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Cultural Meaning and Social Identity: Translating Culture-specific Items in Selected Kashmiri Stories into English

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Abstract:

Translation of literary texts is an arduous process. It is embedded in culture, carries hidden meanings, figurative language, tone and style. Hence, the loss of meaning is inevitable from the source text (ST) into the Target text (TT). One of the major challenges for a translator in literary texts is translating culture-specific items and finding their appropriate equivalents in the target text. Therefore, this study offers a critical analysis of the selected Kashmiri short stories translated into English by Neerja Mattoo. It examines the loss and gain of meaning at the cultural and social levels. The study explores the various strategies employed by the translator and various factors that influence the translator's choices and decisions taken while translating culture-specific items into the target language. Finally, the analysis highlights the various strategies of the translator in translating culture-specific items which contributes to the broader discourse on translating culture-specific items.

Keywords: Literary texts, culture-specific items, equivalence, loss and gain, strategies, choices and decisions.

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Introduction

Translation is a complex phenomenon between a source text and a target text. It requires a substantial effort by a translator compared to an original work. The dichotomy between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) puts a translator into a difficult situation as they have to serve the two masters - the ST author and the TT audience. Hence, the transference of meaning/message from the ST and the TT demands immense efforts by a translator that requires knowledge, commitment and passion for a successful and quality translation.

Translation is a challenging process in literary text than an informative text. Literary texts are rooted in history, culture, customs, beliefs, values and traditions. The translation becomes difficult because of the linguistic differences, cultural gaps and the translator's own reading and interpretation of the ST. The figures of speech like metaphors, similes, puns, idioms, proverbs pose a significant challenge for a translator to provide appropriate equivalents of these elements into the target text. In case a translator faces difficulties in finding the appropriate equivalents, translation turns a negotiation of meaning between the two languages. This distinction between languages has been highlighted by Edward Sapir in his book *Culture, Language, and Personality* (1956). He states, "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). However, this does not make translation impossible but makes us realize that translation demands immense experience and knowledge of subtle nuances about translation theory and its applications.

At the heart of translation is the concept of equivalence. A translator has to make decisions at different levels to achieve equivalence between the ST and the TT. In his article "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" (1959), Jakobson emphasizes the various strategies a

translator can employ to overcome problems at different levels. He points out that absolute equivalence in translation does not exist, nevertheless, the need for and possibility of translation always remain. He states, "Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey" (116). In his categorization of the three types of translation—intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic—Jakobson highlights the problems that arise in each of these categories. For instance, in interlingual translation, where translation occurs between two different languages, a translator encounters numerous challenges both at the linguistic and cultural levels. 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 "сыр", because cottage cheese is a cheese but not a сыр. Russians say: принеси сыру и творогу "bring cheese and [sic] cottage cheese." In standard Russian, the food made of pressed curds is called сыр only if ferment is used. (114)

Jakobson argues that the absolute equivalence is not possible in translation. Linguistic and cultural variations are the primary reasons for loss and gain in translation. As pointed out by Bassnett, "Jakobson goes on immediately to point to the central problem in all types of translation: that while messages may be translated, there is ordinarily no full equivalence through translation" (*Translation Studies* 23). This highlights the complexity of the translation process and the crucial role of a translator.

Problematics of Loss and Gain in Translation

Loss and gain are inevitable in translation. However, a competent translator is able to minimize the loss and gain of meaning while translating the linguistic, emotional and cultural

meaning of words in the target text. They transference the meaning of the ST text into the TT while negotiating the meaning with closely associated words and linguistic elements.

Loss in translation signifies the disappearance of meaning or some linguistics features from the ST into the TT. This may crop up due to unavailability of an equivalent word or linguistic item in the TT to convey the same meaning as in the ST, or due to the translator's proper strategy to preserve the equivalent meaning in the TT. In this context, Nozizwe and Ncube state, "Loss is the disappearance of certain features in the target text which are present in the source language text" (676). They further highlight, "This is largely attributed to the lack of immediate equivalence between concepts, words, phrases, and syntax in the target language that exist in the source language. This process is termed "linguistic distance" (Nozizwe and Ncube 676). Thus, loss of meaning often reflects the unique form of the ST and its culture as rooted in culture and society.

