

Code-Switching and Cultural Identity: A Linguistic Analysis of Urdu Expressions in English Novels Set in Hyderabad

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Abstract

This paper examines the presence of Urdu expressions in English novels, specifically in Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951) and Jeelani Bano's *Aiwan-e-Ghazal* (1976). Urdu, with its rich vocabulary inherited from Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and local influences, has been interspersed throughout English novels. The study classifies eighty Urdu words culled from these two novels under the headings of marriage, clothing, food, poetry and music, and religion and customs. Each term is analyzed according to its linguistic category, semantic field, and cultural function.

The findings reveal that most of the words are nouns denoting culturally specific realities, such as rituals, clothing and cuisine, with a minority of idioms and interjections. Religious and ritual lexicon is prevalent, with food vocabulary next in line, whereas interjections recreate the rhythm of actual Urdu discourse. The paper points to these insertions

-serving a variety of functions: they intensify authenticity, mark identity, express emotional value and strive to preserve cultural integrity by full assimilation into English.

The novelists refrained from translating the Urdu words lest they lose the distinctiveness of the linguistic heritage. At the same time, this deliberate strategy enriches the expressive capacity of English. The study concludes that such practices exemplify postcolonial hybridity, contribute to the growth of South Asian English, and offer valuable insight into the interplay of language, culture and literature.

Keywords: Urdu Expression, English Novels, Linguistic Analysis, South Asian English

1. Introduction

The presence of Urdu expressions in English novels has long been a distinctive feature of South Asian writing in English (Areej et al, 2024; Fatima et al 2023; Akhat et al 2020; Ahmad 2014). Authors who draw on Urdu not only enrich their narratives with local colour but also negotiate questions of cultural identity, translation and linguistic hybridity. Urdu, shaped by centuries of contact with Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, and other languages, offers a vast vocabulary that conveys subtleties of feeling, ritual and social life (Guha 2024; Tahir 2021). Its words often enter English texts without translation, leaving the reader to engage with a culture that is not fully assimilated into the global language (Rahman 2010).

This study investigates the use of Urdu expressions in two novels: *Zohra* (1951) by Zeenuth Futehally and *Aiwan-e-Ghazal* (1976) by Jeelani Bano. The former is originally written in English, while the latter is translated into English from Urdu. Both texts were written in the context of Hyderabad, a city where Urdu once held sway in both elite and popular discourse. The novels are filled with Urdu words referring to marriage, food, clothing, religious rituals and cultural practices. This paper attempts to analyse these terms systematically so as to understand their linguistic type, semantic field and cultural function. The goal is to show how

Urdu enriches English fiction, not only through lexical borrowing but also through the creation of a bilingual literary space.

The research question guiding this study is: What Urdu expressions are used in English novels, and how are they integrated into English discourse to serve cultural and linguistic functions for local and global readers?

2. Literature Review

Scholars of translation and sociolinguistics have long addressed the issue of equivalence and cultural transfer. Vinay and Darbelnet (1958) outlined strategies such as literal translation, equivalence and adaptation, while Jakobson (1959) distinguished between intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation. Potgieter (2006) emphasized degrees of equivalence, ranging from absolute to zero, highlighting the challenges of conveying culturally loaded terms. Newmark (1988) argued for communicative and descriptive strategies when direct equivalence is impossible.

In the field of bilingualism, Poplack (1980) introduced a typology of code-switching, while Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model explained how speakers choose linguistic codes to signal identity and social alignment. These frameworks have been extended to literature, where writers employ code-switching to index cultural identity and resist assimilation into dominant languages.

Postcolonial critics such as Achebe (1975) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) have defended the use of local languages in English texts as a means of resisting cultural erasure. Venuti (1995) proposed the strategy of foreignization, where translators and authors deliberately retain elements of the source culture to preserve its distinctiveness. Bhabha (1994) described this as hybridity, the creation of a third space where languages and cultures intersect.

Previous researches on South Asian English literature have examined the insertion of Hindi, Urdu and regional expressions (Sinha 2023; Sailaja 2011), but much of the analysis has

been literary rather than linguistic. The present study builds on these earlier works by providing a detailed linguistic classification of Urdu words in two novels, supported by a cultural and theoretical framework.

3. Theoretical Framework

This research draws upon three overlapping bodies of theory, namely sociolinguistics, translation studies and postcolonial linguistics. Poplack's analysis of code-switching and Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model help to interpret the motivations behind inserting Urdu into English narratives. These choices signal identity, solidarity, or cultural authority. Newmark's distinction between communicative and descriptive strategies is especially relevant for cultural words that lack precise English equivalents. Venuti's theory of foreignization further explains the deliberate choice to retain Urdu in English texts. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Achebe's use of untranslated proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* provide useful parallels. Urdu in English fiction represents not only borrowing but also a subtle assertion of cultural independence within a colonial and postcolonial framework.

