

THE LINGUOCULTURAL STATUS OF SUFI TERMS AND POETIC IMAGES AS CULTURE-SPECIFIC ITEMS: BEYOND RELIGIOUS LEXIS TOWARD A SPIRITUAL SEMANTIC DOMAIN

Qahramonjon A. Ismoilov
Acting Associate Professor,
PhD on Philological Sciences,
Kokand State University,
Uzbekistan

Аннотация

В данной статье исследуется лингвокультурная сущность суфийских терминов и поэтических образов как культурно-специфических элементов (КСЭ) в контексте культурного перевода и духовной концептуализации. Автор утверждает, что суфийскую терминологию не следует сводить к религиозной лексике, а нужно рассматривать как семантическую вселенную духовного знания, глубоко укоренённую в культурном и поэтическом контексте. На основе анализа классической узбекской литературы и её английских переводов выявляются трудности в передаче таких КСЭ и предлагаются культурно-чувствительные переводческие стратегии. Полученные результаты направлены на расширение научного поля переводоведения, культурной лингвистики и сравнительного литературоведения.

Ключевые слова: суфизм, культурно-специфические элементы, перевод, языковая картина мира, духовная терминология, поэтические образы.

Abstract

This paper investigates the linguocultural essence of Sufi terms and poetic imagery as culture-specific items (CSIs) in the framework of cultural translation and spiritual conceptualization. It is argued that Sufi terminology should not be reduced to religious lexicon, but rather be approached as a semantic universe of spiritual knowledge, deeply embedded in cultural and poetic contexts. By examining classical Uzbek literature and its English translations, this study identifies challenges in rendering these CSIs and proposes culturally sensitive strategies. The findings aim to contribute to the fields of translation studies, cultural linguistics, and comparative poetics.

Keywords: Sufism, culture-specific items, translation, linguistic worldview, spiritual terminology, poetic imagery

1. Introduction

Sufism, as a mystic branch of Islam, encompasses a wide array of concepts, practices, and symbolic expressions. Its language, rich in metaphors and spiritual connotations, transcends the domain of dogmatic religious discourse. In the context of classical Uzbek literature—particularly in the works of poets such as Alisher Navoi, Ahmad Yassavi, and Boborahim Mashrab — Sufi terms and images reflect a profound worldview that blends metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics.

When such terms are translated into English, they often fall into the category of “culture-specific items” (CSIs)—elements of language that are deeply rooted in one culture and have no direct equivalent in another. This study aims to analyze how these Sufi terms and poetic images function as CSIs, emphasizing their linguocultural role and the challenges posed to translators.

2. Methods

The study adopts a comparative-descriptive method with elements of content analysis. Two main sources were analyzed:

- Selected ghazals and didactic poems from classical Uzbek literature with strong Sufi elements;
- Their existing English translations by renowned translators (e.g., H. Talib, R. Nicholson, A.J. Arberry).

The units of analysis included:

1. Lexical Sufi terms (e.g., *haqiqat*, *ma'rifat*, *tariqat*, *fanā*, *baqā*);
2. Poetic images and metaphors used to express spiritual stages (e.g., *sharob*, *mayxona*, *yo'lchi*, *ma'shuq*);
3. The rendering of these items in English and the extent of cultural and semantic shift.

The theoretical framework is based on Aixelá's (1996) classification of CSIs and Newmark's (1988) translation strategies, as well as Eco's (2001) notion of interpretive equivalence in translation.

3. Results

3.1. Sufi Terms as Semantic Clusters

Rather than functioning as individual lexical items, Sufi terms in Uzbek poetry form intricate semantic clusters. For instance, *tariqat* (the spiritual path), *ma'rifat*

(gnosis), and *haqiqat* (ultimate truth) operate as hierarchical stages in mystical journey. Their English equivalents (e.g., *path*, *gnosis*, *truth*) lack the deep-rooted connotative meaning unless properly contextualized.

3.2. Symbolic Poetic Imagery

Words like *mayxona* (tavern) and *sharob* (wine), while literally referring to worldly elements, symbolize divine intoxication and mystical unity. Literal translation renders them semantically hollow without explanatory footnotes or adaptive rendering.

