Policy Journal of Social Science Review

Online ISSN 3006-4635

Print ISSN 3006-4627

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Postcolonial Negotiations of Language: Analyzing Appropriation Techniques in *Blasphemy*

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Abstract

The twentieth century witnessed intense political ruptures as colonized nations sought independence, geographically, culturally, and intellectually from European empires. Language, as one of the most enduring colonial legacies, remained central to these struggles. This study analyzes Blasphemy (1998) by Pakistani writer Tehmina Durrani as a significant postcolonial text that tactically appropriates English to articulate local culture, indigenous sensibilities, and socio-religious experiences. Drawing on key postcolonial theorists such as Ashcroft, Tiffin, Griffiths, Kachru, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Fanon, and Said, the study identifies and interprets Durrani's use of glossing, syntactic fusion, untranslated words, code-switching, cultural redefinition, translation equivalence, indigenous metonymy, and an additional strategy local title. Findings reveal that these strategies allow Durrani to preserve culturally embedded meanings that would otherwise be lost in translation, thereby resisting linguistic homogenization and asserting cultural specificity. The study contributes to scholarship on South Asian postcolonial writing by demonstrating how language appropriation functions as an act of cultural representation, resistance, and reclamation.

Keywords: Postcolonial Literature, Language Appropriation, Linguistic Homogenization, Cultural Representation, Reclamation

Article Details:

Received on 27 Oct 2025
Accepted on 29 Nov 2025
Published on 02 Dec 2025

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Policy Journal of Social Science Review

Online ISSN 3006-4635

Print ISSN 3006-4627

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

Introduction

The turbulent landscape of the twentieth century witnessed the gradual dissolution of European empires, accompanied by ideological, cultural, and linguistic negotiations. Decolonization not only reconfigured geopolitical boundaries but also led to vigorous attempts to redefine national identities, intellectual frameworks, and cultural meanings. McLeod (2010) identifies three broad phases of decolonization, placing Pakistan's emergence in the third phase, immediately following World War II. Alongside territorial independence, colonized nations sought "intellectual decolonization" (McLeod, p.10), attempting to reclaim languages, histories, and cultural spaces previously controlled through what Said (1978) called the representational power of Orientalist discourse.

A persistent debate within postcolonial studies concerns the use of English by formerly colonized societies. Writers and critics have questioned whether English can authentically convey indigenous experience or whether its use reinforces colonial hierarchies. Despite these contestations, many postcolonial writers have creatively reshaped English, indigenizing it through what Ashcroft et al. (2002) term *language appropriation*. This study positions Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* within this tradition.

Literature Review

Postcolonial literature has long resisted the notion of a universal, culturally neutral English literary canon. Barry (2009) notes that postcolonial criticism challenges the liberal humanist idea of "universality" for neglecting cultural and regional specificities. Fanon (1961), in *The Wretched of the Earth*, urged newly independent nations to retrieve their precolonial cultural traditions as a counter-narrative to colonial devaluation. Said (1978), through *Orientalism*, exposed Western attempts to classify and essentialize the "Orient," thereby establishing Europe as intellectually and morally superior.

Nagy-Zakmy (2007) believes that language choice is one of the important determiners in postcolonial writing. Within this critical landscape, language emerges as a central concern. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) advocates abandoning English altogether to "decolonize the mind," arguing that a colonizer's language cannot faithfully carry indigenous worldviews. Achebe (1975), however, defends retaining English but reshaping it, stating that it "must fashion out an English which is at once universal and able to carry [our] peculiar experience."

Kachru (1998) examines English specifically in Asian contexts, arguing that its internationalization necessarily produces localized varieties, each with distinct cultural, aesthetic, and communicative functions. From this perspective, postcolonial Englishes are not deviations but legitimate linguistic systems. Awan and Ali (2012) provide a model for analyzing language appropriation in South Asian fiction. Their study of Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* identifies nine strategies – glossing, syntactic fusion, code-switching, untranslated words, lexical innovation, translation equivalence, and cultural redefinition inter-language, rhetorical contextual and functional styles – seven of which appear in the text. This study adapts their framework and extends it to *Blasphemy*, revealing one additional category.

