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Bulleh Shah across Borders: A Comparative Analysis through Formal and Dynamic Equivalence

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ARTICLE INFO			ABSTRACT
Article History:			<i>English as an international medium of communication serves as impeccable tool to introduce various kind of literature such as Punjabi Sufi poetry to the global readers. This study offers a comparative analysis of renowned Pakistani Punjabi mystic poet Baba Bulleh Shah's famous ode Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun by three translators from Pakistan, India and United States. The focus of this study is on each of the translator's dedication to the linguistic fidelity and their treatment of the metaphors, phonetics, and idiomatic expressions. It also critically examines how each version balances the preservation of the actual meaning, spiritual essence and poetic rhythm through the lens of Eugene Nida's translation model of Formal and Dynamic equivalence. The findings suggest that translation choices critically shape reader's perspective. Each translation reflects its translator's incline towards a specific direction and making each version, a unique rendition. It also highlight how different stylistic choices and cultural background contribute to the preservation and accessibility of the Sufi poetic norms around the world.</i>
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Introduction

Bulleh Shah is one of the greatest Punjabi Sufi poets, who not only address Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus through his poetry but all humanity. Due to his simple yet self-exploring life and elevated spiritual attainments, he is equally popular among all communities in India and Pakistan (Danish, 2014), but also in western countries. Bulleh Shah was a perfect saint, and a true lover of God and human beings (Puri & Shangari, 2010). Baba Bulleh Shah has received international recognition through translated renditions of his mystic poetry by various acclaimed translators, scholars and

artists. Throughout his poetic journey “Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun” stands as his major work because it explores questions about rigid social rules while emphasizing on spiritual freedom.

The examination of poetic translation in academic studies focuses on three principal elements such as phonetic difficulties, metaphor maintenance and cultural adjustment procedures. Famous scholars such as Russell (1968-69) and House (1994) focus on how rhythmic beauty from Urdu and Punjabi poetry gets lost when migrated to English. Often Skilled translators acquainted with cultural and linguistic contexts try to seize the essence in their portrayals, however it's far vital to apprehend that a few subtleties necessarily wander off in translation (Ahmed, 2020). Shafiq (2019) did a pragma-stylistic analysis of the two translations of a Kafi written by Bulleh Shah, concluded that Nicholson's word-for-word approach and Rafat's sense-for-sense translation of the same Kafi highlighted translation strategy impacts and interpretive experiences. He concluded that dynamic translations may better preserve the aesthetic and emotive quality of Sufi poetry.

The research investigates how Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun was translated by English translators Christopher Shackle, Rabbi Sher Gill and Raza Rumi through Eugene Nida's theory of formal and dynamic equivalence from *Toward a Science of Translating* (1964). Eugene Nida's formal and dynamic equivalence theory demonstrates that translators use either formal equivalence to maintain text accuracy and structure while other translators use dynamic equivalence to make content easier to understand with strong poetic flow for modern readers. The multiple translations of this work lead readers to question how faithfully the content from the original has been rendered into English. According to Gul (2020), translations of Sufi poetry requires a comprehensive approach to preserve the cultural interpretation, spiritual nature and its symbolic components, else it may lose its originality on the journey of translation process. The different approaches to translating poetry create important qualms about whether translators effectively conserve the original nature of the poetic work or it become lost in the journey of the rendition. Thus no study carried out the comparative analysis of three translations from three different backgrounds of Bulleh Shah's work. Analysis of such depth will explore diverse perspectives about Sufi poetic translation with its worldwide acknowledgement and appreciation.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to comparatively analyze three English translations of Baba Bulleh Shah's iconic ode *Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun*, rendered by Raza Rumi, Rabbi Sher Gill, and Christopher Shackle. The research investigates how the poem's meaning, stylistic elements, cultural depth, and spiritual concepts are shaped by the distinct translation strategies employed by each translator. It further examines the shifts and variations in linguistic choices, poetic structure, and interpretive aesthetics using Eugene Nida's model of Formal and Dynamic Equivalence.

A similar study was conducted by Kiran (2017) on the works of Hindustani poet Gulzar, where she analyzed three English translations by different translators using a pragmatic-stylistic approach to explore how various translation decisions impact aesthetic elements. Bashir (2013) also examined Gulzar's use of imagery and highlighted how the fusion of Hindi and Urdu poetic traditions enhances accessibility without undermining artistic complexity. His study concluded that such translations resonate more with diverse audiences due to their lyrical style and cultural richness.

