
The Translator's Dilemma: Balancing Fidelity, Creativity, and Cultural Context in Translating Titles of Selected Kashmiri Short Stories into English

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Abstract

Translation can be understood as a negotiation of meaning between two texts and their respective cultures, extending beyond cultural, historical, and translator-mediated decision-making processes. In this regard, a translator functions first as a reader and then as a mediator between languages. A comprehensive understanding of the source text (ST) is therefore crucial for producing an effective and meaningful translation. The translator's role becomes particularly complex when negotiating meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries, as differences at these levels often complicate the translation process. This paper aims to examine selected titles of Kashmiri short stories translated into English, with particular reference to their lexical, cultural, and contextual nuances. Specifically, it investigates the appropriateness of the translated titles and identifies potential instances of mistranslation, if any. The analysis of these titles is undertaken in light of various translation theories and approaches, in order to illuminate the translator's decision-making process during the translation of literary titles.

Keywords: Cultural negotiation, Decision Making, Meaningful Translation, Mistranslation

Introduction

Translation is a process of negotiation between two languages and their respective cultures. This negotiation extends beyond the literal meanings of words and sentences to encompass the literary, metaphorical, and contextual dimensions of the source text, including culturally embedded expressions, idioms, and figurative devices. Achieving equivalence at multiple levels of meaning thus becomes a central concern. Nevertheless, translation remains an inherently creative and challenging endeavor, requiring considerable skill, sensitivity, and effort on the part of the translator. In this context, Azurda aptly underscores both the

difficulty and the inherently creative nature of the translator's task. In his essay "Translation: Its Importance, Usefulness, and Problems," he emphasizes that:

Original writing is like a feature film, and translation a documentary film. In a feature film a director or a writer, if faced with a problem, can change the location. It is called substitution. A scene can be easily omitted if not suitable or if need be, another scene can be added. But the director of a documentary film cannot do so; he is just helpless. If he wants to filmise a particular pose of a snake or show a city in a particular condition, it is quite possible that he will have to wait not for months but for years. I, therefore, do not hesitate to say that literary translation at times turns out to be more demanding than the original work. The translator has to understand two civilizations at the same time: the first is the culture of the SL and the second is that of the TL through which he does his translation. (60-61)

Another prominent translation theorist, Peter Newmark, offers a comprehensive discussion of the multifaceted nature of translation in his influential work *A Textbook of Translation* (1988). In this book, Newmark examines various dimensions of the translation process and explores the possibilities for achieving higher levels of translational accuracy. He engages with the long-standing debate concerning translatability by presenting a series of logical arguments. As he asserts, "The principle with which this book starts is that everything without exception is translatable; the translator cannot afford the luxury of saying something cannot be translated" (6). Nevertheless, when addressing the limitations that hinder the attainment of a perfect or ideal translation, Newmark observes:

Translation has its own excitement, its own interest. A satisfactory translation is always possible, but a good translator is never satisfied with it. It can usually be improved. There is no such thing as perfect, ideal or 'correct' translation. A translator is always trying to extend his knowledge and improve his means of expression; he is always pursuing facts and words. (6)

A central question that arises, therefore, is why translation demands such extensive effort from the translator and why the process becomes inherently complex. In this regard, Edward Sapir, in his book *Culture, Language and Personality* (1956), observes, "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (69). The complexity of translation thus stems from the fact that a source text (ST) is deeply embedded in the culture, beliefs, and traditions of its originating society. The translator must grasp the multiple layers and dimensions of the ST before rendering it into the target text (TT).

In the case of literary works, this task becomes even more demanding, as literary language often diverges significantly from ordinary or everyday language. Such linguistic and cultural gaps, along with the inherent distinctiveness of both ST and TT, contribute to the difficulty of the translation process. However, these challenges do not render translation impossible. A translator who is well-versed in the theories and practices of translation can effectively navigate these issues and work toward producing a meaningful and contextually appropriate translation.

