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## Research Paper

### A Comparative Study of *The Kite Runner* and its Persian Machine and Human Renderings: Culture-specific items in focus

Homa Fadaei, M.A. Department of English, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

[fadaeihoma@gmail.com](mailto:fadaeihoma@gmail.com)

Neda Fatehi Rad\*, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

[Nedafatehi@yahoo.com](mailto:Nedafatehi@yahoo.com)

#### Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the Persian human and machine (Google) renderings of *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini, through comparing and contrasting culture specific items (CSI) as well as the exploited translation strategies. Thus, the relevant problematic forms of the cultural differences were identified and the procedures suggested by Newmark (1988) were examined to see how they fit into the translation of cultural differences in English and Persian. The results of this qualitative study revealed that Literal Translation, Naturalization and Transposition strategies were used most frequently in both human and machine translations. However, machine translation could not present a comprehensible translation due to overuse of these strategies (75%). It was also revealed that the spirit of source text was kept intact in both renderings due to closeness of Iranian and Afghan cultures. It was further discovered that the human translated version carried the real beauty and creativities of the original work. In fact, the terms that were transformed and localized were able to carry over the flavor of the author's work. Finally, it was shown that the regretful theme of the source text was reserved to a great extent in the human rendering of the novel, while machine translation failed to get it. Generally-speaking, based on the findings of this study, culture-specific terms make it difficult for machines to achieve complete word-for-word equivalence, and at the same time, human translator must have a broad knowledge of the literature and traditions of both the source and target languages to come up with a faithful translation in terms of both form and content.

**Keywords:** *Culture-specific items, machine translation, human translation*



## Introduction

As humanity developed, translation has always played a crucial role in inter-lingual communication by allowing for the sharing of knowledge and culture between different languages. With the revolution of technology in the age of globalization, many countries tend to maximize the use of technology in their educational systems (Bagheri Masoudzade et al., 2014). In today's technological era, individuals should know how to utilize and apply technology applications in pedagogy concepts and content of different subjects for various educational purposes (Fatehi Rad, 2012). However, advances in technology have changed the way translation is getting done. This diffusion of information can back to the ancient world to industrial age and into the global village of today, where technological advances have determined the perception of translation and the advent of English as the lingua franca. It can easily lead people to believe that everything they know, and indeed everything worth knowing, somehow exists in one language.

With the explosion of digital content and technologies (O'Reilly, 2005), traditional human translation simply cannot keep up the pace with the translation needs of today and tomorrow.

Recognizing the need to translate their products in order to be successful on international markets, software companies of the 1990s, and several other technology-related industries, sought a way to increase productivity in translation and maintain consistency of their linguistic data across a growing number of languages and countries (Esselink, 2000). As a result of this need and other factors such as the increased availability and affordability of computing power and the Internet, computer-assisted translation (CAT) tools provided the first major technological shift in the present-day translation industry with their commercial debut in the 1990s. Generally, it is called machine translation which is a translation memory (TM), a software program that stores a translator's translated text alongside its original source text, so that these pairs can later be reused in full or in part when the translator is tasked with translating texts of a similar linguistic composition.

While translation studies as an area of research have undergone many paradigm shifts (Snell-Hornby, 2006), it has been slow to adopt such translation technologies within its mainstream, that many scholars believed that using technology in translation has discipline in its own right (Alcina, 2008). Therefore, culture is an issue which should be considered during the translation process, while machine translator might not be as sensitive as human translator to the culture of the target language. Since the concept of culture is essential to understand the implications for literary translation and culture-specific items in translation, many translation theorists have dealt with the definition of culture. In 1984 Larson defined culture as "a complex of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules which a group of people share" (Larson 1984, p.431). He noted that the translator needs to understand beliefs, attitudes, values, and the rules of the SL audience in order to adequately understand the ST and adequately translate it for people who have a different set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and rules. In 1998, Newmark remarked that culture is "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression" (Newmark 1998, p. 94). Here, he asserted that each language group has its own culturally specific features.