The loss of meaning in literary texts also occur due its literariness and also due to the culture-specific items related to food, dress, religion, festivals, music. Moreover, the lack of knowledge on translation theories and current trends further adds the difficulties for understanding the linguistic and cultural nuances between the ST and the TT.

Gain in translation, on the other hand, refers to the enrichment or clarification of meaning from ST into the TT. There is a wider readership and greater reception of a translation among the target readers. A faithful and ideal translation has flavour and felicity in the target language and conveys the meaning smoothly. A translator is able to translate the various culture-specific items related to food, dress, religion, festivals, art, and similar aspects are effectively rendered in the target language. Linguistic elements and other literary aspects of the ST such as idioms, similes, and metaphors, which are deeply rooted in the source-text (ST) culture, may also be

translated successfully without significant loss of meaning. This is possible through the translator's expertise in both the source language (SL) and the target language (TL).

Susan Bassnett highlights gain in translation that "…the translator can at times enrich or clarify the SL text as a direct result of the translation process" (*Translation Studies* 38). Bassnett emphasizes translation is a creative process and underscores the role of a translator to a broader perspective of translating the deeper meaning of words, figurative language and going beyond the literal meaning to translate the literary meaning. It allows the translator to take liberty to enhance clarity in meaning.

Gain in translation implies that it facilitates in cross-cultural communication across language and cultures. It plays a significant role in shaping cultures and literary traditions. Dialogues between nations and civilizations are being created with the help of translation across languages and nations. Gain in translation has also an ideological overtone. A translator may appropriate, reshape or reinterpret meanings in accordance with the ideological positions of publishers, institutions, or their own ideological orientations. Such interventions are carried out through the application of various translation strategies and techniques. As pointed out by House, "Ideology is also believed to be manifested in the ways translations are endowed with paratextual material that are used to frame the text such as prefaces, afterwords and other interpretative 'aids'" (26).

Translating Culture

Translation is a cross-cultural communication, in which culture plays a pivotal role. As Hans J. Vermeer states, translation is a form of "intercultural communication" (192). Hence, translation involves not only linguistic features but also the cultural context of a text. Literary texts such as novels, poetry, drama, essays, and short stories are deeply rooted in the culture of a society. Consequently, translation is not merely the transfer of messages or information but

also the transfer of culture. As highlighted by Susan Bassnett, "…translation is not just the transfer of texts from one language into another; it is now rightly seen as a process of negotiation between texts and between cultures, a process during which all kinds of transactions take place mediated by the figure of the translator" (*Translation Studies* 5). This underscores the close interrelationship between language, culture, and translation, which go hand in hand in the translation process. Bassnett also observes the relationship between language and culture, "Language is the heart within the body of culture" (13). Language thus becomes the medium through which the culture of a society is expressed.

Translating literature shapes and enriches nations and communities. It reflects culture, encompassing a wide array of customs, traditions, myths, and symbols that operate within a society. Literature expresses deeper ideological perspectives, revealing how human's and societies organize, strategize, and negotiate power and desire. Hence, it contributes to the development and welfare of societies and communities.

Thus, to preserve these cultural and linguistic differences of a source text in the target language, a translator must exert considerable effort and employ various strategies, as emphasized by various translation theorists. Different theorists like Lawrence Venuti, Javier Franco Aixelá discuss the strategies of foreignization and domestication, conservation and naturalization respectively which influence whether a translation is source-oriented or target oriented, whether a translator appears more visible or invisible in translation. Peter Newmark also suggests a range of strategies that a translator can employ to convey meaning smoothly and faithfully. For example, in the Kashmiri language, culture-specific items such as *kaangir*, *samavaar*, *pheran*, *khrav*, food items like *rista*, *gustaba*, and *chochvor* have no direct equivalents in English. In such cases, the translator must choose appropriate strategies to carry these items in the target culture. Hence, the appropriate strategy also depends on the ideological

decisions of a translator. Retaining these cultural words, a translator may employ foreignization, domestication, definition, modulation, paraphrasing, or the use of glossaries, footnotes, or endnotes to increase the understanding of the source culture for the target audience.

