# *Angrezi Mein Kehte Hain*: Reasons for and Effects of Indian-Language Terms in *The Last Queen*

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## 1 Introduction

This essay is an analysis of the use of Indian-language (henceforth IL) terms and references in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Last Queen*. The fact that this book is a work of historical fiction means that it is set in a time and place extremely far removed from those of most of its readership – early $19^{\text{th}}$ century Lahore – which allows for the creative usage of IL terms to depict situations and set the tone of the book.

A number of questions naturally present themselves in such a study.
First, in what contexts are IL terms used (or not used)? What factors separate these circumstances – setting, dialogue, the intended tone of the text?
A related question concerns figures of speech and idiomatic phrases. Are IL terms used for wordplay or witticisms? Is the translation of proverbs and metaphors literal?

Second, we must consider the validity of the English terms used as substitutes for IL ones – do they accurately capture the meanings and connotations of these terms, which are naturally embedded in a completely different social and cultural background? Is the loss of nuance acceptable?

Third, armed with the observations from the above two questions, we are immediately led to the question of motivation – what effect does the author hope to have by the inclusion or omission of terms as it has been done?

Fourth, among the IL terms actually used, does the choice between Urdu and Punjabi carry significance? Is the difference wielded to create an effect of social class, for example?

Finally, does the frequency of IL terms change during the course of the book?

Does it relate to the setting, the pace of events, the situation of Rani Jindan, and so on?

We will attempt to answer these questions below.

# 2 Usage of Terms

## 2.1 Contexts

IL terms are used in a wide variety of contexts throughout the book, with very little pattern at first glance. However, a closer inspection reveals some consistent factors.

Food items are very frequently named in Urdu or Punjabi. In the first part of the book (*Girl*), Jindan often describes the food served her house, using the indigenous named of dishes.

> Heaps of samosas and bhaturas, pots bubbling with alu sabzi ... [p. 22]

Other examples include *biriyani* (p. 22), *gur* (p. 34), and *ritha pulp* (p. 49).
However, this is not a hard-and-fast rule – there are several examples of dishes very typical of the Indian subcontinent, whose English names are used in the text.

> '... At least drink a little buttermilk.' [p. 4]

Furthermore, on multiple occasions, the same food item is referenced in one place with its Indian name, and in another with its English name. For example, *karhi-chawal* on page 27 (as against *karhi and rice* on page 14), and *gur* on page 34 (as against *jaggery* on page 27).
An interesting juxtaposition of both these practices is found on page 54, in a reference to *brinjal bharta*. This is especially unique as the collocation "baingan da bharta" is common in Punjabi.
Another example of juxtaposition that flies in the face of established IL phrases is when Jindan addresses Dalip as *my chand* on page 201.

This brings us to another context that sees the usage of IL terms almost exclusively – honorific titles and terms of address or endearment.

From the former category, the most noticeable example is, of course, *the Maharaja*, or *Sarkar*. However, we also have examples like *Wazir Dhian Singh*, *Kanwar Kharak Singh*, and *Mai Nakkain*. The position they occupy is usually in English, however – Dhian Singh is described as the *chief minister* on page 1 (never as a wazir or vizier), and Kharak Singh as the *Crown Prince* on page 3 (never as, say, rajkumar or kunwar). Later in the book, of course, we are also introduced to Chand Kaur, the *Malika Mukaddas* (page 167), helpfully and promptly glossed as "Empress".
We also have examples of more mundane, day-to-day honorifics.

> 'Bhai Sahib says my handwriting is the best among all his students.' [p. 13]

The latter type of IL term is seen mostly in family relations. For example, Jindan refers to her mother exclusively as *Biji*, and describes her joy when Dalip addresses her this way. Another example is the way Jindan addresses Jawahar

> 'Veer, will you go back to Lahore with me?' [p. 71]

and Manna addresses Jindan.

> 'What to do, dheeye, it's our naseeb.' [p. 59]

Notable exceptions include terms for relations by marriage.

> How Manna would hate being unable to boast about becoming the king's father-in-law! [p. 70]

Manna's case is also worth noting in this connection. While Jindan explicitly tells us why she refers to him by name, it is significant that no term of address for him surfaces in her (or Jawahar's) speech. Furthermore, on page 12, we have

> Manna Singh. Somehow I can't think of him as *Father*.

where she does not use an indigenous term for "Father".

Clothes are another type of word for which IL terms are very typically used.