According to Nida and Taber (1982) believed that cultural translation is a translation in which the content of the message is changed to conform to the receptor culture. In 1964, Nida listed four basic factors which make communication possible and, therefore, make possible the translation of a message from one language and culture to another. These are: 1) the similarity of mental processes of all people, 2) similarity of somatic reactions (similar physical responses to

emotional stimulus), 3) the range of common cultural experience, and 4) the capacity for adjustment to the behavioral patterns of others (Nida 1964, pp. 53-55). Therefore, each society interprets a message in terms of its own culture.

The present study analyzed the English-to-Persian translation approaches to rendering cultural words in *The Kite Runner*; human translation and machine translation; in order to find the level of comprehensibility in two mentioned methods of translation and then to find the best ways and methods to translate cultural words. *The Kite Runner* is the first novel by Afghan-American author Khalid Hosseini. It was published in 2003 and it got very popular in many countries. The cultural and social similarities in Iran and Afghanistan, makes this novel very famous and popular in Iran. So, there are several translations of this book in Iran and because of these two versions of translation of this book was chosen as the corpus of this study.

Quality issues are the biggest problems people may encounter when using machine translation. No computer software is able to process the context in which a language is being used and thus to which the translation needs to occur. It is impossible for a computer program to understand context, especially cultural situations (Esselink, 2000). According to Snell-Hornby (2006), humans on the other hand are able to understand language in the context it is used as they understand emotions, non-verbal communication and culture, which all have an effect on the context of language as it is used. Each country has its own culture which in turn has its own values and norms that are followed. The values and norms of each culture influence the way people within that culture communicate with each other. Without having experience with the culture, it is impossible to know which values and norms to be sensitive to when communicating. Machine translation cannot be sensitive to cultures' values or norms. This can cause problems by delivering the wrong message. This could potentially cause many problems which can be very costly. To determine this problem, the researcher regarded Newmark's (1988) translation strategies model in translating culture-specific items to find out how culture-specific items (CSIs) were translated by two human translators and a machine translator.

The present study had three objectives. So, the following research questions were addressed:

Q1. What were the most frequently-used strategies in the human and machine Persian translations of *The Kite Runner* for rendering culture-specific terms?

Q. How successfully did the translators and machine translation manage to render culture-specific elements of the source text?

This study is significant since it reveals that the more a human translator is aware of complexities of differences between cultures, the better h/she will translate. Cultural knowledge and cultural differences are very important for the translator training which can be ignored by machine translation services (Esselink, 2000). Thus, it is essential that the translators know that while traditionally words and phrases were the concerns, today "untranslatable" cultural-bound words and phrases are important issues. In view of this, the findings of the present study are significant as they may contribute to a better understanding of a controversial text whose contents are more or less transparent, and accordingly to give translators a deeper insight towards subtle persuasive strategies which place readers in specific positions. Among the mentioned important issues involved in translation, the present study focused specifically on translation of the cultural concepts and words which are related to the belief and customs of ST because even proficient translators may have problem in dealing with these elements, so the current study can be useful for professional translators, students of English Translator Training and those who are interested in the area of translation studies.

### Method

The current study was a qualitative research to examine the human and machine Persian translations of Khalid Hosseini's *The kite runner* based on Newmark (1988)'s model. The *Kite Runner* is the first novel by Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. It was published in 2003 by Riverhead Books, and it tells the story of Amir, a young boy from the Wazir Akbar Khan district of Kabul, whose closest friend is Hassan, his half-brother. The story is set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of Afghanistan's monarchy through the Soviet military intervention, the exodus of refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the rise of the Taliban regime. For the purpose of the current study and in order to yield reliable results, 100 pages of this book was gone under the investigation. Also, it must be pointed out that the unit of analysis were word (s), phrase(s) and sentences. Running parallel to the purpose of this study (analyzing culture-specific items in translation). The corpus of this study included 100 pages of *The Kite Runner* novel by Khalid Hosseini (2003) and two Persian translations of this book by Ghabrayei (2003) and Ganji-Soleymanzadeh (2004). Data collection procedures for this study were as follows: (a) Extracting the cultural terms randomly from 100 pages of the ST "*Kite Runner*" in accordance with the working definition of cultural terms by Newmark (1988). The cultural terms were selected based on their forms and nature of appearance from 100 pages of "*Kite Runner*". 100 pages were thoroughly searched and the cultural terms were extracted. Therefore, the cultural terms were extracted based on their appearance. (b) Finding out the translation of the extracted English cultural terms in the Persian version of the books rendered by Ghabraei (2003) and Ganji-Soleymanzadeh (2004). (c) Having Google translate to render the chosen cultural items, then comparing and contrasting them with human translation.