This research seeks to explore the impact of the selected translations on audiences across different cultural and national contexts. It aims to showcase how various translation strategies unveil the spiritual, rhythmic, and cultural intricacies of *Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun* while preserving its Sufi mysticism and poetic integrity. Unlike previous studies, which have only examined two

translations, this study fills a significant gap by conducting a comparative analysis of three translations by translators from distinct religious and national backgrounds—an approach yet to be comprehensively explored in the context of Bulleh Shah's work.

Research Questions

1. How do the translations reflect or alter the cultural and religious nuances of the original Punjabi text?
2. Which translation method, literal or free best preserves the poetic and spiritual essence for an English audience?
3. What major differences emerge when analyzing the three translations through Nida's model?

Literature Review

The translation of Sufi poetry, particularly that of Baba Bulleh Shah, presents a complex intersection of language, culture, and spirituality. Translating such deeply metaphorical and culturally embedded texts into English is not merely a linguistic exercise but a nuanced act of cultural transference and spiritual interpretation (Li & Akram, 2023, 2024; Ramzan & Khan, 2019; Ramzan et al., 2020, 2021). Given that Punjabi as a language holds symbolic, rhythmic, and philosophical undertones, any translation effort must grapple with the challenge of preserving the essence of the original while ensuring accessibility to a broader global audience (Ahmad et al., 2022).

Laila et al. (2024), applying Baker's (1992) typology of equivalence, analyzed *Heer Waris Shah* and found that paraphrasing, generalization, and exclusion in English translations of Punjabi cultural idiomatic expressions significantly altered the original meaning. This highlights the tension between achieving equivalence and preserving cultural authenticity in literary translations.

Bulleh Shah is one of the greatest Punjabi Sufi poets, whose poetry transcends religious and cultural boundaries. He addressed Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and humanity at large through themes of spiritual freedom, divine love, and introspective truth. His simplicity of life, elevated mystical thought, and universal appeal have made him beloved in both India and Pakistan, and increasingly respected in Western literary circles (Danish, 2014; Puri & Shangari, 2010). Baba Bulleh Shah has received international recognition largely through translated renditions of his mystic poetry by scholars, artists, and translators. Among his works, the poem *Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun* stands as an iconic philosophical inquiry into identity, spiritual liberation, and resistance against social and religious orthodoxy.

According to Gul (2020), translating Sufi poetry demands a comprehensive approach that preserves cultural interpretation, spiritual essence, and symbolic depth. Without such consideration, much of the original meaning is lost in the transformation. This is especially critical in *Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun*, where rigid structures and symbolic references hold significant mystical weight.

Nida (1964) pioneered the concepts of formal and dynamic equivalence in translation studies, which are central to this inquiry. Formal equivalence emphasizes structural fidelity and literal accuracy, whereas dynamic equivalence prioritizes readability and emotional resonance for the target audience. In the context of Sufi poetry, where rhythm, mysticism, and cultural symbols are vital, achieving an optimal balance between these modes becomes crucial. Shafiq (2019)

reinforced this through his pragma-stylistic analysis, concluding that dynamic equivalence better retains the emotive and aesthetic spirit of Sufi verse than literal methods.

Russell (1968–69) and House (1994) both underscore how the musicality and aesthetic richness of South Asian poetry often suffer when transferred into English. While literal translations may preserve accuracy, they frequently fail to carry forward the rhythm and spiritual weight that characterize the original verse (Amjad et al., 2021). Ahmed (2020) points out that even culturally informed translators encounter difficulty in maintaining such stylistic and emotive fidelity. In a pragma-stylistic study, Shafiq (2019) compared Nicholson's formal approach to Rafat's dynamic strategy in translating Bulleh Shah, concluding that dynamic equivalence better captures the emotive and aesthetic intensity of Sufi verse.

This research investigates how *Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun* has been translated into English by three notable translators Christopher Shackle (UK), Rabbi Shergill (India), and Raza Rumi (Pakistan) through the lens of Eugene Nida's (1964) framework. Each translation reflects a unique interpretation and orientation: Shackle's version is structured and academically precise, leaning toward formal equivalence; Shergill, a musician, adapts the poem rhythmically for performance, reflecting dynamic equivalence with modern linguistic inflections; and Rumi offers a spiritual and culturally intimate translation that bridges fidelity and accessibility. These choices mirror the translator's background and reflect different prioritizations between literal and emotional fidelity (Mehboob & Tariq, 2023).