Translation of Culture-Specific Words

The issue of translating culture-specific items plays a significant role in determining the visibility and afterlife of a text and its author. Before discussing the various strategies for translating culture-specific items, it is essential to understand the definition of culture-specific items. In his foundational work on culture-specific items, Aixelá in his paper "Culture-specific Items in Translation" defines the concept as "Those textually actualized items whose function and connotations in a source text involve a translation problem in their transference to a target text, whenever this problem is a product of the nonexistence of the referred item or of its different intertextual status in the cultural system of the readers of the target text" (58). The author explains that the culture-specific items are the objects, customs and concepts which have cultural and historical associations in the source text or the item has no equivalent in the target text. Hence, there arises a problem in understanding these items because they have different connotations and meanings for the target readers. This definition is flexible as it gives a clear understanding of culture-specific items based on context, time and reception and understanding of the audience. As highlighted by the author, "This definition leaves the door open for any linguistic item to be a CSI depending not just on itself, but also on its function in the text, as it is perceived in the receiving culture..." (58). This is because the author highlights the changing nature of culture over time. Thus, the culture-specific items which are unique at one time becomes familiar through the cultural exchange, globalization and migration.

Therefore, translating culture-specific items are challenging for a translator. The crucial phase is to decide the appropriate strategy in rendering such words. Moreover, translator's purpose also plays vital role in this process. For instance, a translator may choose to foreignize cultural items by retaining the cultural essence of the source text (ST) and remaining more faithful to it, or to domesticate them, making them more accessible to the target audience (TT). In the former approach, the translator preserves the cultural terms by employing strategies such as foreignization or conservation, providing glossary, defining technique, in which the word is retained in a text but simultaneously explained. As Jakobson points out, some words have no "full equivalent" (114). In the latter approach, the translator seeks equivalence of words in the target text to make the translation appear more target-oriented and achieve felicity in translation.

Translation theorists have identified various cultural categories in which the translation of words becomes particularly challenging. For example, Peter Newmark in his book *A Textbook of Translation* has proposed five "Cultural Categories" along with their respective sub-categories. These five categories are:

1) Ecology (flora, fauna, winds, plains, hills)

2) Material culture (food, clothes, houses and towns, transport)

3) Social culture (work and leisure)

4) Organizations, customs, activities, procedures, concepts (political and administrative, religious, artistic)

5) Gestures and habits (94-103).

In the above discussion, this paper analyzes the translation of culture-specific items and the strategies employed by the translator in rendering them. It aims to examine the cultural and social loss and gain of meaning in the light of the various strategies applied by the translator. The study explores the negotiation of meaning between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT), with a detailed discussion of the resulting loss and gain of meaning. The table below presents the cultural words taken from the Kashmiri short stories translated into English, which will be analyzed to evaluate how meaning is preserved, lost, or enhanced in translation.

Discussion and Analysis

The source text samples for this study have been taken from *Afsana Majmaooe (An Anthology of Kashmiri Short Stories)* edited by Qazi Zahoor and published by Kashmir University in 1995. The six short stories selected from the book for analysis are “Kokar Jang”, “Kafan Tsuur”, “Shamshaan Wae:raag”, “Tsini Tsuur”, “Samah”, and “Keñh Poz Keñh Snap”.

The target text samples have been taken from various books which include: *Contemporary Kashmiri Short Stories* by Neerja Mattoo, published by Sahitya Akademi, 1999; *The Stranger Besides Me: Short Stories from Kashmir*, published by Gulshan Books, Srinagar, 1994; and *Kath: Stories from Kashmir* by Neerja Mattoo, published by Sahitya Akademi, 2011. The two short stories “The Cock-Fight” and “Some Tableaux”, “Some Snaps” have been taken from *Contemporary Kashmiri Short Stories*. The stories “The Mourners” and “The Grave Robber” have been taken from *The Stranger Beside Me: Short Stories from Kashmir*. “The Empty Shell” and “The Paper Tigers” have been taken from *Kath: Stories from Kashmir*.

The study highlights the problematics of loss and gain in the translation of selected Kashmiri short stories into English. The discussion draws on various theories and concepts from translation studies. The alternatives suggested by the researcher of this paper are based

on personal knowledge, information from dictionaries, and discussions with scholars and distinguished teachers of Kashmiri language and literature.