Scholarly engagement with Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* primarily revolves around three interconnected concerns: patriarchy and female subjugation, religion and clerical hypocrisy, and the stylistic and linguistic strategies employed to represent local culture and voice. Feminist readings interpret *Blasphemy* as a critical examination of patriarchal power structures and the religious frameworks that sustain the oppression of women. Ayoub et al. (2022) argue that Durrani exposes both institutional and familial mechanisms that limit women's agency, highlighting how religious rhetoric is often instrumentalized to control female bodies and restrict personal choices.

Policy Journal of Social Science Review

Online ISSN 3006-4635

Print ISSN 3006-4627

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

A significant strand of research focuses on Durrani's stylistic and narrative techniques. Scholars employing feminist stylistics (Mills, 1995), corpus-based methods, and close textual analysis have explored how fragmentation, cataloguing, and catalogic lexicons operate as devices that construct gendered meaning while resisting conventional narrative authority. These studies emphasize how choices in language—such as the use of local terms, code-switching, untranslated items, and cataloguing—function both ideologically and aesthetically to highlight cultural difference and subaltern voice (JALT Pakistan, 2023).

Methodologically, studies of *Blasphemy* employ feminist close reading, stylistics, corpus-based quantitative analysis, and theoretical approaches informed by Butlerian performativity, Gramscian hegemony, and Spivakian subalternity. Despite frequent commentary on Durrani's use of local vocabulary and speech patterns, relatively few studies systematically examine language appropriation or the mechanisms of localizing English—such as glossing, syntactic fusion, and untranslated terms—as deliberate postcolonial strategies. This lacuna presents a clear opportunity for research that bridges stylistic description with postcolonial theory.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the language appropriation strategies used by Tehmina Durrani in *Blasphemy*.
2. To analyze how these strategies preserve cultural specificity and resist homogenizing tendencies of English.
3. To assess the role of language appropriation in representing Pakistani socio-religious and cultural contexts.

Research Questions

1. What language appropriation techniques are employed in *Blasphemy*?
2. How do these techniques help convey cultural meanings that may otherwise be lost in standard English?
3. What does Durrani's linguistic strategy reveal about postcolonial identity formation and cultural resistance?

Methodology

Following the underpinnings of Postcolonial theory, the study employs qualitative textual analysis. Using Awan and Ali's (2012) framework, supplemented by the theoretical perspectives of Ashcroft et al. (2002) and Kachru (1998), the researcher closely examined *Blasphemy* to identify linguistic patterns that reflect cultural indigenization. The examples provided by Durrani were categorized according to their linguistic function and cultural purpose.

Analysis

This section highlights the language appropriation techniques used in Blasphemy.

1. Glossing

Glossing is a technique used to add explanation in the English language for a local word. The purpose behind glossing may be to give a clearer understanding of the local word to the foreign readers. For instance, in *Blasphemy*, the narrator explains the local word "Cheel" by adding a noun in apposition, "the hawk" (Durrani, p.16). Durrani (1998) associates hawk-like characteristics with a character in the novel. Despite her using "Cheel" as a proper noun, she prefers an English equivalent for her reader to highlight the symbolic meanings she associates with the character. A similar example is, "korah watta, a hard stone" (Durrani, p.17). In this example indigestible and tasteless food is compared to a hard stone metaphorically, but the writer uses local metaphor and at the same time its English equivalent to address sensibilities of two different communities of readers. Likewise, explanation of "Ubton" as "a mixture of

Policy Journal of Social Science Review
Online ISSN 3006-4635
Print ISSN 3006-4627
Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

crushed almonds, turmeric powder, rose water and milk" (Durrani, p.28) is yet another example of glossing.

2. Syntactic Fusion

Postcolonial writers also use syntactic fusion to integrate the syntax of the local language with English language. Durrani (1998) also uses syntactic fusion in *Blasphemy*.

2.1. Number

It is quite common practice among the postcolonial writers to apply syntactic fusion in singular and plurals. These writers take the base word from their own language and apply the rules of English language to form plurals. For instance, in Blasphemy, the writer uses, "Degs (p. 17), chappatis (17), charpais (41) Marasans (41)", etc. to form plurals. The author uses the suffix 's', a basic rule in English language, to form plurals of the local words.