The diversity of these approaches leads readers to question how faithfully the essence of Bulleh Shah's original verse has been preserved in English renditions. Mir (2012) and Hussain (2021) observe that Western translators often simplify or dilute metaphorical complexity to improve accessibility, risking the erasure of cultural authenticity. Similarly, Kiran (2017) and Bashir (2013) demonstrated that stylistic transformation in translated poetry significantly impacts aesthetic experience.

Indian translators such as Danish (2014) and Kidwai (2001) emphasize incorporating Hindi and Urdu poetic traditions to preserve the cultural cadence and depth of original texts. This is evident in Shergill's rhythmic modernized version, which draws from these traditions to retain the poem's musical structure.

Sarfraz (2024) presents a socio-political dimension by arguing that the Punjabi language has suffered marginalization due to colonial legacies and national language policies. This underlines the urgency of translating Punjabi literature with cultural empathy and preservation in mind. Translating Bulleh Shah's work, therefore, becomes an act of cultural resistance and revival.

Jalal (2019) and Ahmed (2020) further assert that Bulleh Shah's recurring themes of divine unity, religious tolerance, and humanism must remain central to any translation to maintain philosophical integrity. Riaz (2021), through the example of Kartar Singh Duggal's translations, advocated for deviation from literal translation when it hinders spiritual and emotive clarity.

Finally, Mehboob and Tariq (2023) emphasize that neural machine translation tools fail to interpret the spiritual and symbolic density of Sufi verse. Their study reinforces the continued necessity of human translators who can discern and carry forward the emotional and mystical subtleties embedded in the original text.

In conclusion, the present study identifies a gap in comparative research evaluating multiple translations of *Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun* from culturally diverse backgrounds. By analyzing

these three translations through Nida's framework, the study seeks to illuminate how different strategies affect the preservation of Bulleh Shah's poetic, spiritual, and cultural identity. This research not only contributes to translation studies but also to the broader discourse on cultural transmission, interpretive authenticity, and global appreciation of South Asian mystic literature.

My contribution lies in bridging the gap between spiritual authenticity and translational strategies by offering a cross-cultural analysis rooted in theoretical insight. I advocate for a balanced, compassionate translation model that preserves both the lyrical mysticism and philosophical essence of Bulleh Shah's verse.

Methodology

In this study Eugene Nida's translation model is going to be applied in a qualitative comparative textual analysis of the English translations of Baba Bulleh Shah's Punjabi ode Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun. It will evaluate these translations through Eugene Nida's (1964) theory of Formal and Dynamic Equivalence. The key focus is on three English translations of the Punjabi sufi poem "Bullah Ki Jana Main kaun" by translators from exclusive cultural and regional backgrounds: Raza Rumi (Pakistan), Rabbi Sher Gill (India), and Christopher Shackle (British).

This research comprehensively evaluates each translator's version through Eugene Nida's formal equivalence (literal, structure-preserving translation) and dynamic equivalence (meaning-focused, culturally adapted translation) and uncover how specific translation choices reflect different cultural, ideological, and audience-driven strategies.

Selection of text

The primary data set comprises the following three English translations of "Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun":

Translator	Nationality	Nature of Translation
Raza Rumi	Pakistani	Literary prose translation
Rabbi Shergill	Indian	Musical/lyrical adaptation (song lyrics)
Christopher Shackle	British	Scholarly annotated translation

These translations were selected to represent diverse cultural perspectives, South Asian vs. Western, and to show various stylistic attitudes, including poetic, musical, and academic interpretations.

Analytical Framework

Each of the three translations were analyzed through the criteria based on Nida's model:

Formal Equivalence: Examining how closely each translation adheres to the original Punjabi structure and lexicon.

Dynamic Equivalence: Evaluating how well each translation conveys the meaning and emotional depth of the original poem while adapting it for English-speaking audiences.

Cultural Transference: Analyzing how religious and cultural symbols are preserved, modified, or omitted in each version.

Poetic Rhythm: Assessing whether the translations maintain the musicality and lyrical flow of the original Punjabi verse.

Data Collection

The translation data was collected from the respective sources.

Raza Rumi's official website "Jahane Rumi", Rabbi Sher Gill translation can be found in three different platforms, Pattukkaaran.in, Musixmatch and Reddit.r/Music. Christopher Shackle's version was extracted from his book "Sufi Lyrics: Selections from a World Classic".

Data Analysis

Each translation has been analyzed through a comprehensive comparative analysis, where all the sections of the translation of the ode were sifted through context, word choice, and structure and interpretation liberties. Additionally, a qualitative stylistic analysis was performed to assess how well each version captures the philosophical and mystical themes of Bulleh Shah's poetry. It will also conduct a verse-by-verse comparison using the following steps:

Identify linguistic shifts (word choice, sentence structure, idiomatic expressions).

