

Translation of Culture-Specific Realia in Abdulla Qodiriy's "O'tkan Kunlar" (Strategies, Challenges and Cultural Adequacy)

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Abstract

Culture-specific vocabulary constitutes one of the most persistent difficulties in literary translation because lexical units associated with material culture, social practices, clothing, food, and traditional institutions frequently lack direct equivalents in the target language. This study examines the English translation of selected culture-specific realia in Abdulla Qodiriy's *O'tkan kunlar* (*Bygone Days*), with particular attention to Mark E. Reese's English rendering. The study focuses on a selected group of ethnographic and material-culture items, including *samovarchi*, *choyxona*, *shirmoy non*, *yakhtak*, *qala kovush*, and *belbog'*. A qualitative comparative textual approach is employed to examine the relationship between source-language form, translation procedure, semantic adequacy, explanatory supplementation, stylistic naturalness, and retention of cultural specificity. The analysis combines concepts from realia translation studies with the foreignisation–domestication framework. The findings indicate that no single translation procedure adequately represents all dimensions of the selected realia. Direct retention may preserve cultural marking but can reduce immediate accessibility, whereas functional substitution may improve readability at the cost of cultural specificity. Within the selected corpus, transliteration combined with a concise explanatory gloss provides a relatively balanced solution when the source item has no established English equivalent. The study further argues that cultural adequacy should be assessed not only through lexical correspondence but also through the preservation of the item's cultural function, historical associations, and degree of markedness. The article contributes to the study of Uzbek–English literary translation by proposing a criteria-based approach to evaluating culture-specific lexical transfer in Qodiriy's novel.

Keywords: Culture-specific realia; literary translation; Uzbek–English translation; *O'tkan kunlar*; Abdulla Qodiriy; Mark Reese; foreignisation; domestication; cultural adequacy; transliteration; explanatory gloss.

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1. Introduction

Abdulla Qodiriy's *O'tkan kunlar* occupies a central position in the history of modern Uzbek literature. Written in the first decades of the twentieth century and depicting the social and cultural world of nineteenth-century Turkestan, the novel combines literary narrative with a detailed representation of historical forms of

everyday life. Its vocabulary contains numerous culture-specific items associated with clothing, food, social institutions, occupations, architecture, interpersonal relations, and traditional practices.

The translation of such vocabulary into English presents a problem that cannot be reduced to the search for dictionary equivalents. A culture-specific lexical item

may denote a physical object while simultaneously activating information about social status, historical period, customary behaviour, or collective cultural memory. Consequently, replacing such an item with a formally approximate English word may preserve its basic denotation while weakening its cultural meaning.

The English translation by Mark E. Reese is particularly significant in this context. Bibliographic records identify *Bygone Days: O'tkan Kunlar*, translated by Mark E. Reese, as a 2019 English-language edition published through Amazon Digital Services/KDP, with 508 pages and ISBN 9780578467290. A contemporary review of the Muloqot edition describes the translation as a substantial project accompanied by notes and bibliographical material, and notes Reese's long engagement with Central Asian cultural and linguistic contexts.

The present article does not attempt to evaluate Reese's translation as a whole. Instead, it concentrates on a limited but representative group of culture-specific lexical units occurring in passages concerned with the traditional teahouse environment, occupations, food and clothing. The selected items are *samovarchi*, *choyxona*, *shirmoy non*, *yakhtak*, *qala kovush*, and *belbog'*.

Previous research has already addressed the translation of culturally marked elements in *O'tkan kunlar*. Studies have examined realia and translation procedures, lexical transformations, metaphors, and culturally unique elements in the English versions of the novel. Therefore, the contribution of the present study is not the general identification of realia in Qodiriy's novel. Rather, it lies in applying a more explicit set of criteria to the selected lexical units: formal correspondence, semantic adequacy, explanatory support, stylistic naturalness, and retention of cultural specificity.

The study addresses four research questions:

1. What translation procedures are used to render the selected Uzbek culture-specific realia into English?
2. To what extent do the procedures preserve the denotative and culturally marked meanings of the source items?
3. What is gained and lost when realia are retained, explained, or replaced by functional equivalents?
4. Under what conditions can transliteration

combine with explanatory glossing provide an adequate solution?

