

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-6, DECEMBER 2025

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

Cultural Substitution in Daisy Rockwell's English Translation of *Ret Samadhi*

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Article History: Submitted-02/12/2025, Revised-23/12/2025, Accepted-27/12/2025, Published-31/12/2025.

Abstract:

Translating a literary text into a culturally remote language is a challenging task due to difficulty in finding suitable expressions for the practices mentioned in the source text. These challenges include finding suitable equivalents for cultural expressions and idioms in the target language (TL). This article presents brief analyses of select expressions in Daisy Rockwell's English translation of *Ret Samadhi* (Tomb of Sand) denoting culture, idioms, and humour in the light of Jane Pedersen (2005 & 2007) with a view to highlighting various issues related to translation of culturally rooted Hindi texts into English. Alongside, it presents possible solutions to these issues with added commentary. While literal translation and retention techniques keep the translation faithful to the source text, they make the translation clumsy and at times incomprehensible. Added explanation of cultural expressions, cultural adaptation, and deletion of unnecessary details can bring required smoothness to the translation, though sometimes, compromise the authenticity. Deft translators consider the shared knowledge and cultural sensibility of the target audience and use suitable techniques of translation like cultural substitution to capture the authorial intent, and stylistic gravity of the source text in their translation.

Keywords: Culture, translation studies, substitution technique, translation techniques.

Introduction

With the advancement in technology, the world has become a global village as people from far-off cultures in different corners of the world have come closer. This phenomenon created an opportunity to know different people and their cultures through their literature in translation. Translating a text into a culturally unrelated and remote language is a daunting task. It is so because language is a cultural tool designed to express the needs and sensibilities of a particular linguistic society. English, as the dominant lingua franca of the world, serves as a medium for disseminating ideas through translation of texts from various cultures. Due to translation into English, works from Indian languages like Hindi gained international recognition. Translated Hindi literature not only enriches the English literary landscape but also introduces readers to the nuances of Indian culture and its traditions, fostering cross-cultural appreciation. Moreover, translation preserves the nuances of original texts, ensuring that the emotional and aesthetic qualities resonate effectively with the target readers. In this way, translation promotes cross-cultural understanding in an increasingly interconnected world (Hannah 2-4). Thus, translation is essential not only for communication but also for the celebration and preservation of cultural heritage.

Translation is an activity of transferring meaning of a given discourse from one language into the other language. It is a technique of translating a text from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL). Therefore, a translator needs to have good understanding of both the languages and cultures as he is supposed to transfer the writer's intention, original thought, and emotions from SA to TL as faithfully as possible.

Catford defines translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)" (Catford 20). Nida and Taber, in their 1982 book titled *Theory and Practice of Translation*, have defined translation as "reproducing

in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning, and secondly in terms of style” (Nida & Taber 2). Therefore, the primary goal of translation is to convey the meaning of the source text into the target language effectively and accurately. It may involve understanding the message, intention and nuances of the source text. An effective translation of a text also aims to reflect the style and tone of the original text as closely as possible through retaining the effect of linguistic structures, cultural references, and the overall tone and register of the source text. So, it is necessary for a translator to understand the linguistic and cultural differences between SL and TL to find the appropriate equivalents in the target language for cultural expression in SL.

Jeremy Munday, in his 1965 book titled *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*, defines translation as “the process of substituting textual material in one language (Source Language) for equivalent textual material in another language (Target Language)” (Munday 5). Therefore, translation ensures that the meaning and structure of the text in the target language are approximately similar to the structure and meaning of the source language and the translator needs to avoid distorting the structure and meaning.

This paper studies the issues of translatability in Daisy Rockwell’s English translation of Geetanjali Shree’s *Ret Samadhi* published with the title of *The Tomb of Sand* with a view to understanding the strategies and techniques of effective translation. It also examines the use of cultural substitution technique in this translation to assess the extent to which the translator could sincerely capture the semantic and cultural essence of the original text. This work intends to make the students of translation studies better aware of the issues of translatability in the English translation of Hindi text.

Literature Review

George Steiner, in his book titled *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* comments on translation, "To understand is to decipher. To hear the significance is to translate." So, he challenges conventional theories of translation by maintaining that all human communication within and between languages is translation. Another theorist of translation Werner Koller states "phonological, morphological and syntactic units need to be transferred to the target language with a linguistic interpretation during translation" (Koller 47). This definition emphasises the complexity of translation that involves linguistic interpretation. Hans Vermeer also defines translation and stating that "Translation is by definition interlingual and intercultural, it involves both linguistic and cultural transfer, and in other words, it is a culture-transcending process" (Vermeer 40). Therefore, translation is a process of cross-cultural communication that conveys the message from one language into another language. It is actually an interaction between languages and cultures that focuses on linguistic transfer and communicative purpose of translation.