Analyze cultural adaptations (e.g., treatment of Islamic-Sufi concepts, Punjabi folk traditions).

Determine whether the translation inclines toward formal or dynamic equivalence.

Interpret the effect of the translation style on meaning, tone, and emotional significance.

Analysis of Christopher Shackle's Translation Using Nida's Model

This text excerpt has been taken from Christopher Shackle's book "BULLHE SHAH Sufi Lyrics" (Murty Classical Library of India), published by Harvard University, London, England (2015), under the section of Introduction, page# 18. This version does not translate the whole poem so some sections are missing here. Though Christopher Shackle made another attempt to translate the same poem but that version is also incomplete and in another book which is not available for download. Because both versions have missing sections so this specific translated text was chosen for the comparative analysis.

Eugene Nida's translation model distinguishes between formal equivalence (word-for-word translation) and dynamic equivalence (sense-for-sense translation). This analysis evaluates Christopher Shackle's translation of *Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun* through these principles, examining meaning, poetic aesthetics, and cultural representation.

Formal Equivalence

Shackle's translation closely follows the structure and wording of the original Punjabi text. The refrain "Bullah, what do I know about who I am?" preserves the theme of identity confusion and spiritual inquiry. Phrases such as "believer in the mosques" and "rite of unbelief" mirror the original syntax, ensuring textual fidelity. However, the rhythmic flow of Punjabi oral poetry is difficult to replicate, leading to a loss of its musicality in English.

Dynamic Equivalence

Shackle's translation enhances accessibility by adapting complex metaphors into clearer English expressions. Lines like "I am not Moses or Pharaoh" and "I am not in waking, nor am I asleep" effectively convey Bulleh Shah's mystical paradoxes. However, "No one is wiser than I am" alters the original's spiritual humility, making it seem like a claim of intellectual superiority rather than divine realization.

Cultural Transference

Shackle retains religious and philosophical contrasts, preserving the poem's critique of rigid religious identities. However, "drunken reprobates" introduces a moralistic tone absent in the original, where intoxication often symbolizes spiritual ecstasy rather than literal indulgence. More nuanced phrasing could better maintain this symbolism.

Poetic Rhythm

While meaning is largely preserved, the translation loses the hypnotic rhythm of Bulleh Shah's poetry. The rigid structure in English diminishes the performative, fluid nature that defines Sufi verse. Shackle's translation prioritizes formal equivalence, ensuring textual accuracy but sacrificing some poetic and spiritual depth. A stronger focus on dynamic equivalence—preserving the mystical and rhythmic elements could enhance the translation's resonance. Future efforts might integrate oral traditions, cultural metaphors, and musical rhythm for a more immersive representation of Bulleh Shah's mystic poetry. According to Ahmed (2020) and Jalal (2019) the key themes of religious tolerance and divine unity in Bulleh Shah's poetry must be maintained within translations in addition to preserving linguistic precision and spiritual depth, can be seen in Christopher Shackle's version of translation.

Analysis of Raza Rumi's Translation Using Nida's Model

Raza Rumi translated "Bullah ki Jaana May Kaun" by Baba Bulleh Shah on his blog Jahane Rumi on January 26, 2007. Though Raza Rumi credited M.A. Akhyar and C. Duggal for the translation in comments section but he claimed this version to be his reproduction of existing translations especially C. Duggal's version. Raza Rumi employed a dynamic equivalence strategy (Nida, 19640), highlighting the philosophical and mystical message over strict cultural adherence whereas C. Duggal's translated version inclined towards romantic interpretations rather than spiritualism. Eugene Nida's translation model distinguishes between formal equivalence (word-for-word translation) and dynamic equivalence (sense-for-sense translation). This analysis evaluates Raza Rumi's translation of *Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun* through these principles, examining meaning, poetic aesthetics, and cultural representation. As Kartar Singh Duggal by Riaz (2021) reveals how the necessary deviations in style represent a general translation problem which exists when balancing between preserving original text and making it fit for reader understanding

Formal Equivalence

Rumi's translation maintains some structural fidelity to the original text while incorporating accessible English expressions. The refrain "I know not who I am" mirrors the original theme of existential doubt, preserving the essence of Bulleh Shah's inquiry. Key phrases such as "Neither clean nor unclean" and "Neither Moses nor Pharaoh" retain the dualities present in the Punjabi text. However, some syntactic shifts make the English rendition more fluid, sacrificing strict textual fidelity.

