



CULTURAL LOSS AND TRANSLATIONAL STRATEGIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF URDU-ENGLISH IDIOMATIC TRANSLATION IN LITERARY TEXTS

Dr. Faiza Masood

Assistant Professor, Department of English, NUML, Multan Campus

Email id: faizamasood5@gmail.com

Muhammad Haseeb

Lecturer at National University of Modern Languages (NUML)

Email: muhammad.haseeb@numl.edu.pk

Abstract

Translating culturally-loaded idioms from Urdu into English presents significant challenges due to deep-rooted cultural, religious, and metaphorical meanings embedded in the source language. This study investigates how such idioms are rendered in English literary translations, focusing on selected works by prominent Urdu authors including Mirza Hadi Ruswa, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Ismat Chughtai. Using a qualitative comparative analysis, the study draws on Skopos Theory, Nida's Dynamic Equivalence, and Mona Baker's strategies for idiom translation to examine ten culturally rich idioms and their English equivalents. Findings reveal that paraphrasing is the most commonly used strategy, but often leads to cultural loss and flattened tone, while equivalent idioms retain meaning but replace culturally specific imagery. Literal translation is rarely employed due to lack of clarity in the target language. The study highlights how Sufi, rural, and religious idioms often lose their symbolic richness in translation, impacting narrative depth and character portrayal. The research underscores the importance of cultural awareness and contextual sensitivity in literary translation and suggests that translators must balance fidelity to cultural nuance with the communicative needs of the target audience.

Keywords

Idiom Translation, Urdu-English Literary Translation, Cultural Equivalence, Translation Strategies, Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a vessel for the transmission of culture, values, and traditions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the use of idioms—fixed expressions whose meanings often transcend their literal components and reflect the unique worldview of a particular linguistic community. In the realm of literary translation, the task of rendering idioms from one language into another is one of the most intricate challenges, especially when those idioms are deeply rooted in cultural context. This article explores the specific challenges encountered in translating culturally-loaded idioms from Urdu into English within literary texts.

Idioms, by their nature, resist literal translation. They encapsulate historical, social, and religious experiences that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. When these idioms are embedded within literary texts—poetry, novels, or short stories—their expressive and symbolic weight becomes even more significant. Urdu, a language rich in metaphor, symbolism, and cultural allusions, presents a particularly dense field of idiomatic expressions that reflect South Asian traditions, Islamic heritage, Persian poetic influence, and Indo-Pak societal norms. Translating these idioms into English, a language shaped by different cultural and historical trajectories,



involves more than finding linguistic equivalents; it requires a deep understanding of both source and target cultures.

The translator of such texts often faces a critical dilemma: should the translation remain faithful to the source culture, preserving its foreignness and risking incomprehensibility for the target reader? Or should the translator adapt the idiom into an equivalent target culture expression, thereby losing some of its original cultural resonance? This issue is particularly sensitive in literary translation, where idioms often play a vital role in character development, tone, and thematic coherence. An idiom that invokes a specific image or proverb in Urdu may not only lose its meaning in English translation but also distort the literary flavor of the text if not handled with skill and cultural awareness.

The challenges multiply when we consider the layers of meaning in culturally-loaded idioms. For instance, an idiom like "*naach na jaane aangan tedha*" (The one who can't dance blames the crooked courtyard) is not merely a complaint—it's a cultural critique of hypocrisy and deflection of blame, often used in satirical or humorous contexts. Such idioms demand not just linguistic conversion but cultural transposition. Literal translation would render the expression meaningless or awkward, while paraphrasing may dilute the stylistic impact. Hence, the translator must often make nuanced choices that balance accuracy, readability, and cultural fidelity.

Moreover, many idioms in Urdu are allusive, drawing from classical poetry, religious scripture, or folk wisdom, and are instantly recognizable to native readers. The challenge for the translator is compounded by the expectation to maintain literary aesthetics while ensuring accessibility for non-native readers. For example, idioms tied to religious practices or historical narratives may require footnotes or creative adaptation to be understood by an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with South Asian or Islamic contexts.