In the process of translation, some aspects of the source text need to be replaced by the equivalent material in the target text to retain the intended meaning. Nida and Taber also support the view of Catford and emphasise the need of official equivalents in translation. Translating a text is not only the duty of a translator, instead it should be performed in a way that it retains the authorial intention into the target text. Ultimately, translation is a cross-cultural communication, conveying a message from one culture to another. Therefore, it becomes clear that translation is an act of rendering meaning, sense and emotions of the source text to the target text.

The translation of culture has been widely researched by scholars in translation studies. I have reviewed some important researches to put the present work in proper perspective. Jianqing

Wu (2008) highlights cultural gaps in translation when translating Chinese texts into English. He suggests six methods of translation of culture: retaining original cultural flavour, transliteration, transference, replacing the ST cultural expressions in TL, translating the implied meaning, and adding an explanation. Similarly, Buden and Nowotny (2009) explore the concept of cultural translation within political, social and cultural studies. They observe that socio-cultural perspectives should be considered in translation as rendering a culturally rooted element involves transferring it from one set of socio-political settings to another one. Lai (2012) observes that translation of cultural items poses unique challenges to translators in achieving conceptual equivalence between the two languages. He underlines that a sound understanding of the source culture is important for cross-cultural translation alongside careful consideration of the target culture. Similarly, Guo (2012) underlines a close association of language with culture, and suggests the use of certain approaches like semantic and pragmatic equivalence for better translation.

Dabaghi and Bagheri (2012) explore the problems in the rendering of culture in the translation of a literary text. They point out that the translators usually face problems in finding suitable equivalents in the target language. They can use techniques like cultural equivalence, paraphrasing, domestication, and foreignization to translate the culture-specific elements. For the same purpose, Guerra (2012) suggests the use of techniques like adaptation, modulation, generalization, linguistic-paralinguistic substitution, explication, compensation, reduction, transposition, and particularization. Deka (2020) highlights the challenges of cultural translation, which include the lack of knowledge of the source text and its cultural background, difficulty in finding specific equivalents, and difficulty in achieving equivalent effect in translation. Imami and Nasrullah (2021) states that a translator makes many adjustments on both linguistic and cultural levels to achieve a near equivalent effect in translation.

In light of the review presented above, it is evident that not much research has been done on cultural translation of Hindi texts into English. Therefore, this work will shed some light on the translation of culturally rooted expressions in a literary text like *Ret Samadhi* with a view to identifying the challenges and suggesting some possible solutions.

Methodology

This work presents an analysis of the English translation of Geetanjali Shree's *Ret Samadhi* by Daisy Rockwell. The chapter studies how far the translator could capture the authorial intent and literary effect of the source text in her translation. An effort has been made to investigate the translation in the light of Jane Pedersen (2005 & 2007) for translating culture.

Jan Pedersen (2005 & 2007) classified his translation strategies under the SL-oriented strategies and the TL-oriented strategies. The SL oriented strategies include the strategies of equivalence, retention, specification, addition, and paraphrase. The strategy of equivalence seeks to gain equivalence at the word, sentence, pragmatic, and textual levels in the translation. In retention strategy, the original cultural expression is retained as it is when the equivalent cultural expression is not found in the target language. "Specification in translation refers to the process of providing additional details or explanations to clarify ambiguous or context-dependent elements of the original text" (Pedersen 4). The Addition strategy provides additional information while translating the cultural expressions. In Paraphrase strategy, a cultural reference is removed from the source text and its sense is rendered in the target language.

The TL-oriented strategies include Substitution and Omission. In Substitution strategy, cultural substitution is used to convey the sense of an SL cultural expression that may not have an apt equivalent in the target language. Substitution generally results in the loss of meaning of the cultural expression. For example, the translation of Bhagwan Shiva as 'Lord Shiva' is the result

of substitution. It is noteworthy to see that such a translation strips Shiva of his divinity and presents him merely as a Lord or baron in the political sense of the word. It is a process of replacing a cultural reference with the familiar equivalent in the target language. In the Omission strategy, insignificant details of the source text are dropped during translation in favour of lucidity and smooth reading.

Analysis

Translation is usually a challenging task, inviting significant challenges for the translators. The translators often face difficulty in translating culturally rooted literary texts as they often have complex cultural concepts unavailable in the target culture. The Indian culture at its core is characterized by diversity in traditions, clothing, dance forms, and ways of life. Therefore, a translator often struggles to translate the culturally rooted expressions, local idioms, and the regional terminology embedded in a literary text. Geetanjali Shree's 2018 Hindi novel titled *Ret Samadhi* (RS) has many culturally rooted expressions, local idioms, and traditional practices, posing significant challenge to the translators, as interpreting these expressions and finding suitable equivalents becomes a really challenging task. Therefore, Daisy Rockwell in her translation titled the *Tomb of Sand* (TS) often substitutes many cultural terms with the closest equivalents in the target language, when she does not find an exact equivalent in the target language.