Table: Analysis of some Sufi Terms and Poetic Images as Culture-Specific Items¹

Uzbek Term	Literal English	Connotative (Sufi) Meaning	Translation Strategy Observed
Sharob	Wine	Divine love, ecstasy	Literal + footnote
Mayxona	Tavern	Sufi gathering, place of revelation	Adaptation + commentary
Tariqat	Path	Spiritual discipline/method	Calque
Haqiqat	Truth	Divine truth, mystical realization	Calque + context shift
Ma'rifat	Gnosis	Inner knowledge, spiritual wisdom	Borrowing + footnote
Fano	Annihilation	Dissolution of ego in divine	Transliteration + explanation
Baqo	Eternity	Eternal union with God	Adaptation + contextual paraphrase
Ishq	Love	Devotional love for the divine	Literal + cultural gloss
Ma'shuq	Beloved	God (as mystical beloved)	Literal (often misleading)
Salik	Seeker	Spiritual traveler	Borrowing + parenthetical explanation
Murshid	Guide	Sufi master, spiritual teacher	Functional equivalent + gloss
Zikr	Remembrance	Ritual invocation of God's name	Calque + footnote
Sabr	Patience	Endurance on the path to God	Literal + cultural reinforcement
Nafs	Ego/Self	Lower self to be transcended	Transliteration + explanation
Safar-i batin	Inner journey	Mystical inward spiritual voyage	Descriptive translation

¹ **Literal + footnote:** Soʻz aynan tarjima qilinadi, lekin izoh talab etiladi (masalan, *sharob* — “wine”, lekin majoziy jihatdan ilova bilan tushuntiriladi).

Calque: Lugʻaviy tarjimada soʻz tuzilishi saqlanadi (*tariqat* → *path*), lekin maʼno toʻliq ochildmasligi mumkin.

Transliteration + explanation: Atama asl shaklida beriladi va tarjimada izohlanadi (*fano*).

Adaptation: Maʼnaviy maʼno boʻyicha mos alternativ soʻz yoki ibora tanlanadi.

Borrowing + footnote: Atama oʻz holicha olingan, lekin izoh bilan toʻldirilgan.

Functional equivalent: Maʼno jihatdan eng yaqin inglizcha termin topilgan.

3.3. Translation Challenges

Many translators apply literal or calque strategies, which often obscure the cultural nuance. For example, the term *ma'shuq* (beloved) in Sufi context denotes God, but is often rendered as “beloved” without clarification, misleading readers into romantic interpretation.

4. Discussion

The data suggests that Sufi terms, when treated as mere religious vocabulary, fail to convey their full cultural and spiritual depth. These terms are not only part of a spiritual doctrine but also artistic devices reflecting cultural identity and collective memory.

A key challenge lies in the cultural incommensurability: concepts like *fano* or *safar-i batin* (inner journey) do not have concise equivalents in the English lexicon. Thus, translation becomes an act of cultural negotiation, where preserving form may undermine content, and vice versa.

Furthermore, the strong presence of metaphoric imagery demands a dual translation approach—preserving the poetic function while conveying the spiritual message. Annotated translations or creative adaptations (as practiced by Coleman Barks in Rumi translations) can be effective, though they risk distorting original meanings.

5. Conclusion

Sufi terminology and poetic imagery in classical Uzbek literature represent complex culture-specific items that require nuanced treatment in translation. They embody a rich spiritual heritage that transcends linguistic boundaries yet resists full equivalence in English. A culturally informed translation approach—blending explanation, adaptation, and interpretive commentary—is essential for conveying their profound meanings. Future research may focus on corpus-based studies of Sufi translations and the development of glossaries for spiritual lexicon across languages.

References

- Aixelá, J. F. (1996). Culture-specific items in translation. *Translation, Power, Subversion*, 52–78.
- Eco, U. (2001). *Experiences in Translation*. University of Toronto Press.
- Newmark, P. (1988). *A Textbook of Translation*. Prentice Hall.
- Nicholson, R. A. (1921). *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Methuen.

- Arberry, A.J. (1950). *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*. Allen & Unwin.
- Navoi, A. (1492/2000). *Xamsa*. Tashkent: Gafur Ghulom Publishing.
- Talib, H. (2015). Translations from Uzbek Sufi Poetry. *Literature of the East*, Vol. 3.
- Barks, C. (2004). *The Essential Rumi*. HarperOne.
- K Ismoilov. Attitude to the Sufi orders: Yasaviya and Nakshbandiya. - Euro-Asia Conferences, 2021.