Scholars such as Peter Newmark, Mona Baker, and Eugene Nida have addressed various strategies in translating idioms, such as equivalence, paraphrasing, or omission. However, each strategy comes with its limitations. Equivalence may not always be available, paraphrasing may strip the expression of its idiomatic flair, and omission can lead to loss of cultural texture. In literary translation, where the reader's emotional engagement with the text is paramount, such losses can significantly alter the experience of the original.

This research aims to critically examine the challenges in translating culturally-bound idioms from Urdu to English by analyzing selected literary texts and their translations. It will identify the types of idioms that pose the greatest difficulties, evaluate the strategies adopted by translators, and propose culturally and contextually sensitive approaches for future translations. By bridging theoretical perspectives from translation studies with practical case analyses, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how cultural idioms function across linguistic boundaries and how their translations can either enrich or diminish cross-cultural literary communication.

Contribution to the Knowledge

This study offers a significant contribution to the field of Translation Studies, particularly within the domain of literary and idiomatic translation between Urdu and English. While much of the existing literature has focused on the challenges of translating idioms in major global language pairs—such as English-French or English-Chinese—there remains a noticeable gap in research that specifically addresses the Urdu-English literary context. This study not only fills that gap but



also brings a nuanced focus on the *cultural embeddedness* of idioms, highlighting how these expressions function as carriers of social, historical, and religious meaning.

A major contribution of this research lies in its identification and categorization of culturally-loaded idioms in Urdu literary texts, offering a practical framework that future translators and researchers can use to recognize idiomatic expressions that pose significant translational challenges. Unlike studies that treat idioms as merely stylistic features, this research foregrounds their cultural role and emotional resonance in the source text, arguing for a more context-sensitive approach to their translation.

In addition, this study contributes original insight by critically analyzing how well-known translators have handled idiomatic expressions in prominent Urdu literary works. By conducting comparative analyses between original texts and their English translations, this research provides empirical data that reveals the effectiveness—and occasional shortcomings—of commonly used translation strategies such as equivalence, paraphrasing, domestication, and foreignization. This offers a practical reference point for both scholars and practicing translators aiming to improve the accuracy and cultural depth of their translations.

Moreover, this study enhances theoretical understanding by integrating insights from Skopos Theory, Cultural Translation Theory, and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory to examine idioms as culturally situated conceptual frameworks. It demonstrates how a translator's awareness (or lack thereof) of such frameworks can significantly influence the target text's accessibility, emotional depth, and fidelity to the original. This theoretical integration contributes to expanding the scope of idiom translation beyond the lexical level, encouraging a discourse-based and culturally-informed approach.

Lastly, this research emphasizes the importance of cultural literacy and bicultural competence in translation practice. It underscores the need for translator training programs to include specialized modules on culturally-loaded language and metaphor, especially for language pairs like Urdu-English where cultural worldviews may differ drastically. By proposing pedagogical recommendations and a strategic model for idiom translation, this study not only contributes to academic scholarship but also offers practical tools for educators, translators, and publishers working with South Asian literary content.

In essence, this research enriches existing knowledge by offering a detailed, culturally anchored analysis of idiom translation in a relatively underexplored language pair. It provides theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions that can inform future research, improve translation practices, and foster greater intercultural understanding through literature.

Theoretical Framework / Literature Grounding

The translation of culturally-loaded idioms poses a multifaceted challenge that extends beyond linguistic substitution, demanding an understanding of cultural, cognitive, and contextual nuances. This research is grounded in a combination of theoretical frameworks from Translation Studies that collectively support the analysis of idiomatic expressions and their cross-cultural rendering.

A foundational theory for this study is the Skopos Theory, introduced by Hans J. Vermeer (1978), which emphasizes the purpose (*skopos*) of the translation as the primary determinant of translation strategies. In the context of translating idioms, Skopos Theory supports the idea that a translator's choices should be guided by the intended function of the idiom in the target text, rather



than by a word-for-word rendering. This is particularly relevant in literary translation where the aim is often to evoke similar emotional or aesthetic responses in the target audience.