4. Methodology

The primary data for this study comes from two novels *Zohra* and *Aiwan-e-Ghazal*, which contain tens of Urdu expressions. These words have been categorized thematically into five domains: Marriage, Clothing, Food, Fruits and Flowers, Poetry and Music, and Religion and Customs. Each term was classified according to its linguistic type (noun, phrase, interjection, proper noun), semantic field (e.g., ritual, cuisine, flora), and potential function within English discourse. Examples from other South Asian English novels, such as Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, were also consulted for comparison.

A mixed-method approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative component involved counting and charting the distribution of terms

across categories, while the qualitative component focused on examining the cultural functions, narrative roles, and potential impact of these expressions on readers.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1 Distribution of Expressions

The corpus shows that the largest set of words comes under Religion and Customs (over 20 terms), followed by Food (more than 20 terms), Marriage (12 terms), Clothing (9 terms) and Poetry/Music (10 terms). The dominance of religious and ritual vocabulary underscores the centrality of faith and custom in Urdu-speaking communities. Food terms are equally prominent, reflecting the importance of cuisine in cultural memory and social gatherings.

5.2 Linguistic Types

The analysis indicates that most Urdu expressions are nouns, denoting objects, rituals or cultural artefacts. Examples include *nikah*, *mehr*, *sherwani*, *biryani*, *mushaira* and *taziya*. A smaller number are phrases (*Allah-o-Akbar*, *masha Allah*), interjections (*arrey*, *towba*, *ai hai*), and proper nouns (*Ghalib*, *Karbala*). The scarcity of verbs shows that Urdu is largely used to name culturally specific entities rather than to modify English syntax.

5.3 Semantic Fields

The main semantic fields represented are:

- Religion and Spirituality: *namaz*, *shariat*, *murshid*, *urs*, *azan*
- Food and Cuisine: *biryani*, *roti*, *luqmi*, *baghare baingan*, *phirni*
- Marriage and Kinship: *nikah*, *mehr*, *manja*, *shamiana*, *neg*
- Clothing: *burqa*, *dupatta*, *salwar*, *sherwani*, *zarbaft*
- Poetry and Music: *ghazal*, *mushaira*, *qawali*, *shehnai*, *dadra*

These fields correspond closely to the cultural life of Hyderabad and other Urdu-speaking societies, where religion, food, kinship and aesthetics are central.

5.4 Functions in the Text

Urdu expressions in English texts serve multiple functions. Words like *shamiana* or *baghare baingan* add authenticity by grounding the narrative in a specific cultural context, while terms related to clothing and marriage highlight social and gender identities. Interjections replicate the natural flow and expressiveness of Urdu speech, and religious phrases reinforce a worldview rooted in faith. Through the strategic retention of untranslated Urdu expressions, the writer and translator not only uphold the cultural authority of Urdu but also ensure its enduring presence and nuanced significance within the English narrative.

5.5 Reader Reception

Readers unfamiliar with Urdu may respond in different ways. Some may experience curiosity, leading them to explore the meaning of words such as *sharam* or *nakhuda*. Others may feel immersed by the authenticity of the cultural references. At times, untranslated terms may cause alienation, though this can also be interpreted as a deliberate strategy by the author to preserve cultural distance.

6. Discussion

The findings confirm that Urdu expressions in English novels are central to the construction of cultural identity. The dominance of religious and ritual vocabulary highlights the significance of faith in daily life. Food terms evoke sensory detail and cultural belonging. Marriage and clothing words mark social customs and gender roles, while poetry and music terms reinforce the literary prestige of Urdu.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, these insertions act as a form of code-switching, signalling solidarity and cultural pride. From a postcolonial perspective, they embody hybridity by allowing Urdu to coexist with English without being fully absorbed. This practice aligns with Venuti's notion of foreignization, resisting domestication into English.

The study also illustrates the contribution of Urdu to the development of South Asian English within the broader family of World Englishes. Many terms such as biryani, paan, sherwani, and namaz have become recognizable beyond their original context, showing how literature can act as a vehicle for lexical borrowing.

7. Conclusion

This paper has revealed Urdu expression in English novels to be more than mere stylistic flourishes. They symbolize culture, add pragmatic markers, and act as a form of linguistic resistance. When these words are left intact, speakers affirm the richness of Urdu and enrich the expressive potential of English.

The analysis proves that Urdu words are grouped around five main domains: religion, food, marriage, clothing, and poetry. They function to reassert identity and authenticity: on a pragmatic level, they act as a spiritual marker. Depending on one's familiarity with the language, the expressions either provoke curiosity, immersion, or estrangement in the reader.

The paper shows the need to consider bilingualisms, both linguistically and culturally, in any consideration of literary works. It contributes to the translation studies by foregrounding methods of equivalence and resistance. It also contributes to World Englishes by describing the gradual introduction of Urdu words into international English.

The scope of research could therefore be extended to include other South Asian languages used in English fiction. A comparative study would reveal similarities and differences in use with regard to cultural terms. Reader-response studies may also be undertaken to see the differing response of divergent audiences to expressions left untranslated. Cross-genre studies, including drama and cinema, will presumably uncover some indication of the broader effect of Urdu expressions on South Asian cultural production.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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