

**A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF CULTURAL FINGERPRINTS: DOMESTICATING  
AND FOREIGNIZING STRATEGY IN *THE KITE RUNNER* BY KHALED  
HOSSEINI**

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**Abstract**

*The paper discusses how lexemes that are not translated from Dari and Pashto into English in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (2003) can be seen as the means of maintaining the Afghan culture and influencing the experience of the reader. Although a lot of research has been carried out on the theme of trauma, exile and redemption, there is little emphasis on the micro-linguistic strategies in the text. Based on Lawrence Venuti framework of domestication and foreignization, this paper recognizes and classifies untranslated lexemes of kinship, religion, social hierarchy, and cultural object. The analysis indicates that Hosseini often does not translate words, especially in culturally meaningful areas, which can be a part of world-building and making the readers the cultural visitors and not the one who have completely adopted the culture. Although these results are tentative and confined to a few types of lexemes, they offer the perspective of the intersection of language and identity in the works of diasporic literature and highlight the potential of linguistic methods for students' research.*

**Keywords:** foreignization, domestication, untranslated words, Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*, Afghan literature, diasporic fiction, cultural identity.

**Introduction**

Language is not merely a tool of communication; it is a vehicle of culture, identity and social meaning. For the writers of second or global language, language choice is an area of negotiation, in which all lexical choices can influence the way culture, identity and social norms are mediated to the audience. This has been especially serious in the postcolonial and diasporic literature as the authors have tried to walk the fine line between their own culture and the language requirements of an international audience that speaks English (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2002). The most obvious question that is posed to authors, who live in multilingual societies, is this: to be understood or to remain true to the cultural specificities, should the words and phrases that refer to the culturally specific aspects be translated into English or are they better to be left in their original language form? This is not a matter of minor importance. The act of translation or the act of not translating may not only influence the way the reader interprets the story but also affects his or her interest in the culture being represented. It can also determine the reader to be an informed visitor to a place where he is slowly introduced to the culture or an outsider who views a romanticized version of the culture.

Khaled Hosseini is an Afghanistan-American novelist who has covered the theme of identity, displacement, and human repercussions of the chequered history of Afghanistan, mostly in

his best-selling books *The Kite Runner*, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, and *And the Mountains Echoed*. A compelling example of the work of language at the crossroads of culture, identity and narrative is his *The Kite Runner* (2003). The novel is written in English to reach such a large and global audience, and the story of Amir, a young boy in Kabul, Afghanistan, is influenced by friendship, betrayal, and expectations of his family. Although the novel can be read mostly in English, it contains many *Dari* and *Pashto* words, including *Baba*, *Jan*, *Bismillah*, *Agha* and *burqa*. These terms are not usually translated and they are usually left with no glosses or footnotes. The fact that they are included makes them have small yet meaningful instances of linguistic variation that makes the reader have to seek the meaning in the narrative context. Instead of preventing the reader from fully understanding the story, those words appear to be an invitation to the readers to immerse themselves in the Afghan culture and form a subtle perception of social, family, and religious customs in the narrative. The decision to keep these words will not be a coincidence. Indeed, lexemes that have not been translated in literature typically have intentional purposes. They may serve as identity signifiers, cultural conservation instruments, and positioning instruments to readers in the narrative world. Another way that culturally specific words can be retained in the original tongue of the language, a kind of resistance to erasure or homogenization of the cultural meaning, is in postcolonial and diasporic writing (Venuti, 1995). Author such as Hosseini might try to retain a few words without translation so that the cultural essence may be preserved and at the same time inform readers about the social tendencies, families and religious beliefs, which may otherwise be sacrificed or watered down in translation. These decisions hold great significance especially in diasporic fiction where the authors tend to write to people who might have little or no knowledge of the culture they are representing. Linguistically, the non-translation of words gives chances to investigate the meaning in other than traditional translation. They disclose the process by which the authors cope with semantic gaps, cultural specificities, and the conflict between access and authenticity. The *Kite Runner*, e.g., talks of a father called *Baba*, in terms of Amir. Although it might be translated as a mere word, that means father, such interpretation would not have reflected the social and cultural connotations of the word in the Afghan society. *Baba* does not just transfer paternal authority, but social status, moral expectation and emotional distance. *Baba* is a socially loaded lexeme that cannot be translated into English without losing the hierarchical respect of the Afghan culture. Likewise, the word *Jan*, which is frequently used in the context of affection, has a certain warmth and closeness, which cannot be probably recreated with the help of English analogies like dear or child. When words are left untranslated in such cases, it can be seen that the reader may not only enjoy the cultural and emotional undertones of language but also can make the story seem much more authentic and this will also help the reader connect more with the story. Implications about the experience and interpretation of cultural difference by the readers are also present in the use of untranslated lexemes. According to Venuti (1995), there are two major approaches to translation which include domestication and foreignization. Domestication is the process of adapting a text to make it easy for the target audience to understand, whereas foreignization intentionally keeps the linguistic otherness of the source culture, and the cultural difference is visible and forces the readers to contemplate it. In *The Kite Runner*, the untranslated words seem to serve as foreignizing devices in the first place. They indicate the existence of another culture that is not the one of the English speaking reader and produces some moments of reflection and interaction with the Afghan social, religious, and familial standards. Meanwhile, the presence of context, repetitions, and narrative clues makes the readers be able to draw meaning without explicit translation, which enables the novel to be made more accessible without losing any cultural specificity.