The main argument of the article is that cultural adequacy in the translation of realia should not be measured solely by lexical equivalence. It should also account for the preservation of cultural reference, social function, historical specificity, and the degree of cultural markedness carried by the source item.

2. Theoretical Framework and Previous Research

2.1. Culture-specific realia in translation

The concept of realia has traditionally been associated with lexical units referring to objects, concepts, phenomena, and institutions characteristic of a particular geographical, cultural, social, or historical environment. Vlahov and Florin place emphasis on the national, local, and historical colouring carried by such units (Vlahov & Florin, 2012).

From the perspective of translation studies, realia therefore occupy an intermediate position between language and culture. Their translation involves not only semantic transfer but also the negotiation of cultural information.

Several procedures have been proposed for transferring culture-specific items, including transcription and transliteration, calque, cultural and functional substitution, descriptive translation, generalisation, specification, and combinations of retention and explanation (Newmark, 1988; Aixelá, 1996; Pedersen, 2011).

For literary translation, however, the procedure itself is insufficient as a criterion of success. The same strategy can produce different results depending on the lexical and cultural properties of the source item. For example, retaining *yakhtak* preserves the foreign lexical form but does not automatically ensure comprehension for an English-speaking reader. Conversely, translating it simply as *robe* facilitates recognition of the general category of clothing but may remove information about the specific garment represented in the source culture. The central problem can therefore be formulated as a tension between cultural retention and reader accessibility.

2.2. Foreignisation and domestication

Venuti's distinction between foreignisation and domestication provides a useful conceptual framework for examining this tension. Foreignising procedures preserve visible traces of the source culture, whereas domesticating procedures reduce linguistic and cultural unfamiliarity for target readers (Venuti, 2008).

Neither strategy should automatically be considered superior in every context. A domesticating equivalent can be appropriate when the cultural function of the source item is already available in the target culture. However, excessive domestication can transform a historically specific object or institution into a generic target-language category.

This problem is particularly relevant to *O'tkan kunlar*, where vocabulary is part of the novel's representation of nineteenth-century Uzbek social life.

2.3. Previous research on *O'tkan kunlar* in English

Existing scholarship demonstrates that the novel has attracted increasing attention from translation researchers. Studies have discussed realia, lexical transformations, metaphors, culturally unique elements, and differences between the English translations by Carol Ermakova and Mark Reese.

Research specifically devoted to realia has identified procedures such as transliteration, calque, assimilation, and other forms of lexical transformation. Other studies have investigated culturally unique elements in the versions by Ermakova and Reese, focusing on transformations such as concretisation, modulation, and generalisation.

The existence of this research establishes the need for a more narrowly focused analysis. Instead of treating all culturally marked vocabulary as a single category, the present study examines individual lexical items and evaluates their translation according to explicit criteria of semantic and cultural adequacy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study employs qualitative comparative textual analysis. The primary source is Abdulla Qodiriy's *O'tkan kunlar*, while the principal target text is Mark E. Reese's English translation *Bygone Days: O'tkan Kunlar*.

The analysis is restricted to selected culture-specific

lexical items rather than the entire lexical inventory of the novel. This limitation is intentional: the purpose is close textual analysis rather than statistical generalisation about every realia in the novel.

The selected items represent several semantic domains:

- occupational terminology: samovarchi;
- social and institutional terminology: choyxona;
- food terminology: shirmoy non;
- clothing terminology: yakhtak, belbog';
- footwear terminology: qala kovush.

3.2. Analytical criteria

Each item is examined according to five criteria:

1. Formal correspondence. The analysis asks whether the source lexical form is retained, partially adapted, replaced, or omitted.

2. Semantic adequacy. The analysis determines whether the target expression preserves the central denotative meaning of the source item.

3. Cultural adequacy. Cultural adequacy is defined here as the extent to which the translation preserves the source item's cultural reference, social or functional role, historical specificity, and degree of cultural markedness.

4. Explanatory support. The analysis considers whether the translator provides an in-text explanation, parenthetical gloss, footnote, glossary entry, or other contextual support.