Table 1

The six short stories taken for the analysis are as follows:

S. No	**Short Story (Source Text)**	**Short Story (Target Text)**	**Author**	**Translator**
1	Koḳar Jang	The Cock-Fight	Amin Kamil	Neerja Mattoo
2	Kafan Tsuur	The Grave Robber	Amin Kamil	Neerja Mattoo
3	Shamshaan Wae:raag	The Mourners	Hari Krishan Koul	Neerja Mattoo
4	TsIni Tsuur	The Paper Tigers	Sofi Ghulam Mohammad	Neerja Mattoo
5	Samah	The Empty Shell	Farooq Masoodi	Neerja Mattoo
6	Kēñh Poz Kēñh Snēp	Some Tableaux, Some Snaps	Bashir Akhtar	Neerja Mattoo

Table 2

Examples of cultural words from the short stories for analysis:

S.NO	**Story**	**Source Text (ST)**	**Target Text (TT)/Translation**
1		*pheran* (46)	

	kọkar jang (Cock-Fight)		Pheran (15)
		kọkar maeris (52)	Pen (19)
		sahar khaeni (51)	Ramadan fast (19)
		samavaaras (56)	Samovar (21)
		lawaas (56)	Piece of Bread (21)
2	kafan tsuur (The Grave Robber)	*mazaarI* (63)	Graveyard (116)
		kabar (64)	Grave (116)
		aastaanas (69)	Shrine (119)
		firishto (70)	Angels (19)
		jinazI (71)	Funeral (119)
3	shamshaan wae:raag (The Mourners)	*kaangir* (143)	Kanger (16)
		aawreni bal (146)	Cremation (18)
		gọsul (149)	Bath (20)
		kaawuj (150)	It will be a Muslim who prepares at the cremation ground (20).
		krayi phoaTh (150)	Basket containing all the material needed for the cremation rites (21).

		tsaadar (150)	Blanket (21)
		tobuudI (153)	Coffin ((23)
		Tsenta (155)	Pyre (24)
		Buuni (156)	Chinar (25)
4	samah (The Empty Shell)	*vyeth* (196))	Veth (209)
		ganga (200)	ganga (211)
5	(kēñh poz kēñh Snap (Some Tableaux, Some Snaps)	*bismillah* (213)	with the name of God the compassionate on his lips (41).
		mahaa kaali (216)	Goddess Mahakali (42)
		jIjeer (216)	hookah (43)
6	tsIni tsuur (The Paper Tigers)	*tsọchiwear* (174)	tsochivor (124)
		kulchi (174)	kulcha (124)
		bae:qir khaani (174)	baqirkhanis (124)

The words given in the table have been taken from the select Kashmiri Short stories translated into English. The words are culture-specific items related to food, clothing, and other aspects of daily life which reflect the Kashmiri culture and society. Hence, translating them and finding an equivalents for these words is a challenging task for a translator. A translator has to make choices whether to retain these culture-specific items or translate them by providing equivalents. This depends on the decisions taken by the translator and the other factors related to publishing policy, patronage and ideology by an organization. All these

factors will decide the various strategies and techniques by the translator and the loss and gain of meaning from the source text (ST) into the target text (TT). The discussion and analysis of these words takes into consideration all these factors to evaluate the effectiveness of translation from the source text into the target text.

For the analysis of these culture-specific words, the data is being categorized as per the various strategies/techniques employed by the translator and the resulting loss or gain of meaning from the ST into the TT. The study examines how effectively the meaning is negotiated through various strategies and techniques employed by the translator. The analysis of the data reveals that the translator primarily applied three strategies/techniques in translating these culture-specific items:

(a) Domestication: The translator employed this strategy to provide equivalents of culture-specific items in the target language. Hence, the translation becomes more reader-oriented.
(b) Foreignization/Borrowing: This strategy has been used to retain the culture-specific items in the TT. Hence, the translator is more faithful to the source text.
(c) Paraphrasing: The translator employed this technique to explain culture-specific items, thereby communicating their meaning to the target audience. However, by employing this strategy, there is a loss of meaning.