Last research on *The Kite Runner* has put much emphasis on the themes of exile, trauma, guilt and redemption (Rahimi, 2012; Bazin, 2010). Although these studies are very useful in relation to thematic and narrative organization of the novel, they do not thoroughly discuss the micro-linguistic techniques that form the impression of the author on the Afghan culture in the reader. The paper attempts to fill this gap by examining the use of untranslated lexemes and their possible contribution to foreignization, positioning the reader, and building the underlying culture. These linguistic options are of particular interest to students and scholars who consider the intersection of language, literature, and culture. This will give them a viewpoint towards the question of how to preserve identity and authenticity in representations of non-English-speaking societies using the English language.

Moreover, the research on lexemes which were untranslated could enlighten on the moral aspect of introducing another culture in literature. The authors can fight the temptation to cut or commercialize culture to foreign audiences by leaving words in their original forms. Simultaneously, the given approach makes readers more actively read the text, make inferences about the meaning or understand it based on the context, and accept cultural difference. In the case of student researchers, this method underscores the fact that linguistic analysis, in many ways, can help them see deeper layers of meaning that would be obscured during thematic or plot-driven readings of literature.

This paper dwells upon four primary types of untranslated lexemes in *The Kite Runner*: family words, religious phrases, social designations and cultural objects. All these categories have their distinct role in the story, which helps to characterize the development, social world-building, and reflect the practice of cultures. Kinship words like *Baba* and *Jan* are used to create the hierarchies and emotional bonds within the families. Spiritual practices and moral systems can also be seen in expressions found in religion, like *Bismillah*. Such social labels as Agha reveal the status and social conventions whereas such cultural artifacts as *burqa* and *naan* help to define and establish the real world of everyday Afghan life. This paper tries to demonstrate how language can serve the purposes of cultural preservation and engagement of a reader even in an English-language novel by looking at these categories.

To sum up, language selection in *The Kite Runner* is a purposeful and intentional negotiating tactic with which Hosseini handles the Afghan culture representation to the rest of the world. Untranslated lexemes have been used to mark identity, preserve culture and position the readers as the cultural visitors. This paper aims at discussing these linguistic strategies, which form a wider reference in the context of language, literature and culture in the diasporic writing. By conducting the analysis, both readers and student researchers will be able to understand how linguistic decisions may influence the authenticity of narratives and cultural interaction in the English-language literature.

### Research Questions

1. Why does Khaled Hosseini have some *Dari* or *Pashto* words that he does not translate but leaves them to remain in their original state, without using English counterparts?
2. Are these lexemes that are not translated foreignizing strategies to make the culture more authentic, or are they domesticating the Afghan culture to make it accessible to the Western audience?
3. What roles can these lexemes play in creating a fictional world of the novel in the eyes of readers who do not understand languages in Afghanistan?