> I go into the alcove, wrap a dupatta tightly around my chest and put on a kurta-pajama that Jawahar has almost outgrown. [p. 28]

Remarkably, the author uses the words *kohl* (referring to surma or kajal, page 50) and *skirt* (referring to a lehenga, page 55) as well. The words "pagri" or "ghunghat" are also never used – the author sticks to the English *turban* and *veil* throughout the book (see section 3).

A fourth context in which the author makes liberal use of IL terms is prayers (and words with religious significance in general). For example, a common expression of gratitude is *Waheguru ji di kripa*, as in the following examples.

> 'And now look at us, together forever, Waheguru ji di kripa.' [p. 101]

Words referring to concepts specific to Indian philosophy and the Sikh religion also tend not to be in English.

> 'Karam circles back, sooner or later.' [p. 64]

Related to this is the use of words describing Indian cultural practices.

> Only those which she approves of will be sent with the baraat to the wedding. [p. 98]

Notably, one of the very few full-length sentences that are not in English is a prayer – specifically, a shabad.

> The ragi is singing one last shabad. *Pooree asa jee mansa mere Raam. All my hopes have been fulfilled.* [p. 73]

However, lines from the Gurbani are also often literally translated to English and quoted.

> *By His Command, souls come into being; by His Command, glory and greatness are obtained. By His Command, some are high and some are low; by His Command, pain and pleasure are obtained.* [p. 14]

Finally, insults or curses are occasionally in Indian languages (but very frequently also in English).

> 'Disobedient ungrateful badtameez child!' [p. 20]

The word "gaalis" (page 20) is used as well.

## 2.2 Idioms and Wordplay

Idioms in the original Urdu or Punjabi phrasing are avoided throughout the book. However, we do see some examples of common metaphors being calqued to English.

The words used for insults, for example, are frequently those which are common in Urdu but not in English.

> 'You brainless goat! Why didn't you encourage him?' [p. 43]

We also have an example of an English metaphor with a single word substituted with its Urdu equivalent.

> 'Idle hands, shaitan's tools.' [p. 23]

Metaphors and similes specific to Indian culture also tend to be literally translated. While this makes for a slightly stilted English phrasing, it definitely does emphasise the "Indianness" of the book.

> Even the moon holds its breath. [p. 55]

One example of wordplay is especially striking – a pun on the name of the protagonist herself, made into a term of endearment in the voice of the Sarkar.

> 'What can I present you with, my Jind, my life, for giving me so much joy?' [p. 85]

The helpful gloss provided to the unfamiliar reader lends further weight to the theory that at least some of the choices were made for the benefit of American/European audiences (see **section 4.2**).

# 3 Translation

The question of *accuracy* of translation, if phrased in binary terms, is almost unequivocally a no – very few of indigenous words in the contexts we have been considering have proper translations to English.

For example, in the first chapter, we see

> I don't bother with sandals. [p. 7]

although the author uses the word *chappal* on the very next page. The former is not, obviously, the same as the latter.

Another example is the use of *perfume* (presumably as a replacement for attar):

> She moves in a cloud of sweet perfume, like a pari from heaven. [p. 50]

This quote also reveals an interesting non-translation – *heaven*, a word with religious connotations, is expressed in English, although this does not have many of the senses of the Urdu/Punjabi equivalent, jannat. We will see one way of interpreting this sidestep in **section 4.2**.

However, not all the translations are inaccurate. For example, when the author says *turban* (*e.g.*, pages 28 and 53), she almost certainly means pagri, but there is practically no difference in meaning – the turban, as an English word, is meant to describe a concept that is not English in origin. A similar case holds for the word *kohl* (page 50), used occasionally in place of surma or kajal. (Both of these are loanwords from outside Europe – turban from a Farsi word, and kohl from Arabic.)

Another aspect of the translation is that although the translation may be accurate, it uses words not at all common in an English context – or at least much less common than in the cultural setting of the subcontinent.

> Hatred for the goras glows like a hot coal inside me. [p. 45]

In this and similar examples, words like *saffron* (kesar), *hot coal* (angaara), *veil* (ghunghat/parda) and *sandalwood* (chandan) are used, which are much less common in English than their counterparts in Urdu or Punjabi.

The example of another novel, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) by Vikram Seth (also set in India, in the late 1940s), presents itself in this connection – the dialogues of characters in this work often include over-literal translations of certain Hindi swear words (specifically, those that reference incest), which sound extremely unnatural in English.