2.2. Modifiers

Postcolonial writers also use combination of English adjectives with local nouns. Durrani (1998) also uses this technique and uses English adjectives with Urdu nouns. Some examples include, "sweet zarda" (p.18), "bamboo chik" (p.22), "white shuttlecock burqa" (p.9), "red duppata" (p.29), and "cotton chooridar pyjama" (p.33). Another pattern that the novel reveals is using Urdu adjectives with English nouns. For example, the combinations like, "zafran water" (p.65), "khaas breakfast" (p.46), and "aam trays" (p.46) reflect the syntactic fusion.

2.3. Possessives

Another pattern of syntactic fusion that Durrani (1998) uses is making possessive by applying the English language rules. another syntactic formula of English language to form possessives. The author uses apostrophe-s rule with two Urdu nouns to show possession. For example, "Pir's mureed" (p.24). "Mureed" an Urdu word is a devotee of a "Pir", a religious guide. Being a staunch follower, mureed becomes possession of a Pir. The writer prefers using apostrophe-s rule to achieve the sense of possession which is otherwise not possible in Urdu expression "Pir ka mureed".

3. Code-Switching

Code-switching is another frequently used technique that postcolonial writers use in their writings. Durrani (1998) also uses code-switching to keep the cultural connotation intact. The patterns of code-switching found in her work have two dimensions, one, inter-sentential and second, sentential. For instance, "Chor babul ka ghar mohe pi k nagar ajj jana parah were words that overwhelmed me" (p.35). This construction shows that the writer uses the noun clause in Urdu language and the predicate in English language. So, this is an appropriate example of inter-sentential code-switching. Contrary to this construction, sometimes the writer composes whole sentence in Urdu language. For example, in this sentence, "Assi parhe hoe nai, pur assi karhey hoi han" (p.151), the writer prefers sentential code-switching. Therefore, the postcolonial writers use two types of code-switching.

4. Un-translated Words

Unlike glossing, the postcolonial writers sometimes avoid translating the local cultural and religious terms to retain their depth and connotation. In Blasphemy, Durrani (1998) also uses leaves certain terms un-translated.

4.1. Cultural Terms

To retain cultural idiosyncrasy, the writer uses cultural terms without glossing or translating. For instance, the word, "baraat" (Durrani, p.32) has a specific cultural connotation quite different from the "procession" of English. Many rituals – gathering of relatives, "sehra-bandi", departure towards the bride's place, eagerly waiting friends and family member of the bride, etc. – are associated with this word, which may not be communicated by any specific word in

Policy Journal of Social Science Review

Online ISSN 3006-4635

Print ISSN 3006-4627

Vol. 3 No. 12 (2025)

English language. For instance, the narrator says, "Just before the baraat's arrival, I was bathed and perfumed" (p.32). This preparation is typical of the local culture. So, the writer prefers to retain its essence. The other word that the writer uses un-glossed are, "Maiyon", "dholki" (p.28), "bhangra", "dhol" (p.33) etc. The effect that the writer seems to achieve is otherwise not attainable by using the word, "wedding".

4.2. Religious Terms

Urdu is largely influenced by Arabic language and most of terms related to religion are directly borrowed from Arabic. Islamic practices and beliefs are largely different from Christianity, a religion of most of the English-speaking people. So, the concepts and beliefs associated with Islam may not exactly be translatable into English language. Probably due to this reason, Durrani (1998) uses religious terms un-translated to retain their conceptual value, since a majority of the people living in Pakistan follows Islam as a religion. The belief system associated with words such as, "sehri" and "aftari" (p.83) is typically connected with "Ramazan". English language has the word "fasting" for "Roza", but the connotation of both words is different, as "sheri" and "aftari" have specific decorum quite unique to Islamic belief system. Similarly, the concept of "halal" and "haram" is also different in Islamic society. The writer also prefers using these terms to English terms. For instance, in the sentence, "Yathimiri is jaiz for my father, I am not. She can be halal, for he can marry her. I can only be haram" (Durrani, p.126), the writer uses "halal" and "haram" as stated in Islamic jurisprudence, not in English law.