### Delimitations

The approach is confined to one novel, and findings are not likely to be applicable to other works of Hosseini as well as to other diasporic writing. In addition, the analysis implies that the conclusions made are interpretative and not definitive in a statistical way. However, the

method gives the opportunity to understand the meaning of using untranslated lexemes in literary texts and cultural representation in a rich and nuanced way.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Diasporic writing, Language and Cultural Representation**

The key instrument to the formation of cultural meaning and identity in the postcolonial and diasporic works is language. In an English language source that discusses non-English speaking societies, one of the challenges that are expected to face is how the author can make the work readable to a global audience, yet ensure that the culture of a given world is maintained. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002), postcolonial authors walk a fine line where English is used as a means of communication all over the world but with the threat of cultural homogenization. The strategically retained lexemes can be untranslated, and thereby authors can keep the cultural and social meaning of their native languages, as well as involve readers in a sort of cross-cultural lesson.

Language has been used most of the time in the diasporic writing as a mode of connection between two worlds, between the original culture of the writer and the English speaking world around the globe. Bhabha (1994) takes this to be the establishment of a third space, a space of wandering between different languages and cultural situations, where meaning is negotiated. In this domain, untranslated lexemes can be considered as the symbol of cultural originality, which enables writers to avoid being fully absorbed by English. They give the readers a feeling of experiencing a culture on its level and not on a simplified and westernized level. The presentation style may also demonstrate the personal experience of the author who is able to move between languages and cultures, which is why the story can be considered both a place of language negotiation and narration.

As has been observed by scholars, a characteristic of diasporic writing is the use of a mixture of languages, code-switching and the selective translations. Pavlenko(2007) highlights that multilingual authors can apply untranslated words in strategic places especially in sections where translation might result to loss of the semantics. Some kinship terms, religious expressions and objectively defined objects may have implications that can hardly be fully expressed in the English language. As an example, in *The Kite Runner*, the term *Baba* conveys not just the meaning of a father but also authority, social rank, and cultural imperatives that would be lost to some degree if the word would simply be translated to 'father'. Equally, such words as *Jan* or *Agha* have emotional and social undertones that can never be fully reproduced in English.

#### **Domestication and Foreignization**

The ideas of domestication and foreignization that are introduced by Lawrence Venuti (1995) can be used to analyze these linguistic strategies using the theoretical framework. Domestication is the process of making a text easily readable by the target-language reader, which can be achieved by translating cultural signs into recognizable counterparts. Foreignization, in its turn, does not eliminate the linguistic and cultural strangeness of the original text and instead, cultural difference becomes more prominent and requires reader to be active participants in the cultural transmission process.

Although the framework developed by Venuti was initially applied in translation studies, scholars have extended the framework to the multilingual English literature, which itself deals with writers as translators to their own culture (Tymoczko, 1999; Bandia, 2008). In this regard, untranslated lexemes might serve as a marker of self and opposition, conservation of culture in the text. The same untranslated lexemes can convey ideas and shape meaning, inviting readers to acknowledge culture difference instead of passively reading a simplified and domesticated version of another community.

The discourse of domestication versus foreignization is not strictly one-sided. Other researchers maintain that a good literature can be a combination of the two strategies. As an example, partial foreignization may suggest the retention of the original word accompanied by context or explanation of the term presented by the use of narrative details, repetition or perceptive glosses. Stockwell (2002) remarks that such techniques can facilitate cognitive poetics as this enables the reader to be able to discern any meaning progressively, and this may impart immersion and cultural insight. *Burqa* or *naan* are common words used in *The Kite Runner*, which is usually not translated directly, but the narrative context provides the reader with interpretation of the meaning, which implies the progressive strategy of including foreignization with a slight touch of domestication.

### **Untranslated Lexemes in Diasporic Literature**

Lexemes that have not been translated often include areas where translation may lead to semantic dilution e.g. in the fields of kinship, religion, social hierarchy and other culturally important items. Pavlenko(2007) notes that, words that are stored in the source language have the potential of transferring the meaning, which was engrained in a social, historical, or religious context. As an illustration, family relations can be reflected in the use of kinship terminologies, and emotional interactions within a culture and can have a distinct meaning in terms of hierarchy, which cannot be fully understood in the English language, and religious terms can have ceremonial or ethical connotation.