(a) Domestication:

The analysis of the selected short stories shows that the translator has employed the strategy of domestication to render the culture-specific items in the target text (TT). The translator has provided the equivalents to convey their meaning in the target language. Although the words are deeply rooted in the source culture, however, the translated version reads well, and the intended meaning is conveyed appropriately. For example, the following culture-specific words from the source text (ST) have been translated as follows in the TT:

kọkar maeris as (pen), *sahar khae:ni* as (Ramadan fast), *mazaarI* as (graveyard), *kabar* as (grave), *aastaanas* as (shrine), *firishto* as (angels), *jinazI* as (funeral), *aawreni bal* as (cremation), *gọsul* as (bath), *tsaader* as (blanket), *tobuudI* as (coffin), *tsenta* as (pyre), *buuni* as (chinar), and *jIjeer* as (hookah). All these words are culturally rooted and are related to religion and daily life.

The equivalents provided by the translator convey the meanings as intended in the ST. These equivalents carry the meaning accessible and acceptable in the target culture. There translation of these words has felicity and readability. The equivalents like ramadan fast, graveyard, grave, shrine, angels, funeral, cremation, coffin, chinar and hookah are commonly used words in different dialects/varieties of English. However, the translation of the word *gosul* as *bath* takes away the cultural and religious identity of the word. Gosul is a special and sacred bath performed in Islamic religion. So, translating it as *bath* takes away the cultural, religious and emotional meaning of the word. In case of literary texts, it also impacts the tone reflected in the story.

Therefore, the data indicates that the use of domestication strategy has the potential to convey the cultural and social meanings of culture-specific items when done by a skilled translator. However, the translator has to be careful in using the appropriate strategy/technique to achieve equivalence and felicity of the translation in the target text.

(b) Foreignization/Borrowing

Another strategy employed by the translator is of foreignization for certain words, retaining the original culture-specific items for local flavour and authenticity. This strategy has cultural and political overtones as the translator is conscious in rendering the regional texts for global audiences. For example, retaining: *Pheran* as (pheran), *samavaar* as (samovar), *kaangir* as (kanger), *vyeth* as (veth), *ganga* as (ganga), *mahaa kaali* as (Goddess Mahakali), *tsọchiwor* as (tsochivor), *kulchi* as (kulcha), and *bae:qir khaani* as (baqirkhanis) is a crucial decision by

the translator. However, the meaning of these culture-specific items has been explained in the glossary given in the translated texts.

Employing this strategy reflects the postcolonial dimensions in translation process when colonial languages like English marginalizes the indigenous languages and cultures. By using foreignization technique, the translator respects the local culture and language. This shows resistance against the dominant languages and cultures. It brings visibility of the native literature in multilingual contexts. It is a resistance to the dominant languages like English which erodes the local cultures by providing equivalents to every word in the target language. For instance, the word "Pheran" is deeply rooted in Kashmiri culture and reflects the identity of its people. This cultural word is unique to Kashmiri society and culture.

The word "Pheran" has a long history in Kashmiri culture; it not only serves as protection for cold in winters, but is also believed to carry political overtones. As Kaul highlights in his article "The Iconic Attire of Kashmir…", "The word Pheran or Phiran seems to have come from the Persian language, where Pairaahan means a long robe. It is a cherished symbol that reflects the history, culture, identity, and resilience of the people of the Kashmir Valley" (Kaul).

Apart from having the historical significance of this attire, the pheran holds a special significance in the lives of the people of Kashmir. It is a long and loose garment, and wearing it gives a unique identity to the Kashmiri people. Wearing pheran in winters reflects the identity and psychological aspects of this attire. People possess memories whether they wear this dress in winter or not. Hence, retaining this culture-specific item in the target text translates the culture, identity and memories of people in Kashmir. Hence, the foreignization technique helps in preserving and promoting the memories, culture and identity of people in the target culture. However, if we translate this word with an English equivalent like robe, gown and cloak takes

away the cultural and emotional overtones of this word. So, retaining becomes vital both for native as well as for the non-native speakers of Kashmiri language. Because introducing target readers directly to the Kashmir culture invokes curiosity for Kashmiri culture and history and also preserves the Kashmiri culture and identity. It resists cultural domination by preserving Kashmiri cultural identity and asserting the significance of its indigenous values.

