Introduction to Literature (HS1.204)

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Term Paper (Literary Interpretation)

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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^{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?
This immediately leads us 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?
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, 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? Were there other languages that could have been used but were not for accessibility reasons?

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.

> '... Makki ki roti and saag, I hope, because no one in Lahore makes them like you.' [p. 12]

> '... Now, is anyone going to give me nashta, or should I just starve?' ... Biji sets down rotis and alu sabzi in front of him. [p. 20]

> 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]

> 'Karhi and rice, cauliflower, chhole, goat curry.' [p. 14]

> He breaks a piece off a big golden-brown tile of jaggery for me ... [p. 27]

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*:

> The aroma of meat and pulao, kebabs and brinjal bharta assails me.

which is especially unique as the collocation "baingan da bharta" is common in Punjabi.

Another context that sees the usage of IL terms almost exclusively is 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).
We also have examples of more mundane, day-to-day honorifics.

> 'Teacher ji says I have a good head for numbers.' [p. 13]

> '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.

> 'Would you like to go to Lahore sometime, beeba?' [p. 16]

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

Notable exceptions include terms for relations by marriage.

> 'Her poor, bullied daughter-in-law, Chand Kaur, isn't even allowed to choose the clothes . . . ' [p. 98]

> 'My mother-in-law.' [p. 63]

> 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 rush outside without changing my night salwar-kameez. [p. 7]

> 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]

> She dresses me in a maroon silk lehenga which billows around my legs. [p. 50]

Remarkably, the author uses the words *kohl* (referring to surma, 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.

> 'Waheguru ji di kripa, I found you a job.' [p. 29]

> '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]

> A ragi begins to sing a shabad. [p. 72]

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]

> They will participate in many ceremonies: the turmeric bath for the groom, the mehendi hand-painting, the sending of sagan gifts to the bride, the singing of bawdy wedding songs. [p. 99]

Notably, one of the only two 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).

> 'Who is this kambakht? How did he get in here? Get rid of him!' [p. 131]

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

> 'These bewakoof village bumpkins!' [p. 22]

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

2.2 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.

The categories we have identified above give us a clue – 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.

However, even with these words, the decision to use Urdu or Punjabi 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.

Further evidence in favour of this is the use of English spellings of words that have become popular in standard British spelling.

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

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

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]

> Did the gora laat recognize the greatness hidden inside my Sarkar's slender frame?

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.

2.3 Idioms and Wordplay

Idioms are never used with the original Urdu or Punjabi phrasing 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]

> 'Stupid donkey. Can't you tell one small lie for the family's sake?' [p. 40]

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]

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

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

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]

> 'Will you cook for me, my Jind?' [p. 121]

The helpful gloss provided to the unfamiliar reader in the first quote (which has not been done anywhere else) lends further weight to the theory that at least some of the choices were made for the benefit of American/European audiences.

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.

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.

> A servant rushes up with a gold bowl containing saffron paste. [p. 4]
>
> Hatred for the goras glows like a hot coal inside me. [p. 45]
>
> She waves away her veil. [p. 144]
>
> ... no processions or music, no heaped sandalwood, no ragis singing. [p. 225]

In these examples, the words *saffron* (kesar), *hot coal* (angaara), *veil* (ghunghat/parda) and *sandalwood* (chandan) are much less common in English than their indigenous 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 (section 2.3) 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.

4 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]

> 'Would you like to go to Lahore sometime, beeba?' [p. 16]

In most other cases (other than religious terms), the IL terms used in the book tend to be in Urdu.
This may indicate that Punjabi is used to indicate a rural upbringing, as opposed to Urdu, the language of the durbar. 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.

Another interesting point is that the only other full-length sentence not in English (we have seen one in section 2.1) 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.

5 Usage

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.