The technique of cultural substitution helps translators to substitute the culture-bound elements with similar elements in the target culture to make the text more relatable and understandable for reader from a different cultural background. In doing so, idiomatic expressions and cultural expressions in SL may be replaced with closest equivalents in TL that is more comprehensible and relatable to the target audience. It preserves the meaning and cultural essence of the SL to some extent keeping in mind the cultural sensitivities of the target audience. Thus, the

technique of cultural substitution helps bridging cultural gaps between the two culturally different languages like Hindi and English.

The table given below presents cultural expressions from *Ret Samadhi* with their English translation in *Tomb of Sand*. Rockwell relies on the technique of cultural substitution with a view to conveying across the cultural essence of the expressions.

No.	Culture-bound Terms in ST	English Translation by Rockwell
1.	शादी ब्याह (RS, p.14)	Wedding (TS, p.16)
2.	राई चूरा (RS, p.15)	Roasted rice (TS, p.19)
3.	गच्चा खा जाना (RS, p.19)	Barking up the wrong tree' (TS, p.30)
4.	दाल में कुछ काला होना' (RS, p. 20)	Something seems fishy (TS, p. 31)
5.	ससुराल (RS, p. 32)	In-laws (TS, p.56)
6.	आँखे चुराना (RS, p. 36)	Avoiding eye contact (TS, p. 63)
7.	पुत्रवधु (RS, p.37)	Daughter-in-law (TS, p. 66)
8.	भाभी (RS, p. 38)	Daughter-in-law (TS, p. 69)
9.	भगवान (RS, p.70)	God (TS, p.129)
10.	अपने मुंह मियां मिट्टू बनना (RS, p.112)	I was being a show-off (TS, p.216)

In the context of Indian culture, the phrases like 'शादी' and 'ब्याह' refer to the marriage of two individuals but they carry a much more deeper meaning than marriage in the European sense

of the word. In Indian culture, marriage is considered to be a sacred union of two souls, performed with proper rituals; but the word ‘marriage’ does not seem to convey the associated cultural significance of the original Hindi word. ‘**ब्याह**’ is a more traditional term, whereas the cultural term ‘**शादी**’ is more widely used across Hindi-speaking regions.

In English culture, ‘wedding’ generally refers to the *ceremony* where two people are married. Though it can imply celebration, it does not inherently include the extended rituals of ‘**शादी**’ in Indian culture. This makes the English translation logical but not perfectly suitable for the Hindi expression. Therefore, the English translation ‘marriage’ fails to preserve the associated cultural essence ‘**शादी**’. The translator should have chosen a better suited cultural adaptation to bridge the gap to come closer to the cultural connotation in the target language.

In translating the Hindi expression ‘**राई चूरा**’ as ‘Roasted Rice’, the translator once again applies the substitution technique. It is a traditional rural dish usually eaten during fasting. However, its English equivalent relates it to the image of rice grains roasted over heat, possibly dry-roasted for flavour, further missing the cultural context of the Hindi phrase. It is actually not the best rendering as it sounds vague to English-speaking readers, unfamiliar with Indian cultural practices. The translator should have replaced this term with something more familiar in the target culture with added explanation. Perhaps a blend of transliteration and contextual explanation would have worked better in place of the cultural substitution. Overall, the English translation here is not that absurd as it easily imparts some meaning of the original Hindi expression in its English translation.

The following Hindi idiom ‘**गच्चा खा जाना**’ and its English translation ‘barking up the wrong tree’ both suggest a mistaken judgment but they differ subtly in their connotations. The phrase ‘**गच्चा खा जाना**’ typically implies making a blunder, often due to a lack of information. By

contrast, the English idiom 'barking up the wrong tree' is more about directing efforts, accusations toward the wrong object and it does not necessarily imply blunder as the original expression does in Hindi. Here the translator relies on the technique of cultural substitution and tries to replace the original Hindi idiom with a culturally equivalent idiom in the target language. Her intention is to maintain cultural effect but its translation seems to compromise the cultural essence of the original idiom. To some extent, the English translation of the idiom helps to preserve the basic idea of the Hindi expression. The translator should have gone for a more faithful translation by using paraphrasing technique to retain the original meaning of the Hindi expression.

Similarly, while translating the other cultural idioms, the translator employs the technique of substitution quite often. The Hindi idiom '**दाल में कुछ काला होना**' and its English translation 'something seems fishy' convey suspicion and doubt that something is wrong. The technique of substitution used here helps to preserve the essence of the original Hindi idiom in the target language while maintaining the same cultural depth. Here, the translator is quite successful in understanding the Hindi phrase and finding a suitable expression in the target language to render it.