However, beyond possessing proficiency in both the source text (ST) and the target text (TT), a translator must also be well-grounded in the theoretical foundations of translation. Familiarity with various translational strategies and techniques is essential. As Roman Jakobson emphasizes in his seminal article “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” (1959), many issues related to equivalence and the difficulties encountered by translators can be addressed effectively when appropriate strategies are applied. Jakobson contends that absolute equivalence in translation is unattainable; nevertheless, the transfer of meaning or message from one language to another remains entirely possible. As he famously states, “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey” (129). While, categorizing the three types of translation into *intralingual*, *interlingual* and *intersemiotic*, Jakobson highlighted the difficulties which arise in each of them. According to him, interlingual translation in which the translation occurs between two languages and identifies that there is no full equivalence in this context also. He states:

On the level of interlingual translation, there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units, while messages may serve as adequate interpretations of alien code-units or messages. The English word “cheese” cannot be completely identified with its standard Russian heteronym “cup” because cottage cheese is a cheese but not a clip. Russians say: *iipnhech clip h tbopory* “bring cheese and [sic] cottage cheese.” In standard Russian, the food made of pressed curds is called clip only if ferment is used. (114)

Jakobson emphasizes that full equivalence is unattainable across all types of translation. As Basnett notes, “Jakobson goes on immediately to point out the central problem in all types: that while message [can be conveyed], there is ordinarily no full equivalence through translation” (34). Consequently, it is ultimately the translator’s skill and efficiency that enable effective navigation of these challenges and the successful transfer of meaning in complex translation contexts.

Therefore, it is the thorough understanding of the culture, context, and linguistic nuances of the source text (ST) that ensures a translation is both fluent and culturally negotiable. A translator must invest considerable effort in comprehending the cultural frameworks and networks embedded in the ST to approximate the intended meaning of the

author. Equally important is the contextual analysis of the text, which allows for the unfolding of its multiple layers of meaning. Linguistic differences between the source and target languages may present additional challenges; however, it is the translator's responsibility to navigate and negotiate these nuances to achieve an effective transfer of meaning. Accordingly, translation should not be regarded as a purely individual endeavor but rather as a complex, collaborative process aimed at producing a high-quality and contextually appropriate rendition of the original text.

Translating Titles

The present study examines selected titles of Kashmiri short stories translated into English by Neerja Mattoo. Its primary objective is to determine the extent to which these translated titles correspond to the overall narrative structure and thematic concerns of their respective stories. The study further investigates whether deviations occur at the levels of form and meaning, as well as the specific translation strategies employed by the translator. A close reading of the texts suggests that Mattoo alternates between creative and literal approaches in rendering the titles, resulting in intriguing variations that merit detailed analysis.

Accordingly, this inquiry seeks to explore the subtle nuances involved in translating literary titles, particularly with regard to contextual relevance and cultural significance. Instances of mistranslation in fictional works often alter the intended effect of the source text (ST), raising important questions about fidelity and reader reception. Asaduddin, in his essay "Manto Flattened: An Assessment of Khalid Hasan's Translations," underscores the multiple dimensions involved in translating titles and the consequential impact such choices can have on the target audience. This framework provides a critical lens through which Mattoo's translations may be assessed. Asaduddin Writes:

Another similarly unwarranted change of title: Hasan translates "Khol Do" as "The Return" (ibid, p.350). It is clear that the unbearable nature of the traumatic experience of Skina, Sirajuddin's daughter, has been telescoped in her gesture of lowering her *Shalvar* following the utterance of the two words "Khol do" ("Open It"). Not only is the neutral word "return" insipid as a title, robbing the original of its terrible impact, but it also changes the whole emphasis by shifting the focus from daughter's trauma to the father's frantic search for his daughter. Moreover, the change of the title in English to "Return" becomes more problematic when we remember that Joseph Conrad has a celebrated story by the same name, and Manto's story offers neither any parallel nor any counterpoint to it." (133)

The example above illustrates how excessive creativity in translating titles can constitute a form of interpretive "violence," introducing an abrupt shift in the narrative's overall trajectory and altering the story's intended meaning. It also underscores the risks

inherent in translation, wherein a translator's misjudgment may lead to semantic loss and obscure the author's original purpose. Consequently, the task of the translator requires careful engagement with the text's broader message and context, particularly when rendering titles. Throughout the translation process, the translator's role and choices hold significant weight; however, factors beyond the translator's control, such as publishing policies, patronage, or the translator's own interpretive aim, may also shape these decisions. Therefore, in analyzing the titles of the selected short stories, this study has taken all of these considerations into account.

Discussion and Analysis

The table below presents the original titles of the source texts (ST) alongside their translated versions (TT), including information about the respective authors and translators. The researcher's analysis is based on these selected short stories.