Untranslated words also use a similar situation in the diasporic literature as a cultural marker that denotes the author's loyalty to the culture of their home. Bandia (2008) explains that postcolonial writers tend to apply the language tactically in order to oppose the loss of cultural identity and the need to maintain the integrity of the narrated world. It can encompass some form of code-switching, the non-translation of some words, or random glossing. In such a way, the authors affirm the presence of the culture and call on the readers to explore the world in its reality instead of viewing it through a domesticated and Westernized prism.

A number of articles on multilingual English fiction depict this tactic. As an example, the book *The Namesake* by Lahiri (2003) uses some of the Bengali words pertaining to family, ritual, and food and does not involve their translation, which is accompanied by the background information given through the story. Equally, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by Adichie contains Igbo lexemes, which make readers immerse in the society of Nigeria with its traditions and cultural values. Such instances are similar to those of Hosseini in *The Kite Runner*, who employed the use of *Dari* and *Pashto* words in supporting the authenticity of the story and the immersion of the reader into the story.

### **Readers' Interaction with Culture**

Having untranslated lexemes in the works of literature may affect the reading and the way of perceiving the text. Venuti (1995) also concludes that foreignization can morally transform readers into cultural tourists, who are exposed to otherness and enticed to actively investigate the continuing foreign norms and practices. This is most applicable at the student level of analysis where the meaning of the new words is slowly acquired through the context, repetition and by the story telling aspects instead of being explicitly translated.

The repetition in the words *Baba*, *Jan*, *Bismillah*, and *Agha* is used in terms in *The Kite Runner* helps the reader to gain a meaning by observing how different characters behave, interact, and what the narrators say. This process does not only strengthen cultural authenticity, but also aids in engaging the reader cognitively and emotionally. Hosseini shows a close attainment of accessibility and cultural fidelity through linguistic difference but offers interpretive scaffolding.

### Lapses in the Current Research

Though such thematic issues as trauma, exile, and redemption in *The Kite Runner* have been discussed in earlier studies (Bazin, 2010; Rahimi, 2012), little is known about linguistic techniques and the significance of untranslated lexemes in maintaining cultural identity. The fact that the majority of existing analyses focus on plot, character growth, or sociopolitical setting leaves a gap in comprehending the role of language per se in making the world-building and the audience interested.

The research aims to fill this gap by discussing untranslated lexemes in the novel, the role they play as possible foreignization machinery, and how they affect the perception of readers and cultural authenticity. Through the lexeme analysis of the classes related to kinship, religion, social hierarchy, and cultural objects, the paper cites the interactions between language, identity, and narrative, which can be applied when researching linguistics and literature.

### Theoretical Framework

A framework of domestication and foreignization by Lawrence Venuti (1995) was used to analyze it. Every lexeme was analyzed to establish whether it had been:

- Translated into English (domestication),
- Left in its original form with no explanation (foreignization), or
- Partly explicable by context or narrative innuendos (a mixture of domestication and foreignization).

As an example, *Baba* is nearly never translated which means that there is a high degree of foreignizing tendency and *burka* is sometimes descriptively contextualized which means partial domestication.

To make sure of being objective, the analysis was cut down to the textual evidence presented in the novel. The functionality of lexemes was interpreted through the recurrence, narration into which they are found, and the semantic content instead of subjective preference. Although this method gives a precise picture of the linguistic behavior of Hosseini, it is admitted that the way will be interpreted differently by the readers, especially those who are not so familiar with the Afghan culture or languages.

### Methodology

The paper utilizes the qualitative textual examination methodology, which involves analyzing texts to uncover meanings, patterns and themes, and aims to focus on the linguistic role of untranslated lexemes in Khaled Hosseini's book, titled *The Kite Runner* (2003). This research is deemed to require qualitative textual analysis as it enables focusing on a close reading of the novel and taking into account the contextual, cultural, and social connotation of particular lexemes (Creswell and Poth, 2018). As opposed to quantitative assessment in measurement, it focuses on the interpretive cognition in nature with special attention to the influence of language decisions on the cultural representation and perception among readers.