The next Hindi expressions '**पुत्रवधु**', '**भाभी**' and '**ससुराल**' are closely related expressions, reflecting deeply ingrained cultural values and familial relations in the Indian society. Their English translation 'daughter-in-law', 'sister-in-law' and 'in-laws' are, though functional, fail to convey the social and emotional complexity that the original expressions carry. The expression '**पुत्रवधु**' (literally the bride of the son) represents a significant transformation in a woman's social identity upon entering her husband's family where she is expected to integrate into the familial customs, hierarchy, and responsibilities. Similarly, the expression '**भाभी**' denotes the wife of an elder brother, marking a relation imbued with respect, warmth, and

underlying subtle power dynamics. These Hindi expressions carry not just familial intimacy but also behavioural expectations tied to their gender roles. Similarly, the last expression in the list ‘**ससुराल**’ refers to the husband’s home, which is the marital household of a woman after marriage. Its English translation “in-laws” loses its cultural significance, particularly the socio-emotional transition it holds for a bride. Hence, these expressions are tied to the comparable social scenario and almost convey the same meaning with a part of emotional sentiments and social expectations missing. While the English translation is semantically correct, it often does not capture the emotional weight, social restrictions and relational intricacies embedded within the Indian familial context. The English language does not possess the vocabulary for different familial relations unlike the Hindi language has. Hence, languages not only reflect different relationships but also they reflect different cultural frameworks within which those relations function.

The next Hindi idiom, ‘**आँखें चुराना**’ signifies guilt, discomfort, shame, and a desire to avoid confrontation. The imagery is vivid and emotive, suggesting a deliberate and often shame-driven withdrawal from direct engagement. The idiom is frequently used in contexts where someone is caught doing something wrong or feels ashamed and thus avoids facing the other person. In contrast, the English expression “avoiding eye contact” is more literal. While it implies guilt or nervousness, it lacks the poetic intensity and emotional flavour that the original Hindi expression holds. In this way, the English counterpart does not quite meet the expectations of the readers. The technique of cultural substitution totally fails here and the translation turns out to be quite absurd.

The Hindi expression ‘**भगवान**’ and its English translation ‘God’ appear equivalent at the first glance as both seem to refer to the supreme, divine being. However, a deep cultural and philosophical analysis reveals a significant difference in their cultural usage. In the Indian

culture, the expression ‘**भगवान**’ is used for great reverence. It does not essentially mean the Supreme, for which the more adequate term ‘*Ishwar*’ is used in Hindi. By contrast, the English word ‘lord’ may denote an authorial figure like judge in court, and hence does not preserve the deeper emotional weight and spiritual significance which the original Hindi expression holds. It reveals how translation often fails to preserve the underlying emotional and philosophical intricacies of the source culture. Though the technique of substitution is quite logically employed and it has been somewhat successful in rendering the core meaning of the term.

Last but not the least, the Hindi phrase “**अपने मुंह मियां मिट्टू बनना**” and its English translation “I was being a show-off” retain the meaning of the culturally endowed Hindi phrase to a certain extent. However, the English equivalent appears more direct and lacks the layered metaphorical essence of the Hindi phrase. While “**अपने मुंह मियां मिट्टू बनना**” denotes laughter, disapproval, or criticism in equal measures, the English translation simply describes it as a behavioural act. The Hindi phrase literally translates as “to become your own parrot of praise”, referring to someone who sings their own praise or shows off in a direct manner. The metaphorical use of ‘**मियां मिट्टू**’, a term often used for parrots trained to speak flattering phrases, adds a rich cultural texture to the expression. By contrast, its English translation is far more literal and lacks poetic flavour and humour of the original Hindi expression. The Hindi phrase subtly critiques the act of boasting oneself with a humorous and slightly mocking tone, which the English translation lacks. Therefore, the technique of substitution has achieved partial success here in imparting the essence and meaning of the Hindi phrase in its English translation.

Conclusion

After a close analysis of the above-listed cultural expressions of the original Hindi text along with their English translation, it becomes clear that Rockwell relied on the technique of cultural

substitution to impart the underlying meaning and cultural essence of the original Hindi expressions in the target language. However, her technique seems to achieve partial success and she could possibly have done better if she had relied on the technique of retention or borrowing with added explanation. Each Hindi expression need not be translated into English if its suitable counterpart is missing in the English culture. Whatsoever, the English translation is not completely senseless as it happens to preserve the cultural effect and supposed meaning of the source text to some extent. Hence, the English translation does not seem to be completely absurd as the chosen English equivalents are meaningful and justified to some extent. Daisy Rockwell filled the gaps and made her translation smoother and more readable than the original text, winning the Booker Prize in 2022 for the author and herself.

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