of definitions for “daraba” was “to go away.”

“I said to myself, ‘Oh, God, that is what the prophet meant,’ ” said Ms. Bakhtiar, speaking in the offices of Kazi Publications in Chicago, a mail-order house for Islamic books that is publishing her translation. “When the prophet had difficulty with his wives, what did he do? He didn’t beat anybody, so why would any Muslim do what the prophet did not?”

She thinks the “beat” translation contradicts another verse, which states that if a woman wants a divorce, she should not be mistreated. Given the option of staying in the marriage and being beaten, or divorcing, women would obviously leave, she said.

There have been similar interpretations, but none have been incorporated into a translation. Debates over translations of the Koran — considered God’s eternal words — revolve around religious tradition and Arabic grammar. Critics fault Ms. Bakhtiar on both scores.

Ms. Bakhtiar said she expected opposition, not least because she is not an Islamic scholar. Men in the Muslim world, she said, will also oppose the idea of an American, especially a woman, reinterpreting the prevailing translation.

“They feel the onslaught of the West against their religious values, and they fear losing their whole suit of armor,” she said. “But women need to know that there is an alternative.”

Religious scholars outline several main threads in the translation of “daraba.”

Conservative scholars suggest the verse has to be taken at face value, with important reservations.

They consider that the Koran holds that force is an acceptable last resort to preserve important institutions, including marriages and nations. Some scholars have accused some Muslims of trying to make the verse palatable to the West.

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"I am not apologetic about why the Koran says this," said Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Islamic scholar who teaches at [George Washington University](#). The Bible, he noted, addresses stoning people to death.

Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian whose writings underpin the extremism of groups like [Al Qaeda](#), published extensive commentaries about the Koran before he was hanged in 1966.

Islamic tradition states that Muhammad never hit his 11 wives, and Mr. Qutb considered a man striking his wife as the last measure to save a marriage. He cited the prophet's horror at the practice by quoting one of his sayings: "Do not beat your wife like you beat your camel, for you will be flogging her early in the day and taking her to bed at night."

The verse 4:34, with its three-step program, is often called a reform over the violent practices of seventh century Arabia, when the Koran was revealed. The verse was not a license for battery, scholars say, with other interpretations defining the heaviest instrument a man might employ as a twig commonly used as a toothbrush.

Sheik Ali Gomaa, the Islamic scholar who serves as Egypt's grand mufti, said Koranic verses must be viewed through the prism of the era.

The advice "is always broad in order to be relevant to different cultures and in different times," he said through a spokesman in an e-mail message. "In our modern context, hitting one's wife is totally inappropriate as society deems it hateful and it will only serve to sow more discord."

A caller on a television program in Egypt recently asked the mufti if he should stop sleeping with his wife if she was causing discord, the spokesman said. The mufti replied that the measures in the verse were meant to bring harmony, not to exact revenge.

More liberal commentators, particularly women, say the usual interpretation reflects the patriarchal practices of the Arabian peninsula.

This school holds that the sacred texts have become encrusted with medieval traditions that need to be scraped off like a layer of barnacles. Some Saudi women have been trying to do this by emphasizing the public role played by Aisha, one of the prophet's wives, while the Asma Society gathered Muslim women from around the world in New York last fall to explore the establishment of a female council to interpret Islamic law.

Some analysts hold that the verse cannot be rendered meaningfully into English because it reflects social and legal practices of Muhammad's time.

"The whole idea is not to punish her," said Ingrid Mattson, an expert in early Islamic history at the Hartford Seminary and the first woman to be president of the Islamic Society of North America. "It is like a fear of sexual impropriety, that the husband takes these steps to try to bring their relationship to where it is supposed to be. I think it is a physical gesture of displeasure."

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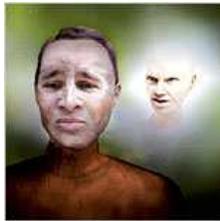
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