Table:1

S.NO	Short Story (Source Text)	Short Story (Target Text)	Author	Translator
1	"Kokar Jang"	"The Cock-Fight"	Amin Kamil	Neerja Mattoo
2	"Kafan Tsuur"	"The Grave Robber"	Amin Kamil	Neerja Mattoo
3	"Phaatakh"	"The Cattle Pound"	Amin Kamil	Neerja Mattoo
4	"Shamshaan Wae:raag"	"The Mourners"	Hari Krishan Koul	Neerja Mattoo
5	"Phari"	"Smoked Fish"	Hari Krishan Koul	Neerja Mattoo
6	"TsIni Tsuur"	"The Paper Tigers"	Sofi Ghulam Mohammad	Neerja Mattoo
7	"Samah"	"The Empty Shell"	Farooq Masoodi	Neerja Mattoo

The story "Kafan Tchoor" has been translated by Neerja Mattoo as "The Grave Robber." This rendering moves beyond the literal meaning of the phrase "Kafan Tchoor," indicating a degree of translatorial creativity. However, it raises an important question: to what extent does this translated title accurately reflect the semantic and contextual nuances of the original? Does it adequately connect the reader to the broader meaning and thematic concerns of the story?

The choice of “Grave Robber” appears to be shaped by considerations of target-culture readability. In English, “A grave robber is a person who illegally digs up graves, tombs, or crypts to steal valuables, such as artifacts, personal property, or even bodies for sale” (Google). By contrast, a more literal translation of “Kafan Tchoor” would be “Shroud Thief.” This version more directly conveys both the idiomatic and metaphorical force of the original expression, which in the context of the story describes someone so morally depraved that he or she would even steal a burial shroud. Such an act serves to dramatize the moral deterioration and corruption within the society depicted in the narrative.

While “Grave Robber” is an acceptable and culturally accessible equivalent for an English-speaking audience, it inevitably dilutes the metaphorical resonance embedded in the source text (ST). The idiomatic intensity of “Kafan Tchoor” is therefore partially lost in translation, even if the chosen title arguably enhances reader familiarity in the target culture (TC). Nonetheless, “Shroud Thief” could have served as an equally effective alternative, retaining both the literal meaning and the metaphorical depth of the original.

Comparable examples can be identified in translations from Urdu and Hindi, where translators frequently adopt a literal approach when rendering titles into English. A notable illustration is Ismat Chughtai’s Urdu short story “Lehaaf,” which Syeda Hameed translates as “The Quilt.” While this translation is a direct lexical equivalent, it remains faithful to the original by preserving both its denotative and connotative dimensions. In doing so, it neither distorts nor departs from the semantic and thematic essence of the source title. Consequently, a literal translation strategy can be considered effective when it succeeds in conveying not only the surface-level meaning but also the deeper contextual and symbolic significance inherent in the original text.

The title of Sofi Ghulam Mohammad’s short story “Tsunī Tchoor” has been translated by Neerja Mattoo as “The Paper Tiger.” The expression “paper tiger” is itself a literal English translation of the Chinese term *zhǐlǎohǔ*, denoting “something or someone that claims or appears to be powerful or threatening, but is in fact ineffectual and incapable of withstanding challenge” (Wikipedia). In contrast, “Tsunī Tchoor” is deeply rooted in Kashmiri cultural and linguistic contexts and carries a layered symbolic significance. On the surface, the term simply refers to an individual who steals charcoal. However, in the narrative framework of the story, it acquires metaphorical and cultural dimensions. Within this context, a “Tsunī Tchoor” is someone who is cowardly and unaware of their own potential strength.

This nuance is evident when Mohmud refers to Gani and Abdullah as “Tsunī Tchoor,” implying that their inability to recognize their own agency renders them vulnerable to Sultan Sofi’s exploitation. They continue to work under oppressive conditions for meagre wages, despite possessing the capacity to resist his highhandedness. Mattoo’s translation as

“The Paper Tiger” therefore introduces an interpretive shift in both plot and characterization. At the conclusion of the story, when Mohmud leaves the shop and again labels Gani and Abdullah as “Tsun Tchoor,” the term refers not to the tyranny of Sultan Sofi but to the men’s own helplessness and passivity. In contrast, the concept of a “paper tiger” aligns more closely with Sultan Sofi himself, as he appears powerful while his authority is based entirely on the vulnerability and powerlessness of those he exploits.

