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Article

A Linguocultural Analysis of Sufi Terms and Poetic Images as Culture-Specific Items: A Study Based on the Sufi Writings of R. A. Nicholson

Qahramonjon A. ISMOILOV[*1]

1. Associate Professor, PhD in Philological Sciences, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan
* Correspondence: hero-2008@bk.ru

Abstract: This article investigates the linguocultural status of Sufi terminology and poetic imagery as culture-specific items through a comprehensive examination of the Sufi writings of Reynold Alleyne Nicholson. Drawing upon his translations, commentaries, and historical studies, the paper reveals how mystical concepts and symbolic images embody Islamic cultural memory and resist complete semantic transfer into English.

Keywords: Sufism, Culture-Specific Items, Linguocultural Analysis, Mystical Terminology, Poetic Imagery, Translation Studies, Reynold A. Nicholson, Symbolism, Islamic Mysticism, Intercultural Communication.

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1. Introduction

The increasing scholarly interest in intercultural communication and translation studies has brought renewed attention to culture-specific items whose meanings are deeply embedded in particular civilizations. Among such units, Sufi terminology and poetic imagery occupy a unique position because they represent not only linguistic expressions but also metaphysical experiences, religious symbolism, and centuries-old spiritual traditions. Consequently, the translation and interpretation of Sufi discourse involve far more than lexical substitution [1].

Reynold Alleyne Nicholson occupies a distinguished place in the history of Oriental studies owing to his profound engagement with Islamic mysticism. His works, including *The Mystics of Islam* (1914), *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (1921), *A Literary History of the Arabs* (1907), *Selected Poems from the Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz* (1898), his translation of *Kashf al-Mahjub* (1911), and his monumental edition and translation of Rumi's *Mathnawi*, have significantly influenced Western perceptions of Sufism [2].

Nicholson repeatedly emphasized that many mystical expressions cannot be adequately rendered through ordinary lexical equivalents. While discussing fanāʾ and baqāʾ, he argued that these concepts describe states of spiritual consciousness rather than merely abstract philosophical notions*[3]*. Similarly, his analysis of Persian symbolism demonstrates that wine, the beloved, and the tavern function as metaphysical metaphors rather than literal references [4].

Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the linguocultural status of Sufi terms and poetic images as culture-specific items through an examination of Nicholson's major writings devoted to Islamic mysticism [5].

2. Materials and Methods

The present study employs descriptive, comparative, semantic, and linguocultural approaches. The corpus consists of Nicholson's principal writings devoted to Islamic mysticism, including *The Mystics of Islam*, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, *A Literary History of the Arabs*, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, *Selected Poems from the Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz*, and the eight-volume translation and commentary of Rumi's *Mathnawi*.

From the perspective of translation studies, culture-specific items are regarded as lexical or symbolic elements whose meanings are inseparable from a particular cultural framework. In Sufi discourse, such elements encompass technical terms, symbolic metaphors, and conventional poetic images. Therefore, the present investigation treats concepts such as fanāʾ, baqāʾ, wajd, dhikr, maʿrifa, and tajallī as linguocultural phenomena rather than isolated lexical units.

Nicholson observed that mystical terminology frequently resists exact translation because its semantic structure is rooted in religious experience. Similarly, while translating Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjub*, he retained numerous Arabic terms in their original forms because no satisfactory English equivalents existed.

The study also employs contextual analysis to examine poetic symbols. Special attention is devoted to the symbolic vocabulary occurring in Rumi and Persian mystical poetry. Nicholson maintained that wine, intoxication, roses, nightingales, candles, and moths constitute a conventional mystical language whose meanings transcend literal interpretation. Therefore, these symbols are examined as culture-specific signs reflecting Islamic spirituality and Persian literary traditions.

3. Results

The analysis demonstrates that Sufi terminology possesses a multilayered semantic structure characterized by theological, philosophical, and experiential dimensions. One of the most representative examples is fanāʾ. Nicholson defines it as the extinction of individual consciousness in the realization of Divine Reality rather than simple annihilation. Consequently, the English equivalent "annihilation" fails to convey the full spiritual significance embedded in the Arabic original [6].