### Data Collection

This research draws on the main material of the 2003 version of *The Kite Runner* by Riverhead Books. All text was closely read and all lexemes that are not English, such as *Dari* and *Pashto* words, were noted. The data collection was done by recording the pages where the words appear, the word or phrase itself and the narrative where the word appears. There were also 112 distinct lexemes that were recognized in the novel. Repetition was also identified as a method to examine patterns of frequencies as repetition can be an indication of cultural importance of a word, or narrative focus.

Considering the previously mentioned examples of kinship, like *Baba* and *Jan*, and religious exhibitions, like *Bismillah*, in the novel, there are a variety of situations where particular

expressions are used repeatedly in specific ritual or emotive events. Contextual notes are also added to such social titles like *Agha* and cultural objects like *burqa* or *naan*.

### Categorization

The found lexemes were divided into four major categories in accordance with cultural and semantic function:

**Kinship and Address Terms:** These are spoken words that are used to address a family member (*baba*), to show a relationship (*jan, kaka*). The words are culturally charged and may be interpreted as hierarchical or emotional which cannot be entirely translated into English counterparts.

**Religious Expressions:** Lexemes that give Islamic rituals, prayers, or beliefs, e.g. *Bismillah*, *Inshallah*, and *Namaz*. Such words can be spiritual, moral and social at the same time.

**Social Titles:** Words that represent status, power, or social rank such as *Agha*, *Khan* and *Mullah*. These names give an understanding of the social system in Afghanistan and show the hierarchy of the characters.

**Cultural Artifacts and Clothing:** Lexemes of everyday life, food or traditional clothing, including *burqa*, *naan* and *kolba*. These words are used to establish and develop the setting and maintain the specifics of the Afghan culture.

The use of categorization permitted the systematic analysis of the role of lexemes and the possibility to detect the trends in the foreignization and domestication strategies.

### Results

As the analysis has shown, Khaled Hosseini mostly adopts the foreignizing strategies in *The Kite Runner*, especially in such areas, which have either heavy cultural or emotional weight. The tables below are a summary of the distribution of lexemes without translation in the four categories identified in the methodology.

**Table 1: Distribution of Untranslated Lexemes in *The Kite Runner***

Category	Example	Frequency
Kinship	<i>Baba</i>	674 times
Kinship	<i>Jan</i>	113 times
Religious	<i>Bismillah</i>	5 times
Religious	<i>Inshallah</i>	13 times
Religious	<i>Mashallah</i>	7 times
Social Title	<i>Agha</i>	89 times
Clothing/Cultural Object	<i>Burqa</i>	7 times
Food	<i>Naan</i>	16 times

### Observations from Results and Discussion

#### Kinship Terminology and Culture

The most common lexemes that could not be translated were kinship, which indicated their key position in the relationships between characters and in plot like *Baba* is never translated, and it supports the authoritative position of a father, his social status, and emotional importance:

‘Most days I worshipped Baba with an intensity approaching the religious.’ (Hosseini, 2003, P.30)

*Baba* here is showing respect and moral expectation and cultural hierarchy. On making it the word father, such subtleties would be taken away. In the same way, in a culturally specific

way, *jan* expresses intimacy and affection. Its usage is rather frequent, and in such a way, readers can internalize its meaning of affection:

‘My door is and always will be open to you, Amir jan.’ (Hosseini, 2003, P.31)

The word *jan* is used employing the strategy of foreignization to introduce the readers to the Afghan types of families instead of a westernized version.

### **Religious Expressions and Identity**

Such religious lexemes as *Bismillah* should occur during ritual or moral highs. Apart from this other religious terminologies like *Inshallah* has also been noticed:

‘Inshallah, you have reached this letter safely.’ (Hosseini, 2003, P. 276)

*Inshallah* has not been translated to ‘hopefully’ or ‘if God wills’ retaining the cultural and religious essence by using foreignization.

Other words like *Mashallah* are also used and by employing the strategy of foreignization the writer is evoking the sense of otherness and inviting the readers as a guest to explore the culture by making subtle efforts to comprehend it:

‘Mashallah, you’re just about the smartest little guy I’ve ever met, Sohrab jan’ (Hosseini, 2003, P. 312)

Keeping the religiously important words intact also increases the authenticity of the novel and conveys the place of Islam as an important part of the daily Afghan life. It would be a danger to its immediacy and cultural weight to have it partially translated or explained.