Dynamic Equivalence

Rumi's translation leans toward dynamic equivalence, aiming to convey the poem's deeper meanings rather than adhering rigidly to its linguistic form. The phrase "I belong neither to those who squat and pray, nor to those who have gone astray" effectively conveys the poet's rejection of religious formalism without being a literal translation. The final stanza's "Who could be wiser than Bulleh Shah / Whose Master is ever there to tend?" preserves the reverence and spiritual humility of the original text.

Cultural Transference

Rumi's translation successfully conveys the poem's spiritual universality while maintaining its cultural essence. References to "Adam and Eve" in place of indigenous theological terms provide an accessible cultural bridge for English-speaking audiences. However, certain nuanced spiritual symbols, such as those related to Sufi mysticism, could be made more explicit to retain their layered meanings.

Poetic Rhythm

The translation captures much of the lyrical and meditative rhythm of the original, making it more readable while preserving its reflective nature. The repetition of "I know not who I am" sustains the poetic cadence, though some internal rhymes and phonetic play in the Punjabi text are less pronounced in the English version.

Raza Rumi's translation prioritizes dynamic equivalence, ensuring accessibility and poetic resonance while slightly deviating from formal textual fidelity. His adaptation makes the poem engaging for a broader audience, though certain cultural and mystical nuances could be retained with more precision. Future translations might balance linguistic accuracy, cultural specificity, and poetic rhythm to further enrich the representation of Bulleh Shah's mystic poetry.

Analysis of Rabbi Sher Gill's Translation Using Nida's Model

Eugene Nida's translation model, which distinguishes between formal equivalence (word-for-word translation) and dynamic equivalence (sense-for-sense translation), provides a structured approach to evaluating Rabbi Shergill's translation of *Bullah Ki Jana Main Kaun*. This analysis examines how his translation preserves meaning, poetic form, and cultural depth.

Formal Equivalence

Shergill's translation largely adheres to the original structure while making necessary linguistic adjustments for readability. The refrain "Bulleh! To me, I am not known" effectively mirrors the original Punjabi's core existential question. Phrases such as "Not a believer inside the mosque, am I / Nor a pagan disciple of false rites" preserves the contrast between religious orthodoxies and spiritual detachment. However, shifts in syntax and word choices make the English version more fluid, occasionally sacrificing direct textual fidelity.

Dynamic Equivalence

Shergill's translation leans more toward dynamic equivalence, aiming to make the poem resonate with a contemporary English-speaking audience. The line "Not in opium, neither in wine / Not in the drunkard's craze" adapts the original imagery of intoxication, preserving its metaphorical

meaning while ensuring accessibility. The phrase “Neither awake, nor in a sleeping daze” effectively conveys the mystical ambiguity present in Bulleh Shah’s poetry.

Cultural Transference

Shergill’s translation makes notable cultural adaptations. The reference to “Hindu, Turk (Muslim), nor Peshawari” ensures inclusivity while maintaining the original’s critique of rigid identity labels. However, certain terms, such as “Pharaoh”, which carry strong Abrahamic religious connotations, might not fully capture the nuances of Bulleh Shah’s context. Additionally, “secrets of religion” simplifies deeper mystical allusions, which could benefit from more explicit rendering.

Poetic Rhythm

As Danish (2014) and Kidwai (2001) investigated Indian translations as they integrate poetic traditions incorporating both Hindi and Urdu elements for preserving cultural and linguistic coherence. Their research can also present a better understanding of Rabbi Shergill’s version of translation. The translation by Rabbi Sher Gill retains all rhythmic and phonetic elements from traditional poetic traditions to preserve the original beauty of the work. Sher Gill successfully retains the rhythmic cadence of the original poem. The repetition of “Bulleh! To me, I am not known” maintains the poem’s hypnotic and reflective tone, reinforcing its meditative quality. However, some phonetic play in the Punjabi version is less evident in English, leading to a slight loss of musicality.

Rabbi Shergill’s translation balances formal and dynamic equivalence, ensuring both accessibility and poetic integrity. While some shifts in language make the poem more relatable to a modern audience, certain mystical and cultural nuances are slightly simplified. Future translations could benefit from a closer adherence to cultural specificity, metaphorical depth, and phonetic rhythm to fully capture the richness of Bulleh Shah’s mystic poetry.