5. Cultural retention. The analysis evaluates whether the target expression allows the reader to recognise that the item belongs to a culturally specific source environment rather than to an apparently universal category.

These criteria make it possible to distinguish between lexical adequacy and cultural adequacy. A translation may be lexically understandable while remaining culturally incomplete.

4. Results

4.1. Overview of the selected translation procedures

The selected examples demonstrate four principal patterns:

Source realia	English rendering discussed in the source material	Principal procedure	Main effect
<i>samovarchi</i>	“Samovarmaker” / “owner of the tea house”	morphological adaptation / functional substitution	accessibility increases; cultural specificity may decrease
<i>choyxona</i>	“teahouse” / “tearoom”	cultural/functional approximation	basic function retained, institutional meaning partly reduced
<i>shirmoy non</i>	“oil bread” / “hot-bread”	descriptive/generalising translation	basic food category accessible, cultural specificity reduced
<i>yakhtak</i>	“yakhtak (oriental robe)”	retention + gloss	lexical and cultural marking retained with explanation
<i>qala kovush</i>	“leather-shoes”	generalisation	material aspect retained, specific footwear function weakened
<i>belbogʻ</i>	“belt”	functional substitution	basic function retained, traditional clothing association weakened

The table should not be understood as a numerical ranking. Its purpose is to show how different procedures redistribute semantic and cultural information between the source and target texts.

4.2. Samovarchi: morphological adaptation and functional substitution

In the source passage, *samovarchi* is associated with the character Asra. The Uzbek suffix *-chi* is a productive agentive element used to form occupational or activity-related nouns.

Reese’s rendering “Samovarmaker” retains the lexical

root *samovar* and combines it with the English agentive element *-maker*. The procedure can therefore be described as a form of morphological adaptation.

This solution has an important advantage: the reader encounters a visibly marked lexical form rather than a completely ordinary English occupational noun. At the same time, the English element *maker* introduces a semantic association with manufacturing that is not necessarily identical to the occupational meaning expressed by Uzbek *-chi*.

The later rendering “owner of the tea house” shifts from formal retention to functional explanation. It makes the

social setting immediately accessible but narrows the interpretation of the original lexical item.

The two solutions therefore demonstrate different forms of information transfer:

samovarchi → **Samovarmaker**. preserves more of the source lexical identity, whereas

samovarchi → **owner of the tea house**. prioritises contextual accessibility.

The analytical significance of this example lies in the fact that the two strategies should not be treated as equivalent. The first preserves lexical markedness but risks semantic reinterpretation; the second clarifies the context but potentially removes the culturally specific occupational label.

4.3. Choyxona: lexical accessibility versus institutional meaning

The term choyxona is often translated by the English word teahouse. This is understandable at the denotative level because both expressions identify a place associated with tea.

However, the cultural functions of the two institutions are not necessarily identical.

Within the social world represented in O'tkan kunlar, the choyxona is connected with male social interaction, conversation, hospitality, food, and communal activity. Thus, its cultural meaning extends beyond the literal combination "tea + house".

Reese's alternation between "teahouse" and "tearoom" demonstrates the difficulty of finding a stable English equivalent. "Tearoom" may be semantically intelligible, but it can activate associations with English-speaking cultural environments that differ from the historical Central Asian setting.

For this reason, teahouse can be considered a relatively accessible functional approximation, but its cultural adequacy depends on contextual reinforcement.

The important conclusion is not that teahouse is "wrong". Rather, it represents a partial equivalent: the lexical category is communicated, while some institutional and historical associations remain dependent on context.

4.4. Shirmoy non: the problem of generic culinary

equivalents

Food realia present a particularly difficult translation problem because the meaning of a culinary term may include ingredients, preparation method, shape, historical usage, and cultural associations.

The source material identifies Reese's renderings "oil bread" and "hot-bread" as examples of descriptive or generalising solutions.

Such expressions are immediately understandable to an English-speaking reader. However, their transparency is achieved through the reduction of culturally specific information.