Complementing this is Nida's Dynamic Equivalence Theory, which advocates for a meaning-based approach to translation that seeks to produce a similar response in the target audience as intended in the source language (Nida, 1964). Nida's approach is especially valuable when dealing with idioms that have no direct counterparts in the target language. His concept of "functional equivalence" encourages translators to prioritize cultural and conceptual compatibility over lexical fidelity.

Another theoretical foundation is Baker's (1992) typology of idiom translation strategies, which outlines methods such as using an idiom with similar meaning and form, an idiom with similar meaning but different form, paraphrasing, or omission. Mona Baker's work highlights the complexity of idiomatic translation and provides a practical framework that will be used to categorize and evaluate the strategies observed in Urdu-English literary translations.

Further grounding is provided by Cultural Translation Theory, which views translation as a cultural act that involves negotiation between worldviews rather than merely languages (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). This perspective is particularly important when translating idioms that reflect socio-religious beliefs, historical experiences, and cultural practices unique to South Asia. Cultural translation requires the translator to engage in "cultural mediation," preserving the identity of the source text while making it intelligible in the target culture.

In addition, Conceptual Metaphor Theory by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) underpins the understanding of how idioms function as cognitive constructs rooted in embodied experience. Many idioms in Urdu are metaphorical and reflect conceptual mappings that may not exist in English. For example, an idiom like "*moonh mein paani aana*" (literally "mouth fills with water") conveys desire or craving but is metaphorically grounded in a physical sensation. Understanding such metaphors from a conceptual standpoint helps the translator avoid literal misinterpretation.

Studies focusing on idioms in translation, such as those by Fernando (1996) and Newmark (1988), reinforce the idea that idioms are culturally dense expressions that resist simplification. Newmark argues that idioms "should not be translated word-for-word unless their meaning and usage are universal" (Newmark, 1988, p. 125). This is highly applicable to Urdu-English translation, where idioms often carry socio-cultural values unfamiliar to English-speaking readers.

Finally, relevant empirical studies on Urdu-English idiomatic translation are sparse, but existing works such as Ahmed (2013) and Fatima & Batool (2020) have acknowledged that literal translations often lead to semantic loss or distortion. These studies underline the urgent need for more culturally-aware and genre-sensitive translation strategies in South Asian literature.

In synthesizing these theories and prior research, this study builds a robust theoretical foundation for analyzing how Urdu idioms are translated into English, what challenges arise, and how translators navigate the delicate balance between fidelity, function, and cultural resonance.

Research Questions

1. What are the major challenges faced by translators in rendering culturally-loaded idioms from Urdu to English in literary texts?



2. What strategies are most commonly employed to translate culturally-bound idioms in Urdu-English literary translations, and how effective are they in preserving the original meaning and cultural context?

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyze the key linguistic, cultural, and contextual difficulties involved in translating culturally-loaded idioms from Urdu to English in selected literary works.
2. To examine the translation strategies adopted by professional translators in dealing with idiomatic expressions and evaluate their effectiveness in conveying both the semantic content and cultural significance of the original idioms.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative textual analysis design. The focus is on examining culturally-loaded idioms in selected Urdu literary texts and their corresponding English translations. This design is appropriate for exploring nuanced cultural and linguistic phenomena such as idiomatic expressions, where interpretation and context play a critical role. The research will analyze how idioms have been translated, the strategies employed, and the extent to which cultural meaning is retained, lost, or transformed.