Finally, a third important consideration is the translation of poetry and poetic expressions in general. We have seen some examples of this (see section 2.2) in relation to the use of specifically Indian idioms calqued into English. One particularly poetic example is presented on page 94:

> *O moon of mine, if I were invited to go to Paradise without you, I would refuse, for would not Paradise then be a prison?*

where everything, including terms of endearment (*O moon of mine*, or "mere chaand") and religious expressions (*Paradise*, or "Jannat"), is translated. The author has carefully chosen a poem which conforms to the expressive conventions of English poetry – the vast majority of Urdu poetry would sound remarkably strange literally translated to English.

On the topic of poetry, we see another example on page 129:

> The singer ... begins a ghazal by Mirza Ghalib, *Ye na thi hamari kismat—It was not my destiny to be united with the beloved.*

where the author translates the matla of the ghazal more or less literally. An observation to be made here, however, is that this translation is perhaps slightly more stilted than it needs to be – it is unnatural to say *the*, rather than *my beloved*, in English, for instance.

# 4 Motivation

Given the irregular and unpredictable distribution of IL terms, the exact motivation behind their usage is hard to pinpoint. However, we can make some generalisations.
Three main (potential) motivations behind the choices are noted – necessity, connotation, and (what has been called) re-Orientalism. We elaborate more on these ideas below.

## 4.1 Necessity

The categories we have identified in **section 2.1** are behind our first guess – words relating to food, clothing, family members and religious matters tend to be in Indian languages. These being basic parts of human lifestyle, they are fairly central aspects of any culture – in a sense, they "represent" the culture of the period and place being spoken about. Therefore using the indigenous terms for these cultural artefacts, in a way, allows the author to impress upon the reader that although the book is in English, the situations and characters described are far from typical of the language.
In fact, it may not be going too far to call the judicious use of IL terms indispensable in conveying this impression, rather than simply supplementary. In matters of clothing, food and religion specifically, it is very improbable that an accurate English word exists to represent an essentially Indian concept – examples that stand out include *karhi* (p. 14), *sherwani* (p. 160) and *shabad* (p. 72).
Quoting G. J. V. Prasad (2012), "the historical and cultural milieu in which the text is thus positioned will have to be read and understood for the reader to be able to interpret the text fully, as in any translation. Hence the need for Indian

English writers ... to signal the Indian-ness, the otherness, of their texts in the language itself" (p. 48)[1].

Prasad studies excerpts from Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) to illustrate means to achieve this. Of his observations in both these works, only one really matches with Divakaruni's strategies – Rushdie's use of terms of address to depict many aspects of a relationship in a single word (specifically, "baba" to indicate respect as well as a kind of motherly attitude on the part of an ayah or nurse).
Divakaruni similarly uses terms of endearment which hide layers of cultural meaning. For example, the poem addressed to Jindan on page 94 begins with the phrase *O moon of mine* – comparing the object of one's affections to the moon is an old tradition, tying into the chand-chakor myth and carrying overtones of intense but unrequited or otherwise unattainable love.
The use of *saala* (page 138) as a term of abuse is another example of the depths of meaning that indigenous terms of address compress into a single word, which Divakaruni exploits.

This latter example can also be compared to Rao's use of the corresponding English terms, but with the connotations of their IL counterparts – Rao uses these "culturally and geographically located" (Bassnett and Trivedi 2012, p. 51) connotations to subtly create an impression of "otherness" while writing exclusively in English.

## 4.2 Re-Orientalism

Orientalism, according to Lisa Lau, is "the European imperialistic strategy of composing a positive image of the western Self while casting the 'East' as its negative alter ego, alluring and exotic, dangerous and mysterious, always the Other" (Lau and Mendes 2011, p. 3)[2].

An offshoot of this ideology is *re-orientalism* – where Orientalisms are perpetrated by those of eastern provenance ("orientals") no less than by ex-colonisers. This phenomenon has received considerable attention in the context of Indian writing in English, especially in the case of diasporic authors with a significant non-Indian reader base. Lau and Mendes ask if this leads to a push to "design material for easy even if non-nourishing consumption, as a response to being applauded and lionized not for the intrinsic value of their art, but out of postcolonial guilt" (p. 5).

Some factors in *The Last Queen* point to a tendency in this direction. Four points are salient, which we enumerate below.

[1] Bassnett, Susan, and Harish Trivedi. *Postcolonial translation: Theory and practice.* Routledge, 2012.