A term such as shirmoy non does not simply identify an abstract category of bread. Its cultural meaning is connected with a particular culinary tradition. Consequently, an English expression that communicates only the generic category "bread" cannot be regarded as fully culturally equivalent.

A possible alternative in a scholarly translation would be a hybrid construction such as shirmoy bread, supported by a concise glossary explanation. This solution would preserve the source designation while preventing the reader from being left without semantic guidance.

The example demonstrates a broader principle: when culinary realia has no established target-language equivalent, controlled retention plus explanation may preserve more information than complete substitution.

4.5. Yakhtak: retention supported by glossing

The clothing term yakhtak presents a different situation. Reese retains the Uzbek lexical item and supplements it with the parenthetical expression "oriental robe".

This is a hybrid strategy because the original lexical form remains visible while a target-language explanation provides a broad semantic category.

The major advantage is the preservation of cultural marking. The reader can recognise that yakhtak is not simply an ordinary English garment term.

At the same time, "robe" is a relatively broad category. It does not necessarily communicate the complete structural characteristics of the garment. The gloss "oriental robe" therefore increases accessibility but does not provide a fully precise ethnographic description.

From the perspective of cultural adequacy, the solution can consequently be described as partially adequate but culturally marked.

A more informative scholarly solution would be: yakhtak (a traditional open-fronted Uzbek outer garment). Such a formulation retains the source term and identifies its functional category without replacing it with a culturally unrelated English garment.

4.6. Qala kovush: loss through generalisation

The footwear term qala kovush is rendered in the source material as “leather-shoes”.

This translation communicates the material and general category of the object but does not fully specify its traditional function.

The source term refers to a culturally specific form of footwear associated with traditional dress. Consequently, “leather-shoes” represents a generalisation rather than a close cultural equivalent.

A more informative rendering could be: qala kovush (traditional leather overshoes). Here, the original designation is retained while the functional information is added in English.

This solution demonstrates why cultural adequacy cannot be reduced to material correspondence. The words “leather shoes” may be semantically plausible, but the cultural identity of the object becomes less visible.

4.7. Belbog‘: functional equivalence and cultural reduction

Reese’s use of “belt” for belbog‘ illustrates another form of partial equivalence.

At the basic functional level, a belbog‘ can indeed be associated with something worn around the waist. Therefore, “belt” is accessible and syntactically natural in English.

However, a traditional belbog‘ can carry information about material, wrapping practice, dress tradition, and cultural identity that the generic English word “belt” does not encode.

Consequently: belbog‘ → “belt”. may be regarded as lexically understandable but culturally reduced. In contexts where preservation of traditional dress is

important, sash or a hybrid form such as belbog‘ (traditional sash) may provide greater cultural specificity. The example again confirms that translation adequacy is multidimensional. A target expression can be natural and comprehensible while still losing part of the source item's cultural content.

5. Discussion

The selected examples reveal a continuum rather than a simple opposition between foreignisation and domestication.

At one end of the continuum are forms that strongly retain the source-language item: yakhtak → yakhtak (oriental robe). At the other end are more domesticating or generalising forms: belbog‘ → belt. Between these extremes are hybrid and functional solutions: samovarchi → Samovarmaker and choyxona → teahouse.

The analysis suggests that the central issue is not whether a translator should always foreignise or always domesticate. The more relevant question is which dimension of meaning is at risk of being lost.

If the source item has no established English equivalent and carries strong cultural markedness, retention may be preferable. If retention creates an incomprehensible expression, a concise gloss can compensate for the absence of a direct equivalent.

The results can therefore be represented as follows:

Source realia → retention → explanation → cultural accessibility

rather than:

Source realia → substitution → target-language fluency.

This distinction is particularly important in historical literary translation. In a novel such as O‘tkan kunlar, culture-specific lexical items are not decorative additions to the narrative. They participate in constructing the historical world of the novel.

At the same time, foreignisation should not be treated as an automatic guarantee of adequacy. An untranslated lexical item can preserve foreignness without communicating meaning. Consequently, foreignisation without interpretive support may preserve form while sacrificing accessibility.

