

**TRANSLATING NATIONAL-CULTURAL REALIA IN UZBEK
HISTORICAL NOVELS: STRATEGIES AND FUNCTIONAL PRIORITIES**

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Abstract. *The thesis examines the translation of national-cultural realia as a central means of preserving the historical atmosphere and cultural identity of Uzbek novels. Drawing on examples from Oybek's Navoiy and Pirimqul Qodirov's Starry Nights, it discusses transliteration, cultural substitution, descriptive translation, contextual explication and pragmatic compensation. The analysis demonstrates that a culturally marked item should be translated according to its textual function rather than through an automatic preference for either foreignization or domestication.*

Keywords: *realia, national colour, historical novel, cultural code, foreignization, domestication, explication, literary translation.*

Realia are words and expressions that designate objects, institutions, customs, beliefs and forms of social behaviour specific to a particular culture. In a historical novel, they do more than identify material objects. They locate characters within a social hierarchy, reconstruct the worldview of an earlier period and create the cultural texture through which readers perceive history. Therefore, the omission or unjustified generalization of realia may preserve the plot while weakening the identity of the literary world.



The translation of realia cannot be reduced to a single universal rule. The translator must consider the genre of the text, the item's frequency, its role in characterisation, the knowledge of the target audience and the possibility of explaining it without interrupting the narrative. A short story may require a highly economical solution because each detail carries considerable weight, while a novel offers broader opportunities for contextual repetition, glossing and gradual familiarisation. Nevertheless, even in a large narrative, excessive exotic vocabulary can overburden the target text and turn culture into decoration rather than lived experience.

Venuti's distinction between foreignization and domestication provides a useful framework for understanding this choice [1]. Foreignization preserves the visible difference of the source culture, whereas domestication brings the expression closer to the linguistic and cultural expectations of the target reader. Neither strategy is inherently superior. A historical title, ritual term or proverb may need to remain culturally visible, while an opaque idiom may require functional adaptation. The decisive criterion is whether the selected solution preserves the item's narrative, social and aesthetic function.

In Oybek's Navoiy, the title parvonachi identifies Majiddin not simply by name but by his position in the court hierarchy. Omitting the title and retaining only Majiddin reduces the historical specificity of the character. A productive solution is transliteration at first mention, accompanied by a brief contextual or paratextual gloss. This procedure preserves the historical index without forcing a misleading English institutional equivalent. The same principle applies to the



honorific Sahibqiran: its cultural prestige and dynastic association cannot be fully represented by a neutral word such as “commander.”

Proverbs function as condensed cultural memory. The Uzbek proverb “It hurar, karvon o‘tar” is rendered as “The dog barks, the caravan goes on” in the English translation of Navoiy [2, p. 188; 3, pp. 165–166]. The literal image is intelligible in context and retains the caravan as a culturally meaningful symbol of perseverance. Here foreignization does not seriously hinder comprehension; instead, it allows the target reader to enter the source culture’s figurative world. The example demonstrates that literal translation can be successful when the metaphorical relation remains transparent and performs the same pragmatic function.

A different problem arises in the phrase “har qadamda sizga tosh otadi,” literally “throws stones at you at every step.” The published version uses “is trying to denigrate you.” This paraphrase conveys verbal hostility but neutralizes the concrete image of repeated attack. The metaphor suggests not only damage to reputation but continuous political pressure. A functional rendering such as “he casts stones at you at every turn” may preserve the source image, provided that the surrounding context makes the figurative meaning clear. Thus, descriptive paraphrase should not automatically replace a culturally accessible metaphor.

Religious and ritual realia require particular care because the same physical action may belong to different symbolic systems. In *Starry Nights*, Babur circles Humayun three times while praying and offering his own life for his son [4, p. 412]. The direct English translation states that he “went round the bed of Humayun



three times” [5, p. 584]. Although the movement is described correctly, its meaning as an act of self-sacrifice remains implicit. The verb “circumambulate” gives the action a ritual register, but it may also suggest a formally established religious rite. A combined solution—“he circled Humayun’s bed three times in an act of self-sacrifice”—is clearer and culturally more responsible.

Non-verbal behaviour can also function as realia. Tohir’s father “yoqasini ushladi,” a gesture expressing alarm and astonishment. One direct translation misreads collar as colour and produces “caught ... the color of his shirt,” thereby destroying both the physical action and its emotional significance [4, p. 9; 5, p. 11]. Ermakova’s “anxiously grabbed at his shirt collar” restores the gesture [6, p. 25]. “He clutched at his collar in alarm” is still more idiomatic and explicitly communicates the affective function. This case shows that cultural competence must be supported by careful lexical and contextual interpretation.

Baker identifies several options for culture-specific items, including a more general word, a culturally neutral expression, loan words with explanation, paraphrase and omission [7]. In historical fiction, omission should normally be the last resort because recurrent realia build the text’s national texture. Explication is most effective when it is economical: a brief phrase can reveal the function of a ritual, while a glossary or footnote may support recurrent historical titles. Cultural substitution is appropriate only when the target item evokes a genuinely comparable function and does not relocate the narrative into a false cultural environment.



The translator should therefore assess realia through a functional sequence: identify the literal referent; determine the item's historical, social and stylistic associations; establish its role in the immediate passage; estimate the target reader's access to the concept; and select the least intrusive strategy that preserves the relevant effects. Such an approach avoids both opaque exoticism and cultural flattening. It also recognises that translation decisions are interdependent: the repeated treatment of titles, rituals and proverbs gradually teaches the reader how to interpret the fictional world.

In conclusion, national-cultural realia are structural components of historical fiction rather than detachable ethnographic labels. Transliteration is useful for historical titles and institutions, literal imagery can preserve transparent proverbs, descriptive translation can clarify an unfamiliar practice, and pragmatic compensation can restore an effect lost at the lexical level. The most successful translation is not the one that maximises foreign words or replaces every difference with a familiar expression, but the one that allows the target reader to understand the narrative while continuing to perceive its Uzbek historical and cultural identity.

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