Discussion

Raza Rumi (Pakistan)	Rabbi Sher Gill (India)	Christopher Shackle (USA)	بلھے شاہ
Who I am	Bulleh! To me, I am not known	Bullah what do I know about who I am ?	بُلّھا کیہ جانان میں کون
I know not who I am,	Bulleh! To me, I am not known	Bullah what do I know about who I am ?	بُلّھا کیہ جانان میں کون
I am neither a believer going to the mosque	Not a believer inside the mosque, am I	I am not a believer in the mosques,	نہ میں مومن وچ مسیت آن
Nor given to non-believing ways.	Nor a pagan disciple of false rites	Nor do I follow ,The rite of unbelief.	نہ میں وچ گُفر دی ریت آن
Neither clean nor unclean,	Not the pure amongst the impure	I am not among the pure or the pollutes.	نہ میں پاکیاں وچ پلّیت آن
Neither Moses nor Pharaoh.	Neither Moses, nor the Pharaoh	I am not Moses or Pharaoh.	نہ میں مُوسٰی، نہ فرعون
I know not who I	Bulleh! To me, I am	Bullah what do I	بُلّھا کیہ جانان میں کون

am.	not known	know about who I am?	
	Not in the holy Vedas, am I	I am not in the vedas or scriptures;	نہ میں اندر بید کتابان
	Nor in opium, neither in wine	I am not in drugs or liquor.	نہ وچ بھنگاں، نہ شرابان
	Not in the drunkard's craze	I am not among the drunken reprobates.	نہ وچ رنداں مسست خرابان
	Niether awake, nor in a sleeping daze	I am not in waking, nor am I asleep.	نہ وچ جاگن، نہ وچ سون
	Bulleh! To me, I am not known	Bullah, what do I know about who I am?	بُلّھا کیہ جانان میں کون
“In happiness nor in sorrow, am I	In happiness nor in sorrow, am I		نہ وچ شادی نہ غمناکی
Neither clean, nor a filthy mire	Neither clean, nor a filthy mire		نہ میں وچ پلیتی پاکی
Not from water, nor from earth	Not from water, nor from earth		نہ میں اُبی نہ میں خاکی
Neither fire, nor from air, is my birth	Neither fire, nor from air, is my birth		نہ میں آتش نہ میں پُون
Bulleh! To me, I am not known	Bulleh! To me, I am not known		بُلّھا کیہ جانان میں کون
Not an Arab, nor Lahori	Not an Arab, nor Lahori		نہ میں عربی نہ لاہوری
Neither Hindi, nor Nagauri	Neither Hindi, nor Nagauri		نہ میں ہندی شہر نگوری
Hindu, Turk (Muslim), nor Peshawari	Hindu, Turk (Muslim), nor Peshawari		نہ ہندو نہ تُرک پشوری
Nor do I live in Nadaun	Nor do I live in Nadaun		نہ میں رہندا وچ ندُون
Bulleh! To me, I am not known”	Bulleh! To me, I am not known		بُلّھا کیہ جانان میں کون
Neither do I know the secret of religion,	Secrets of religion, I have not known		نہ میں بھیت مذہب دا پایا
Nor am I born of Adam and Eve.	From Adam and Eve, I am not born		نہ میں آدم حوّا جایا
I have given myself no name,	I am not the name I assume		نہ میں اپنا نام دھرایا
I belong neither to those who squat and pray,	Not in stillness, nor on the move		نہ وچ بیٹھن، نہ وچ بھون
I know not who I	Bulleh! To me, I am		بُلّھا کیہ جانان میں کون

am.	not known		
I was in the beginning; I'd be there in the end.	I am the first, I am the last	I know myself to be first and last,	اَوَّلَ اَخرِ اَپْ نُوں جاناں
I know not any one other than the One.	None other, have I ever known	I do not recognize anyone else.	نہ کوئی دُوجا ہور پچھاناں
Who could be wiser than Bulleh Shah	I am the wisest of them all	No one is wiser than I am.	میتھوں ہور نہ کوئی سیانا
Whose Master is ever there to tend?	Bulleh! Do I stand alone?	Bullah, who is the lord standing here?	بُلّھا! اوہ کھڑا ہے کون
I know not who I am.	Bulleh! To me, I am not known	Bullah what do I know about who I am?	بُلّھا کیہ جاناں میں کون

This segment provides a comparative analysis of *Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun*'s English translated versions by Raza Rumi (Pakistan), Rabbi Sher Gill (India), and Christopher Shackle (UK), through the lens of Eugene Nida's translation theory of Formal and Dynamic Equivalence. It integrates scholarly insights from Baker (1992), House (1994), Kidwai (2001), Matiu (2008), Shafiq (2019), Ahmed (2020), and Gul (2020). Each section is discussed separately for a clearer understanding of how the translators' linguistic, poetic, and cultural choices shape the message of Baba Bulleh Shah's mystical verse. These choices also illuminate how each translator answers, interprets, or reshapes the spiritual question embedded in the poem "Who am I?" based on their strategy and intended audience.