The most productive strategy for the selected examples is therefore not unrestricted foreignisation but controlled foreignisation: the source item is retained when its cultural identity is important, while a short explanation supplies the semantic information necessary for comprehension.

This conclusion also modifies the common understanding of “hybrid strategy”. A hybrid form is not automatically successful merely because it contains the original word. Its adequacy depends on the relationship between three components:

1. source lexical retention;
2. semantic explanation;
3. preservation of cultural markedness.

Where these three components are balanced, hybrid translation can minimise both cultural loss and reader difficulty.

6. Cultural Adequacy as a Multidimensional Criterion

The analysis allows cultural adequacy to be conceptualised as a combination of four dimensions: Cultural adequacy = denotative adequacy + functional adequacy + historical specificity + cultural markedness.

Denotative adequacy: The target expression should identify the same basic object, action, institution, or phenomenon.

Functional adequacy: The translation should preserve what the item does or how it functions in the source culture.

Historical specificity: The translation should not unintentionally transform a historically specific object into a modern or culturally unrelated category.

Cultural markedness: The translation should preserve, where relevant, the perception that the item belongs to a particular cultural environment.

This model helps explain why a word such as “belt” can be denotatively acceptable while remaining culturally incomplete, and why *yakhtak* (traditional open-fronted garment) may provide greater cultural adequacy than simply *robe*.

The model also prevents the analysis from reducing translation quality to the question of whether the target word appears natural in English.

7. Implications for the Translation of Uzbek Realia

The findings have implications beyond the selected passages of *O‘tkan kunlar*.

First, translators working with Uzbek literary texts should distinguish between ordinary lexical items and culture-specific items whose meanings depend on historical and social context.

Second, the first occurrence of unfamiliar realia can be retained and briefly explained. Subsequent occurrences may then use the retained form without repeating a lengthy explanation.

Third, translators should avoid inconsistent treatment of the same culturally significant item unless a deliberate contextual reason exists.

Fourth, glossaries and notes can reduce the need for excessive explanation within the narrative. Reese’s translation is documented as a heavily annotated edition, which makes the interaction between in-text translation and supplementary explanation particularly relevant to the study of realia.

Finally, translation scholars should distinguish between reader-oriented accessibility and cultural adequacy. A highly fluent English equivalent is not necessarily the culturally most informative solution.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of selected culture-specific realia in Abdulla Qodiriy’s *O‘tkan kunlar* demonstrates that the translation of culturally marked vocabulary involves a complex interaction between semantic transfer, textual fluency, and cultural representation.

The examples of *samovarchi*, *choyxona*, *shirmoy non*, *yakhtak*, *qala kovush*, and *belbog‘* show that different translation procedures produce different distributions of meaning. Functional substitution can improve immediate comprehension but may reduce cultural specificity. Direct retention preserves cultural marking but can create comprehension difficulties. Descriptive translation makes selected semantic features explicit but may generalise the source concept.

Within the selected corpus, transliteration or lexical retention combined with a concise explanatory gloss appears to offer a balanced solution when the source item has no established English equivalent. Such a strategy allows the target reader to encounter the source-culture term while simultaneously receiving enough information to interpret it.

The study also demonstrates that cultural adequacy should not be equated with formal equivalence. A translation can reproduce the denotative meaning of a lexical item while weakening its social function, historical specificity, or cultural markedness. For this reason, the evaluation of realia should incorporate several dimensions rather than relying on a single criterion of lexical correspondence.

The study is limited by its deliberately selective corpus and qualitative design. It does not claim statistical representation of every realia occurring in *O'tkan kunlar*. Future research should therefore expand the corpus to include social titles, architectural vocabulary, food terminology, religious-cultural units, forms of address, and other historically marked lexical categories. A comparative study of Reese's and Ermakova's translations would also make it possible to investigate how different translators distribute cultural information between lexical retention, substitution, explanation, and paratextual commentary.

More broadly, the translation of Uzbek literary heritage requires a balance between accessibility and cultural preservation. The evidence examined here suggests that retaining culturally significant lexical forms, supported by carefully controlled explanation, can help maintain the historical and ethnographic texture of Qodiriy's novel without making the English text inaccessible to international readers.

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