This raises an important question: what would be the effect of translating the title literally as “Coal Thief”? Would such a rendering preserve the intended meaning, or would it obscure it for English readers? A literal translation such as “Coal Thief” might introduce an unfamiliar expression into the target language (TL), resulting in a gain of meaning insofar as readers would infer its idiomatic and metaphorical implications through the narrative. Nevertheless, Mattoo’s chosen translation, “Paper Tiger,” effectively captures aspects of the idiom’s thematic resonance. However, it simultaneously results in a loss of the culturally specific metaphorical meaning embedded in the original term “Tsun Tchoor,” which is intimately tied to the story’s social context and character dynamics.

In the story “Shamshaan Wearaag,” Neerja Mattoo translates the title as “Mourners.” This represents a significant departure from the original phrasing, introducing a title in the target text (TT) that neither reflects nor preserves the semantic depth of the source text (ST). By opting for “Mourners,” the translator reorients the reader’s focus toward the individuals who grieve, thereby shifting attention away from the specific cultural and emotional experience that the original title conveys.

The narrative itself centers on Pedro’s intense lamentation over his mother’s death within the setting of a crematorium. This profound emotional state, marked by grief, suffering, and existential anguish, constitutes the essence of “Shamshaan Wearaag.” The chosen English title, however, does not capture this layered meaning. Instead, “Mourners” generalizes the culturally specific concept embedded in the original phrase, which denotes not merely the act of mourning but the distinct spiritual and emotional condition associated with a crematorium in the Hindu cultural context.

The phrase “Shamshaan Wearaag” carries strong cultural resonance, evoking the ritualistic, spatial, and emotional dimensions of cremation practices within Hinduism, elements that differ markedly from the funerary traditions of other religions. By replacing this culturally rich term with a more generic English equivalent, the translation diminishes the cultural specificity of the source text and risks encroaching upon the creative intent of the original author.

In this regard, a more appropriate rendering might be “Grievings at the Crematorium,” a title that more accurately communicates both the denotative and

connotative dimensions of the original phrase, preserving its cultural, emotional, and contextual significance

The title “Phari” has been translated by the translator as “Smoked Fish.” This English rendering provides a close and accurate equivalent of the original term, referring to a fish traditionally cooked over fire without the use of oil. The translation successfully conveys both the cultural and contextual meanings embedded in the Kashmiri term “Phari,” thereby preserving its culinary and cultural specificity.

Another title, “Samah,” has been translated as “The Empty Shell.” According to *Kashir Lugaat*, the word “Samah” denotes *tabaah* and *naash*, terms that translate into English as “destruction” or “ruin.” However, “Samah” also carries the meanings of “mourning,” “lamentation,” and “grief,” resonating with the thematic concerns of the story in which the writer mourns the erosion of Kashmiri cultural values. In this context, translating the title as “Mourning” would more accurately reflect the emotional and conceptual essence of the source text.

The short story “Kokar Jung” has been translated as “Cockfight,” which represents a literal and contextually faithful rendering of the original title. This translation effectively captures the thematic and narrative significance of the term within the plot, preserving both its denotative meaning and its cultural relevance.

Findings and Conclusion

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that the strategies and techniques employed by a translator play a crucial role in the rendering of titles in literary works. The findings indicate that, in several cases, the translator succeeds in conveying meanings that closely align with the contextual and narrative dimensions of the original stories. However, there are instances in which the translated titles fail to encapsulate the full semantic range of their Kashmiri counterparts. Such losses of meaning may be attributed to the specific translational strategies adopted as well as to the cultural and linguistic distance between the source and target languages.

These observations underscore the necessity for translators to exercise careful judgment, paying close attention to the cultural, metaphorical, and contextual nuances embedded in source-text titles, rather than allowing subjective preferences to guide their choices. Translating titles thus emerges as a particularly demanding aspect of literary translation, one that can easily lead to significant distortions when the multifaceted contexts of both source and target texts are overlooked. The analysis highlights the translator’s responsibility to engage deeply with the linguistic, cultural, and contextual dimensions of the source text. It also underscores the importance of a strong theoretical and practical foundation in translation studies. Moreover, translators must remain vigilant against the

influence of personal biases or external pressures, such as publisher expectations, which may compromise the integrity of the translation.

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