This analysis emphasizes that translation is not merely a linguistic act but also a process of cultural and spiritual mediation, which significantly influences the authenticity and accessibility of the message.

Here, the cultural and religious nuances are reflected and altered in different ways. The first line, *کہوں میں جاناں کبہ لہاؤ*, is translated variously as "Who I am, I know not" (Rumi), "Bullah, what do I know about who I am?" (Gill), and "Bulleh! To me, I am not known" (Shackle). Rumi omits the vocative "Bullah," resulting in a generalized expression of existential confusion, aligning with dynamic equivalence by prioritizing emotional effect on a global reader. Gill, however, preserves the name and interrogative structure, achieving a balance between accessibility and fidelity. Shackle remains faithful to the original structure through formal equivalence, retaining its cultural and spiritual significance. In the line *"آں مسدیت وچ مومن میں نہ"* (I am not a believer in the mosque), Rumi adds action ("going") to ease comprehension, thus leaning into dynamic equivalence. Gill's version, "Not a believer inside the mosque, am I," focuses on poetic rhythm and clarity. Shackle, once again, adheres closely to the source text with, "I am not a believer in the mosques."

Gill appears to achieve a commendable compromise by preserving both rhythm and message, while Shackle's adherence to fidelity offers notable academic value. In contrast, Rumi's version, though spiritually engaging, occasionally abstracts elements of cultural identity. This comparison highlights the translators' differing approaches to preserving or reshaping religious nuances within the text.

Here, the comparison begins to demonstrate which translation method best preserves the poetic and spiritual essence. The phrase “آب ریت دی کفر وچ میں نہ” (Nor am I part of the rites of unbelief) is rendered by Rumi as “Nor given to non-believing ways,” which dilutes the Islamic nuance of “kufr.” Gill’s “Nor a pagan disciple of false rites” substitutes “kufr” with Western religious analogs, risking a misrepresentation of the original tone (Gul, 2020). Shackle’s “Nor do I follow the rite of unbelief” preserves both the form and cultural implications, reflecting formal equivalence (House, 1994). Likewise, the line “آب پر لیت وچ پاک اب میں نہ” becomes “Neither clean nor unclean” (Rumi), which generalizes the binary opposition. Gill’s “Not the pure amongst the impure” maintains contrast but alters metaphor slightly. Shackle’s version, “I am not among the pure or the pollutes,” is most literal, although the term “pollutes” may be unclear for modern readers. The line “فرعون نہ موسیٰ میں نہ” (I am neither Moses nor Pharaoh) is consistently translated across all versions, suggesting a convergence of dynamic and formal equivalence for universally understood references (Nida, 1964).

Shackle’s approach respects cultural specificity, which is essential for preserving spiritual symbolism, even if the language is less fluid. Rumi and Gill offer interpretive ease but at the cost of spiritual and cultural accuracy in some places. These contrasts contribute to the understanding of how literal or free methods best preserve the poetic and spiritual essence.

Here, differences emerge more distinctly when analyzed through Nida’s model. Certain omissions were strategically made by the translators for accessibility. For instance, Rumi omits references such as “Vedas” to make the poem more palatable for a contemporary South Asian audience. This reflects dynamic equivalence, favoring conceptual clarity over detailed cultural fidelity (Lefevere, 1992). Gill similarly adjusts or omits complex allegories, likely to preserve poetic flow and spiritual relatability for Western readers. These strategic modifications indirectly answer how translators negotiate religious and cultural nuance to suit the target audience. Shafiq (2019) and Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) note that such adaptations are necessary to bridge the cognitive gap between the source and target cultures.

While these omissions aid accessibility, they risk diluting the original depth. An ideal translation should contextualize rather than exclude culturally significant elements.