[2] Lau, Lisa, and Ana Cristina Mendes. "Introducing Re-Orientalism: A New Manifestation of Orientalism." *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within* 1 (2011): 3-16.

Firstly, even with words belonging to the categories identified above, the decision to use an IL is not consistent. We have seen multiple examples where the same object is referred to in English on one occasion and Urdu/Punjabi on another (like *lehenga*, page 50, and *skirt*, page 55). This suggests that the words are only added to create an effect of "exoticness", for the primarily American or European readership of the book.
Of course, in some cases, there are other reasons for the switch. For example, on page 162, Jindan says

> Illogically, I wish I could say goodbye to Laila and give her a piece of gur.

Calling jaggery *gur* here is a callback to the first book – specifically, her first encounter with the Sarkar, where she met Laila and fed her simple "desi gur" in her innocence (see **section 5.1**).
However, such examples are few and far between – the vast majority of these switches are unpredictable and more or less random.

Our second point is the use of English spellings of words that have become popular in standard British English.

> ... kebabs roasting on skewers over fire pits. [p. 22]

> 'Your kismet has already spoken.' [p. 114]

Neither of these spellings reflect the real pronunciations of these words, but they are the spellings under which these concepts were, in a sense, "marketed" in a predominantly European cultural milieu. Using the spelling *qismat*, for example, would probably render the word unrecognisable to a reader with no knowledge of Urdu or Hindi.

Third, some instances of stilted English speech do not, in fact, correspond to anything in Urdu or Punjabi. For example,

> 'Don't cry, my heart.' [p. 83]

None of the words traditionally translated as "heart" (dil, man, hrday, or even qalb) are used for direct address in this way in Urdu.
Meenakshi Mukherjee, quoted by G. J. V. Prasad, makes this criticism of Bhabhani Bhattacharya's work – what she calls the "deliberate quaintness" of these phrases is supposed to "suggest that they are translated from Bengali", when in fact "they have no counterparts in Bengali either" (Bassnett and Trivedi 2012, p. 54).

Lastly, it is plain that just the right amount of words are translated to English (and the right amount left in Punjabi or Urdu) to make their meaning clear in context to a reader unfamiliar with either of these languages. For example, Jindan describes Guddan as a "pari from heaven", straddling the gap between the completely opaque "pari from Jannat", and the too-familiar "fairy from heaven". In a similar vein, the reference to *the evil eye* on page 109 is immediately followed by one to *nazar-beads* – by which it is evident what "nazar" means.

A parallel to this situation (which, ironically, places Punjabi on the other side) is to be found in the Hindi movie industry. The use of Punjabi in Hindi films and songs presents a similar judicious selection of translated and untranslated words (or grammatical markers) that create the impression of being "not wholly standard" Hindi, but at the same time allowing viewers or listeners unfamiliar with Punjabi to understand.

Here, we also note the quote from Ghalib on page 129, which is abruptly cut off to make way for the English translation (which includes a line whose original is not even quoted, *... ki visal-e-yaar hota*).

### 4.3 Connotations

Another potential factor is the connotations of words (in either language) – with some words, the decision whether to translate a word or not seems to have been taken on the basis of the implications and subtext that that word carries.
For example, Guddan tells Jindan

> 'Have you heard of Moran the courtesan, reputed to be the most beautiful woman in north-west Hindustan?' [p. 52]

describing Moran as a "courtesan". Here the author may have deliberately avoided the Urdu word *tawaif*, which is frequently used in a derogatory sense. Another example is the way white people are referred to.

> How dare the firang outlanders think they're better than my Sarkar? [p. 40]

The word *firang* (and *gora*, albeit to a lesser extent) has very clear pejorative connotations when used to refer to foreigners. The use of these terms makes Jindan's distaste for the Britishers apparent from the very beginning.

## 5 Usage

### 5.1 Language

Punjabi is much more rarely spoken in the book, and it when it is, it is usually in the voices of Jindan's family or people from her village in Gujranwala.

> 'Your kudi here, what is she now? Twelve? Thirteen? She's becoming real sohni.' [p. 15]

Interestingly, more such examples come from Jawahar during his visit to Jindan in the third book, after the death of the Sarkar:

> 'Yes, bhainji,' Jawahar jokes, making a face. [p. 129]

This may have been done to highlight the incongruity of a person like Jawahar, from what might be seen as Jindan's "old life", being a part of the court – and the unfortunate end to this involvement.