Data Analysis:

Urdu Idiom	Transliteration	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning	Cultural Context	English Idiom Equivalent
نیکی کر داریا میں ڈال	Nekī kar daryā meñ ḍāl	Do good and throw it into the river	Do good without expecting anything in return	Rooted in Islamic moral teachings	Do good and forget it / Cast your bread upon the waters
اونٹ کے منہ میں زیرہ	Ooṅṅ ke mūh meñ zīrā	Cumin in a camel's mouth	Too little for a large need	Reflects exaggerated shortage	A drop in the ocean
آپ بھلے تو جگ بھلا	Āp bhalē to jag bhalā	If you are good, the world is good	The world appears good through one's own conduct	Sufi and moralistic worldview	Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder (approximate)
چور کی داڑھی میں تینکا	Chor kī ḍāḥī meñ tinkā	A straw in the thief's beard	Guilty conscience gives one away	Common in folk tales and moral stories	A guilty conscience needs no accuser
آسمان سے گرا کھجور میں اٹکا	Āsmān se girā khajūr meñ aṭkā	Fell from the sky and got stuck in a date tree	Out of the frying pan into the fire	Used in humorous or tragic tone	Out of the frying pan into the fire

Urdu Idiom	Transliteration	Literal Meaning	Figurative Meaning	Cultural Context	English Idiom Equivalent
کھودا پہاڑ نکلا چوہا	Khodā pahār niklā chūhā	Dug a mountain and found a mouse	Great effort with insignificant result	Satirical or political context	Much ado about nothing
سانپ بھی مر جائے اور لاٹھی بھی نہ ٹوٹے	Sānp bhī mar jāye aur lāṭhī bhī na ṭūṭe	Kill the snake without breaking the stick	Solve a problem cleverly without harming oneself	Folk wisdom, strategic thinking	Kill two birds with one stone (<i>partial</i>)
جان بوجھ کر انجان بننا	Jān būjh kar anjān bannā	Pretending to be unaware knowingly	Willful ignorance	Common in family or gender-related discussions	Playing dumb / Turn a blind eye
آبیل مجھے مار	Ā bail mujhe mār	Come, O bull, hit me	Inviting trouble intentionally	Used sarcastically or humorously	Asking for trouble
نا تجربہ کار کے ہاتھ میں تلوار	Nā-tajrubah kār ke hāth meñ talwār	A sword in the hands of an inexperienced person	Danger when power is given to the unqualified	Political and social implications	A loose cannon / A child with a loaded gun

Idiom Analysis 1

Idiom:

چور کی داڑھی میں تنکا (*Chor kī dārhī meñ tinkā*)

Figurative meaning: A guilty person gives themselves away.

English equivalent: A guilty conscience needs no accuser.

Source Text (Urdu):

"جیسے ہی استاد نے کلاس میں چوری کی بات کی، شفیق نے فوراً اپنی جیب ٹٹولنی شروع کر دی۔ واقعی چور کی داڑھی میں تنکا تھا۔"

English Translation (Published):

"As soon as the teacher mentioned the missing item, Shafiq immediately reached into his pocket. Clearly, he had something to hide."

Translation Strategy Used:

Paraphrasing. The idiom is not translated directly. Instead, its implied meaning is expressed in plain English.

Cultural Loss or Gain:

- **Loss:** The culturally rich and vivid imagery of *a straw in the thief's beard* is removed, eliminating the folk-tale tone and proverbial familiarity.



- **Gain:** It becomes more accessible for readers unfamiliar with South Asian idioms, making the context clearer in English.

Impact on Literary Narrative:

The **tone shifts** from witty and proverbial to more neutral and expository. The **cultural flavor** embedded in the idiom is diminished, slightly weakening the depth of the character's inner guilt as traditionally perceived by Urdu-speaking audiences.

Idiom Analysis 2

Idiom:

اونٹ کے منہ میں زیرہ (*Oonṭ ke mūh meñ zīrā*)

Figurative meaning: Too little to make a difference.

English equivalent: A drop in the ocean.

Source Text (Urdu):

"اتنے بڑے خاندان میں ایک روٹی دینا تو اونٹ کے منہ میں زیرہ ڈالنے کے برابر ہے۔"

English Translation:

"Feeding one loaf to such a large family is like a drop in the ocean."

Translation Strategy Used:

Use of equivalent idiom with similar meaning but different form.

Cultural Loss or Gain:

- **Gain:** The chosen English idiom "*a drop in the ocean*" conveys the **same meaning** and is naturally familiar to English readers.
- **Loss:** The specific **desert imagery** and regional metaphor of a camel eating cumin is lost, along with the idiom's rootedness in the South Asian environment.