The word Kaangir, a domestic tool has great significance in Kashmiri culture. Kaangir which is an earthenware bowl covered with wicker, serving as a portable firepot filled with hot embers of charcoal. It is a traditional heating device used during winters. It is associated with Kashmiri culture, domestic life and identity. It reflects the daily life and collective memory of the people. Hence, introducing the target readers to this culture-specific item expose them to Kashmiri culture and identity. Translating kaangir as “firepot” erases the cultural identity, and memory attached with the people of Kashmir.

Another word samavaar also carries deep socio-cultural and psychological relevance for the people in Kashmir. It is a traditional utensil used to prepare *nun-chai* (namkeen tea) and is a staple in every household. The samavaar reflects family bonding, unity, and the warm hospitality characteristic of Kashmiri society. Employing the foreignization strategy to retain this culture-specific item translates culture, identity and memories of the people.

Words like tsọchiwor which has been translated as (tsochivor), kulchi as (kulcha), and bae:qir khaani as (baqirkhanis) represent different varieties of bread in Kashmir. Finding appropriate equivalents for these items in the target language is challenging. In such cases, the use of foreignization allows the translator to preserve the cultural meaning of these words. By employing this strategy, translators effectively act as ambassadors of the culture and society from which the source text originates.

Therefore, the foreignization technique is an appropriate technique where the translator acts as a mediator for culture, identity and memories of people. This gain of meaning is essential for giving life and visibility to the ST author and culture. This is crucial for constructing and formation of culture and identity for the marginal literatures against the dominant ones like the English. The foreignization technique facilitates growth and promotion of the regional literatures. This promotes the cultural understanding and unity between languages and cultures.

(c) Paraphrasing

In this category, the translator has employed the technique of paraphrasing, in which the culture-specific items or phrases have been explained rather than retained or given near equivalents in the target text (TT). For example, the words and expressions, “lawaas” (piece of bread), “Kaawuj” (it will be a Muslim who prepares at the cremation ground), “Krayi PhoaTh” (basket containing all the materials needed for the cremation rites), and “Bismillah” (with the name of God, the Compassionate, on his lips) have been explained by the translator in the target text. While this strategy conveys the general meaning of these words, it strips them from the cultural and religious significance. Rather than explaining these words and expressions in complete sentences, the translator could have provided the near equivalents of these words. For example, the word “lawaas’ could have been retained as “lawaas” instead of “piece of bread”, “Kaawuj” could have been translated as funeral attendant instead of “it will be a Muslim who prepares at the cremation ground”, “Krayi PhoaTh” as funeral basket instead of (basket containing all the materials needed for the cremation rites), and “Bismillah” could have been retained instead of given this explanation as “with the name of God, the Compassionate, on his lips”.

All these expressions and words such as “lawaas”, “Kaawuj”, “Krayi PhoaTh” and “Bismillah” convey deep cultural and religious meaning, which is lost when paraphrased. The negotiation of meaning for these culture-specific items could have been more effectively achieved providing appropriate equivalents in the target text.

Hence, the strategy to translate these culture-specific items has led to the loss of meaning from the ST into the TT. Rather than applying this paraphrasing technique, the foreignization techniques could have employed to translate these words.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the translation of culture-specific terms presents a significant challenge for a translator, requiring an in-depth understanding of linguistic, cultural and contextual meanings of words within a text. Translating the various dimensions of these meanings requires a deep understanding of the ST and TT culture and language. Effective translation demands not only familiarity with various strategies but also awareness of current theoretical developments in the field. The choice of an appropriate strategy depends largely on the translator’s proficiency and competence in both the source and target languages.

The findings of the study highlight both loss and gain of meaning in culture-specific items. However, the analysis reveals that the application of various strategies is crucial in translating the culture-specific items. The analysis highlights that the use of appropriate strategies such as domestication, foreignization and paraphrasing should be employed carefully while translating culture-specific items. As the analysis shows that the use of paraphrasing technique by the translator has led to the loss of meaning of culture-specific items. Therefore, the strategies such as domestication, foreignization and paraphrasing, word-for-word or sense-for-sense translation, and the use of glossaries, footnotes, or endnotes can all contribute to minimizing cultural loss and ensuring greater fidelity in the translated text.

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