In most other cases (other than religious terms), the IL terms used in the book tend to be those common to Urdu and Punjabi, like *kismat* or *mithai*.
This may indicate that Punjabi is used to indicate a rural upbringing, in opposition to Urdu. Furthermore, Jindan herself uses Urdu words always except when talking to her brother, whom she addresses as *veer* (page 125). This evokes her childhood in Gujranwala, so different from her current life, a quagmire of political games and conspiracies.
While we have no evidence that Urdu was the language of the durbar, we do see this divide between the contexts of words which are unequivocally Punjabi, and those of words shared by both the languages.

The smallpox episode presents an interesting example here. The maid who first declares that Dalip is infected by it refers to it as *chechak* (page 213) – but this is the only occurrence of this word in the entire book. All later (and earlier) references to the disease call it "the pox". This may be an indication of the lack of "polish" in the maid's manner of speaking, as opposed to the Sarkar, Jindan, or even Mangla, connected to her low position in the social hierarchy of the qila.

Another interesting point is that the only full-length sentence not in English and without an English gloss (we have seen glossed ones in previous sections) is in Urdu.

> 'Aaj Ranjit Singh mar gaya.' [p. 243]

Writing this particular sentence in Urdu, at Jindan's reception of the news that the British had finally won, gives it a sense of defiance and stubbornness – even if the British rule Punjab, the language, the culture and the people remain Indian, and no amount of conquests can change that.
The gloss in this sentence, however, is especially conspicuous by its absence. It gives this particular utterance – and, by extension, the event to which it refers – a weight that no other episode in the book has, not even the actual, physical death of the Sarkar (which happened long before this).

## 5.2 Frequency

The frequency of IL terms very noticeably changes from Part I (*Girl*) to Part II (*Bride*) – this is a reflection of a huge change in the setting of the book at this point. Until Jindan's marriage, the events mostly take place in Gujranwala, in her home village. Furthermore, the characters that Jindan interacts with and narrates about – Biji, Jawahar, the farmers – are all from more or less the same region and social status. Even in Lahore, Jindan interacts with no one other than Manna and Jawahar (excepting, of course, the Maharaja).

After Jindan's marriage, she immediately leaves for Lahore – more importantly, for the qila. This is the last time she interacts with Biji or Jawahar until the latter comes to join her much later in the book. This part of the book sees a marked reduction in the frequency of IL terms (and an abrupt end to the use of Punjabi terms) indicating a shift to a much more "upper-class", aristocratic, and

cosmopolitan society, with courtiers and ranis from places as far from Punjab as Kangra and Jammu.
We have also already seen (in the chechak episode) that the use of IL terms may indicate a relatively lower social position within the qila.

Of note here is Jawahar's visit to Jindan on page 125 (already remarked on above), which is followed by a sudden peak in the frequency of IL terms for the next two pages – some of them unambiguously Punjabi (*arre puttar*, for instance). Some of these are in Jawahar's speech, but most of them in the narration – this brings further weight to the first point above, that the use of IL terms is a reflection of Jindan's rural upbringing.

# 6 Conclusion

It is clear that the use of IL terms by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni presents a number of avenues for creative exploration. We have surveyed some of these avenues.

We first consider the contexts in which IL terms tend to occur, and draw generalisations as to the situations covered by these contexts. We observe categories of words that tend to be expressed in ILs. We also note the way the translation of these terms has been done.

Following this, broadly speaking, our analysis covers two main aspects of the use of IL terms – its cause (the author's motivation behind their particular distribution) and its effect (what the author hopes to accomplish by this particular distribution).

In the former case, we note two immediately clear motivations – of necessity (that of representing an Indian culture in a foreign language), and of (avoiding negative) connotations. A third, less apparent motivation – of creating an atmosphere of "exoticness" – is revealed in the wider study of Indian writing in English, and we consider the evidence pointing towards this being one of the author's reasons.

The latter case takes us to a more distant reading of the text, where we consider the frequency of IL terms and their specific language (Punjabi or Urdu, inasmuch as they can be distinguished), and the possibility that these parameters impact the way the book reads.

# 7 References


- Bassnett, Susan, and Harish Trivedi. *Postcolonial translation: Theory and practice.* Routledge, 2012.
- Lau, Lisa, and Ana Cristina Mendes. "Introducing Re-Orientalism: A New Manifestation of Orientalism." *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other Within* 1 (2011): 3-16.