### **Social Titles and Hierarchy**

The characters are placed in the levels of Afghan hierarchies through such social titles as *gha*:

He’d referred to Assef as “Agha,” and I wondered briefly what it must be like to live with such an ingrained sense of one’s place in hierarchy.’ (Hosseini, 2003, P. 39)

The fact that the term is not translated makes readers think about the authority. This word *gha* is also used to show respect and this factor is shown not by the literal meaning but by the context:

‘Read it again please, Amir agha, Hassan would say.’ (Hosseini, 2003, P.28)

This is a foreignizing approach, which maintains cultural subtlety and at the same time educates the readers about societal dynamics.

### **Objects of Culture and World-Building**

Such cultural objects as *burqa* are at times partially covered by narrative context through subtle hints to guide readers through the vast valley of a foreign culture:

‘They sat in the laps of their burqa-clad mothers’ (Hosseini, 2003, P.226)

### **Food and Culture**

An important aspect of a culture is its distinctive cuisine or a food that is widely eaten or associated with it. And by keeping such words in their original form the author attempts to invite the readers to step into their culture to view and feel it closely. Hosseini is seen to be making the same attempt:

‘A man who takes what’s not his to take, be it a life or a loaf of naan...I spit on such a man.’ (Hosseini, 2003, P.18)

The evidence suggests that Hosseini selects the strategy of foreignization of culturally important lexemes in a tactical way and resorts to a combination of foreignization and domestication. The contextual cues enable the readers to get the understanding on unknown objects without necessarily domesticating them into the English language. The style of this view helps in the world-building and allows the readers to feel the real life of Afghanistan.

The recurrent application of foreignizing strategies places the readers in the status of cultural visitors instead of given up domesticated interiors (Venuti, 1995). The active engagement and cultural awareness are achieved by gaining meaning gradually in the process of repetition and

context. This approach honors the integrity of the Afghan culture even though the linguistic challenges of those who may not understand *Dari* or *Pashto* is also made.

### **Linguistic Implications of the findings**

Based on this analysis, untranslated lexemes act as cultural indicators which help to preserve identity, build a world, and maintain authenticity of a story. They show the indistinguishability of language and culture and note how writers can be self-translators, who traverse between global English and local cultural loyalty readership.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the role of untranslated lexemes in *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini by studying domestication and foreignization. Through examining the words pertaining to kinship, religion, social hierarchy, and cultural objects, the study indicates that Hosseini uses mostly foreignizing strategies as the culturally important words are not translated to retain the Afghan identity.

Certain terms of kinship like *Baba* and *Jan* which have emotional, hierarchical and social meanings cannot be perfectly expressed in English. *Bismillah* as a religious lexeme is used to retain the ritual meaning and moral environment. Social naming such as *Agha* and cultural artifacts such as *burqa* and *naan* play a part in world building and sometimes rely on the context of the narrative to aid understanding. These plans combined enable the reader to be active in the process of interacting with the world of Afghanistan and at the same time can be exposed to the narrative.

Linguistically, the study presents these results to highlight how language and identity cannot be separated in diasporic literature. Lexemes without a translation are like fingerprints of cultures, they are the indication of a particular social and moral order. They encourage the readers to engage in the Afghan culture as they are and not as a passive consumer of a modernized form. By inviting the reader as a cultural guest, Hosseini makes an invitation to the difference and makes the ethical representation.

The study has its shortcomings due to the fact that it examines and analyzes a novel and the interpretations are made through contextual analysis and not reader response studies. The future study can focus on other books by Hosseini like *A Thousand Splendid Suns* or to compare the works of several diasporic writers to identify the typical language tricks in the fiction written in English. Also, a study of how readers of untranslated lexemes interpret the message might be of value in terms of the success of foreignization and the extent of understanding and true meaning.

To sum up, in *The Kite Runner* certain lexemes are left untranslated intentionally to add depth to the story, making it more cultural, and ensuring that the readers can contribute to the story. The paper provides importance to students of linguistics and literature by emphasizing their ability to study the language on a micro-level to derive larger cultural and narrative trends. This text by Hosseini shows that words are not just bearers of meaning and are capable of acting as agents in sustaining identity and creating reader experience.

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