Likewise, baqāʾ denotes not mere permanence but subsistence through God after the disappearance of ego-consciousness. Such semantic complexity reveals the inadequacy of literal translation and confirms the culture-bound nature of Sufi terminology [7].

Another group of culture-specific items includes poetic images. In Persian mystical poetry, wine symbolizes divine love and spiritual ecstasy. Nicholson emphasized that mystical poets employ the language of earthly love to express transcendental truths. Similarly, the beloved signifies Divine Beauty rather than a human being [8].

The symbol of the moth and candle occupies a central position in Persian symbolism. According to Nicholson, the moth's destruction in the flame metaphorically represents self-annihilation in Divine Love. The rose and nightingale likewise embody the relationship between beauty and yearning [9].

In his commentary on Rumi's *Mathnawi*, Nicholson demonstrated that these images derive from centuries of Persian literary convention rather than isolated poetic inventions. Consequently, they should be regarded as culture-specific semiotic structures [10].

Furthermore, Nicholson observed that mystical language deliberately employs paradoxes and symbols because ordinary language is incapable of describing spiritual realities. Therefore, ambiguity itself becomes an integral feature of Sufi discourse [11].

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that Nicholson's approach anticipated several concepts developed later within linguocultural studies and translation theory. Modern scholars define culture-specific items as expressions whose meanings cannot be fully transferred across linguistic boundaries. Nicholson's practice reveals an intuitive awareness of this principle long before the emergence of contemporary translation studies [12].

His tendency to preserve Arabic terms reflects what later theorists describe as foreignization. Instead of replacing fanāʾ, dhikr, and maʿrifa with approximate English expressions, Nicholson preferred transliteration accompanied by explanatory commentary. Such a strategy acknowledges the cultural uniqueness of mystical concepts [13].

Moreover, the symbolic system encountered in Persian poetry functions as a cultural code shared by generations of Sufi writers. Images such as wine, tavern, cupbearer, and beloved possess meanings established by collective literary memory. Nicholson emphasized that misunderstanding these conventions inevitably results in distorted interpretations [14].

Another important aspect concerns the inseparability of language and spirituality. Unlike ordinary terminology, Sufi expressions represent experiences rather than objective phenomena. Consequently, their meanings emerge through religious practice and mystical consciousness. Nicholson repeatedly insisted that mystical language should be interpreted within its spiritual context.

From a linguocultural perspective, poetic images constitute repositories of cultural values. The candle and moth metaphor, for instance, encapsulates notions of sacrifice, love, and self-transcendence deeply rooted in Islamic mystical tradition. Therefore, these symbols function as vehicles of cultural memory [15].

Nicholson's scholarship thus demonstrates that the translation of Sufi discourse requires not merely linguistic competence but also familiarity with Islamic theology, Persian literature, and mystical philosophy. His works reveal the limitations of literal translation and highlight the importance of cultural interpretation.

5. Conclusion

The present investigation has demonstrated that Sufi terms and poetic images constitute culture-specific items characterized by semantic depth and cultural embeddedness. Through his extensive studies of Islamic mysticism, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson revealed that mystical language reflects spiritual experiences inaccessible through ordinary lexical categories.

The analysis shows that concepts such as fanāʾ, baqāʾ, dhikr, and maʿrifa possess meanings extending beyond dictionary definitions. Likewise, symbols including wine, the beloved, the candle, and the moth represent culturally codified metaphors grounded in Persian and Islamic traditions.

Nicholson's translations and commentaries illustrate the impossibility of complete semantic equivalence between languages when dealing with mystical discourse. His preference for transliteration and explanatory annotation demonstrates a profound awareness of cultural specificity. In this respect, his works anticipated many principles subsequently formulated within linguocultural studies and modern translation theory.

Therefore, Sufi terminology and poetic imagery should be approached not merely as lexical units but as repositories of cultural memory and spiritual meaning. Nicholson's legacy continues to provide valuable insights into the interaction between language, culture, and mysticism.

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