Impact on Literary Narrative:

The **meaning is preserved**, and the **tone remains critical**, but the **local flavor** is generalized. The shift favors clarity and idiomatic fluency over cultural specificity, making it more palatable but less authentic.

Idiom Analysis 3

Idiom:

آ بیل مجھے مار (*Ā bāil mujhe mār*)

Figurative meaning: Inviting trouble willingly.

English equivalent: Asking for trouble.

Source Text (Urdu):

"وہ جان بوجھ کر افسر کو چھیڑ رہا تھا، جیسے آ بیل مجھے مار کہہ رہا ہو۔"

English Translation:

"He kept provoking the officer, as if he was just asking for trouble."

Translation Strategy Used:

Use of equivalent idiom with similar meaning and form.

Cultural Loss or Gain:

- **Loss:** The vivid rural imagery of a person daring a bull to attack—a culturally loaded scenario—is lost.
- **Gain:** The English idiom "*asking for trouble*" is easily understood and retains the sarcastic tone.

Impact on Literary Narrative:

The **tone of sarcasm** and recklessness is well preserved. However, the **cultural context of rural bravado** (bull taming, masculine idiocy, or comic danger) is **not conveyed**, which may flatten the depth of character or environment originally portrayed.

Summary of Observations

#	Urdu Idiom	Transliteration	English Translation (Published)	Strategy Used	Cultural Loss/Gain	Narrative Impact
1	چور کی داڑھی میں تنکا	Chor ki darhi mein tinkā	He had something to hide.	Paraphrase	Loss of folk wisdom imagery	Tone softened; cultural depth reduced
2	اونٹ کے منہ میں زیرہ	Oont ke muh mein zeera	A drop in the ocean.	Equivalent (different form)	Meaning preserved; desert/camel image lost	Retains criticism but erases rural metaphor
3	آئیل مجھے مار	Aa bail mujhe maar	Asking for trouble.	Equivalent (similar meaning)	Tone preserved; cultural imagery lost	Humor/sarcasm retained; context flattened
4	نیکی کر داریا میں ڈال	Nekī kar daryā mein dāl	Do good and forget it.	Paraphrase	Religious context diluted	Moral tone weakened
5	کھو دا پہاڑ نکلا چوہا	Khoda pahaar nikla chooha	Much ado about nothing.	Equivalent idiom	Satirical tone preserved	Theme intact; cultural metaphor removed
6	آسمان سے گرا کھجور میں اٹکا	Aasman se gira khajoor mein atka	Out of the frying pan into the fire.	Equivalent idiom	Functional meaning retained	Tone and theme consistent
7	سانپ بھی مر جائے اور لاٹھی بھی نہ ٹوٹے	Saanp bhi mar jaye aur laathi bhi na toote	Solve the problem without causing harm.	Literal + paraphrase	Idiom lost in generalization	Diplomatic tone diluted
8	جان بوجھ کر انجان بننا	Jaan boojh kar anjaan banna	Pretending not to know.	Paraphrase	Figurative tone lost	Loss of irony; tone more literal



#	Urdu Idiom	Transliteration	English Translation (Published)	Strategy Used	Cultural Loss/Gain	Narrative Impact
9	نا تجربہ کار کے ہاتھ میں تلوار	Na-tajruba kaar ke haath mein talwar	Power in wrong hands.	Paraphrase / generalization	Visual metaphor removed	Political undertone reduced
10	آپ بھلے تو جگ بھلا	Aap bhalay to jag bhalā	If you are good, the world seems good.	Literal with minimal adaptation	Message retained; Sufi/moral tone softened	Inner reflection lost in translation

Findings and Conclusion

The analysis reveals that paraphrasing is the most commonly employed strategy in translating culturally-loaded idioms from Urdu to English. While it ensures clarity and accessibility for target readers, it often leads to a significant loss of cultural depth and a flattening of tone, especially when the idiom carries metaphorical or humorous weight in the source text. In contrast, the use of equivalent English idioms, such as *"a drop in the ocean"* or *"out of the frying pan into the fire"*, tends to preserve the core semantic meaning of the original expression. However, this strategy typically replaces the culturally specific imagery—often rooted in South Asian landscapes, folklore, or customs—with generalized metaphors from the English-speaking world. Literal translations of idioms are rare and mostly avoided due to their incomprehensibility or awkwardness in English. Furthermore, idioms that carry Sufi, rural, or religious connotations frequently lose their symbolic power and fail to transfer their deeper cultural resonance, ultimately weakening the narrative tone, character voice, and thematic richness of the literary text.