There are also other examples that reflect cultural color. The words like, "dastarbandi" p.87) and "dum" (p.98) may be limited in meaning if translated into English language. "dastarbandi" is not merely placing a turban on the head of a scholar, rather, it is an honor that a religious scholar receives after completing his education. If "dastarbandi" is replaced with "wearing turban" of English language, it may not convey the essence to that covetous "dastar". Similarly, the word, "dum" also needs explanation if glossed in English. The writer may have to write multiple sentences to explain the concept related to these words. So, Durrani (1998) prefers to retain cultural essence by using the local words.

5. Translation Equivalence

1. Translation equivalence is another useful technique that postcolonial writers use in their writings. This technique helps them retain cultural essence besides promoting nationalistic feelings. *Blasphemy* also includes several instances of translation equivalence. For example, the narrator says, "Mother has put her seal on my fate" (p.26). This sentence shows how mothers in Pakistan are influential to make their daughters passive and decide future for them. In Urdu language the expression, "kismat pe mohor lagana" is a common metaphor used for a situation in which someone else decides matters for someone else. Another example of translation equivalence is, "... I'll pull your tongue out with chimta" (p.173). The Urdu expression, "main chimtey se tumhari zuban khench longa" is equivalent to the above-mentioned translation. This expression is used in a state of anger. The writer translates it to show anger the way it is expressed in the local language.

6. Cultural Redefinition

Another idiosyncrasy of a culture is the words associated with relationships. Postcolonial writers use these words the way they are used in their local languages. In the novel, *Blasphemy*, Durrani (1998) uses the local words used to address relations. For example, maids in the novel use "Bibiji" for mistress of the house. This is reflected in the sentence, "Bibiji, you should know the people of your ilaaka better" (p.85). Some other words that the writer uses are, "Bhai" (p.23), "Ma" (p.23), "apa" (p.79) and "Amma" (p.185).

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Online ISSN 3006-4635

Print ISSN 3006-4627

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7. Indigenous Metonymy

Postcolonial writers also use indigenous metonyms. Durrani (1998) uses multiple metonyms to elaborate the complex systems entrenched in apparently harmless entities. The most powerful indigenous metonymy that she uses is the shrine in possession of a Pir. Through this technique, the writer unfolds the crooked nexus of religious shrines with feudal system. The writer reimagines the shrine as a metonym for feudalism and moral corruption as opposite to previously held notion of shrine as a religious and spiritual shelter.

8. Local Titles

In Pakistan some relations are ranked so high that their names are not called as a symbol of respect. For example, married women are expected not to call their husbands with names (with few exceptions in cities or elite culture). In *Blasphemy*, for instance, "Pir sain" is a title and not a proper noun, but the writer uses it as a proper noun as 'pirs' are not usually called through their name, as it may be considered disrespect calling their names. The writer retains this unique aspect of her culture and uses the local titles.

The language appropriation in the novel does not exemplify "lexical innovations" and "indigenous discourse markers", but it adds to the already existing techniques by using local titles as proper nouns to show how in Pakistan some titles are used more frequently as replacement of names.

Conclusion

Thus, language appropriation is one of the useful techniques that postcolonial writers use for various reasons. The foremost among them is a contest with universal claims of English language. English language, according to many thinkers, such as Achebe (1975), wa Thiong'o (1986), etc., is not sufficient to explain all cultures of the world. More importantly, representation of a culture whose values are different from English values through English language may restrict the essence of those values. Apart from this, postcolonial writer may highlight the aftereffects of colonization on the colonies once occupied by the imperialist. For instance, *Blasphemy* highlights religious exploitation and class difference, which is the result of colonial interaction. Manifestation of cultural diversity is probably another reason for including local values and terms in cultural products like novels. Above all, plurality, hybridity, and otherness reflect their perspective on considering an individual as part of a unique (Barry, 2009).So, language appropriation is one of the techniques used in conjunction with other postcolonial frameworks that postcolonial writers practice to reclaim diversity and identity of their culture(Burney, 2012).

The research finds that Durrani (1998), like other postcolonial writers, uses language appropriation techniques stated by Ashcroft, Griffeths, & Tiffen (2002) and Kachru (1998), and validated by Awan and Ali (2012). The study also finds that the writer adds to the already existing techniques by introducing local titles as proper nouns.

The study concludes that postcolonial writers appropriate language to epitomize and reclaim their culture. They retain cultural meaning by using the indigenous terms that may not exactly be translated into another language; hence representing and maintaining the essence of culture.

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