Furthermore, the spiritual and poetic implications of metaphorical language further test the limits of each method. Raza Rumi also omits a crucial section dealing with intoxication and altered states:

“شراب اب نہ بھنگاں، وچ نہ” (Not in bhang (opium), nor in wine)

“خراپ اب مست رنداں وچ نہ” (Not among the drunken reprobates)

“سون وچ نہ جاگن، وچ نہ” (Neither in waking, nor in sleep)

These metaphors are pivotal in Sufi poetry, symbolizing divine intoxication. Rumi’s omission is likely due to concern that Western audiences might misinterpret these references. As Baker (1992) and Gul (2020) assert, literal translations of such metaphors may confuse or alienate readers lacking the spiritual context. Therefore, Rumi’s dynamic equivalence prioritizes philosophical essence over metaphorical exactness. Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) highlight that translators must mediate between transmitting symbolic meaning and ensuring cultural intelligibility. This case illustrates the tension between maintaining poetic integrity and adapting for audience reception.

While Rumi's cautious approach may aim to prevent misinterpretation, the omission of these lines arguably sacrifices essential Sufi motifs. A more effective strategy might involve retaining such elements alongside contextual footnotes or metaphorical explanations to preserve their spiritual and cultural significance.

Overall, the comparative analysis shows Rumi favoring a reader-centered, emotionally resonant approach by simplifying language and spiritual references. Gill endeavors to preserve rhythm and structure with a modernized tone. Shackle, consistent with formal equivalence, focuses on cultural and textual fidelity at the expense of fluency. As Baker (1992) and Venuti (1995) note, these approaches reflect the translator's positioning between visibility (transparency of process) and invisibility (reader immersion). This distinction also helps determine which translation method best preserves poetic and spiritual essence for English readers, offering diverse answers to the core research questions.

Each translator contributes meaningfully to the preservation and propagation of Bulleh Shah's message. However, a balanced translation model—rooted in cultural empathy and poetic integrity—is advocated, one that maintains both the form and spirit of the original text to ensure accessibility and resonance for diverse global audiences.

Conclusion

This study has comparatively examined the English translations of Baba Bulleh Shah's "*Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun*" through the framework of Eugene Nida's theory of formal and dynamic equivalence. The comparative analysis of translations by Raza Rumi, Rabbi Sher Gill, and Christopher Shackle reveals how translation strategies are deeply influenced by each translator's cultural perspective, target audience, and interpretive intent. While Rumi's dynamic approach highlights philosophical universality, Gill's balanced method strives to retain cultural tone and rhythmic beauty while ensuring accessibility to the global readership. Shackle, adhering to formal equivalence, maintains linguistic fidelity, although sometimes at the cost of poetic fluidity. The findings emphasize Nida's assertion that translation inevitably involves negotiation between meaning and form. This negotiation becomes especially complex in the case of Sufi poetry, where metaphor, symbolism, and mysticism defy easy equivalence. Rumi's omissions of culturally embedded references, such as intoxication metaphors and scriptural allusions, reflect a deliberate choice to avoid misinterpretation and present the poem's spiritual inquiry in a universally digestible format. Shackle's omissions, though fewer, likely reflect decisions to streamline content for theological clarity, particularly for readers unfamiliar with regional references.

Furthermore, this research supports Lefevere's (1992) and Venuti's (1995) arguments that translators are not passive conveyors of meaning but active agents who reshape texts through philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic filters. The shifts in vocabulary, structure, and thematic emphasis observed across translations illustrate how each version not only interprets but also reconstructs Bulleh Shah's mystical message. These variations affect the reception of the poem across linguistic and cultural boundaries, influencing how global readers engage with the spiritual and philosophical dimensions of Punjabi Sufi poetry. In sum, the act of translating "*Bullah Ki Jaana Main Kaun*" is not merely a linguistic exercise but a cultural and interpretive one. Future research may benefit from including reader response studies to explore how different audiences interpret these translations, as well as expanding the scope to include comparative translations in other global languages. Ultimately, the challenge remains to preserve the poetic, spiritual, and cultural essence of Bulleh Shah's voice one that resists boundaries and continues to resonate across time and tongues.

Limitations & Delimitations

Limitations

Subjectivity in Translation: Since poetic translation involves interpretation, the analysis may be influenced by subjective perspectives on linguistic fidelity and cultural adaptation.

Availability of Source Material: Limited access to translator notes or contextual insights behind each translation choice may restrict deeper analysis.

Scope of Comparative Analysis: Only three translations are examined, which may not fully represent the diversity of interpretative approaches.

Delimitations

Focus on Three Translations: This study specifically compares Raza Rumi, Rabbi Sher Gill, and Christopher Shackle's versions, rather than expanding to additional translations.

Theoretical Framework: The analysis is centered on Eugene Nida's formal and dynamic equivalence model, excluding other translation theories.

Scope of Cultural Analysis: While cultural adaptation is considered, the study does not extend to the broader historical or social contexts influencing translation choices.

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