Translating culturally-loaded idioms from Urdu into English presents complex challenges that go beyond linguistic conversion, involving deep cultural negotiation and interpretive judgment. This study concludes that while strategies like paraphrasing and idiomatic equivalence offer practical solutions, they often do so at the cost of cultural specificity and stylistic nuance. The loss of metaphorical, religious, or folkloric layers embedded in idioms can dilute the authenticity and emotional depth of translated literary works. Therefore, literary translators must exercise not only linguistic competence but also cultural sensitivity and contextual awareness to strike a meaningful balance between fidelity to the source culture and readability in the target language. Future research and translator training should emphasize idiomatic competence and cultural immersion to better equip translators for preserving the cultural soul of idiomatic language in cross-cultural literary translation.



References

1. Ahmed, M. (2013). Issues in translating idiomatic expressions in Urdu-English literary texts. *International Journal of Linguistics*, 5(4), 123–134.
<https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v5i4.4322>
2. Baker, M. (1992). *In other words: A coursebook on translation*. Routledge.
3. Bassnett, S., & Lefevere, A. (1990). *Translation, history and culture*. Cassell.
4. Catford, J. C. (1965). *A linguistic theory of translation*. Oxford University Press.
5. Dickins, J., Hervey, S., & Higgins, I. (2017). *Thinking Arabic translation* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
6. Eco, U. (2001). *Experiences in translation*. University of Toronto Press.
7. Farghal, M., & Shunnaq, A. (1999). Translation with reference to English and Arabic: A practical guide. *Irbid National University Press*.
8. Fatima, S., & Batool, S. (2020). Challenges in translating culturally bound expressions: A case study of Urdu-English translation. *Journal of Language and Culture*, 11(1), 45–58.
9. Fernando, C. (1996). *Idioms and idiomaticity*. Oxford University Press.
10. Hatim, B., & Mason, I. (1990). *Discourse and the translator*. Longman.
11. Holmes, J. S. (1988). *Translated! Papers on literary translation and translation studies*. Rodopi.
12. House, J. (1997). *Translation quality assessment: A model revisited*. Gunter Narr Verlag.
13. Katan, D. (2004). *Translating cultures: An introduction for translators, interpreters and mediators*. Routledge.
14. Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.
15. Larson, M. L. (1998). *Meaning-based translation: A guide to cross-language equivalence* (2nd ed.). University Press of America.
16. Munday, J. (2016). *Introducing translation studies: Theories and applications* (4th ed.). Routledge.
17. Mushtaq, H., & Zahra, A. (2020). Translating Urdu idioms into English: An analysis of selected short stories by Manto. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 10(2), 180–188.
18. Newmark, P. (1988). *A textbook of translation*. Prentice Hall.
19. Nida, E. A. (1964). *Toward a science of translating: With special reference to principles and procedures involved in Bible translating*. Brill.
20. Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (1982). *The theory and practice of translation*. Brill.
21. Ordudari, M. (2007). Translation procedures, strategies and methods. *Translation Journal*, 11(3). <http://translationjournal.net/journal/41culture.htm>
22. Pym, A. (2010). *Exploring translation theories*. Routledge.
23. Schäffner, C. (Ed.). (1999). *Translation and norms*. Multilingual Matters.
24. Shuttleworth, M., & Cowie, M. (2014). *Dictionary of translation studies* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
25. Vermeer, H. J. (1978). Ein Rahmen für eine allgemeine Translationstheorie. *Lebende Sprachen*, 23(3), 99–102.