The extracted texts and the found CSIs were analyzed regarding Newmark's (1988) proposed strategies for translating cultural terms. To analyze the data, two phases were followed; first some CSIs in the source text were detected. Second, the translations of them by human translators in the target text were found. Then, they were compared and contrasted regarding the framework of study. Next, the frequency of the used strategies was found. In the next phase the same extracted texts were translated in the Google translation service and the mentioned procedure was followed. When the analysis of data was completed, two tables were drawn in order to find the frequency of used strategies in both human and machine translations. Then, they were compared and contrasted. Finally, two human translators were compared in terms of using translation strategies and afterward they were compared with human translation.

### Results

In order to analyze the obtained data, two human and one machine translation of the chosen book, '*The Kite runner*', was investigated in order to find the culture-specific items and to compare the used strategies by each translator. Therefore, to do this purpose, human translator which has been shown by HT1 is Ganji-Soleymanzadeh (2004) and the second human translator which has been shown by HT2 is Ghabrayei (2003) and machine translation which is Google translate service has been shown by MT. The results of the study are presented with respect to the research questions. Therefore, to answer research question one which is; 1. What strategies did the translators and machine translation use in rendering culture-specific elements of the source text?

It should be mentioned that Ganji-Soleymanzadeh were chosen as HT1 and after examining the extracted examples from their translation the following results were obtained. They used Modulation strategy as the most frequent used one (12) which followed by Through translation



(11), Recognized translation (4), Cultural equivalence (4), Transposition (3), and finally Descriptive equivalence (2), Paraphrase (2) and Synonym (2) with the same frequency. (Table and Figure 1) However, Ghabrayei was chosen as HT2 and after examining the extracted examples from his translation the following results were obtained. He used Through translation strategy as the most frequent used one (10) which followed by Modulation (9), Recognized translation (6), Synonym (4), Naturalization (4), Transposition (4) Descriptive equivalence (3), Cultural equivalence (3), Functional equivalence and Paraphrase (1). (Table and Fig. 2)

It should be mentioned that Ganji-Soleymanzadeh were chosen as HT1 and after examining the extracted examples from their translation the following results were obtained. They used Through Translation strategy as the most frequent used one (17) which followed by Naturalization (15), Transposition (14), Descriptive equivalence and Modulation (10) , Cultural equivalence(5), Couplet (4), Paraphrase (2) and Synonym, Recognized translation and Componential analysis (each one 1) with the same frequency. (Table and Fig. 1)

However, Ghabrayei was chosen as HT2 and after examining the extracted examples from his translation the following results were obtained. He used Transposition as the most frequent used one (20) which followed by Naturalization (17), Modulation (9), Descriptive equivalence (8) , Through translation (7), Cultural equivalence(6), Couplet (4), Synonymy (3), Functional equivalent (2), Recognized translation (2) and Paraphrase and Componential analysis (0) (Table and Fig. 2)

Therefore, Through translation which is the literal translation of common collocations, names of organizations and components of compounds was the most frequent used translation by Human translator one and Machine translation while human translator two used Transposition which involves a change in the grammar from SL to TL, e.g., (i) change from singular to plural; (ii) when a specific SL structure does not exist in the TL, a change is required; (iii) change of an SL verb to a TL word, change of an SL noun group to a TL noun, and so forth the most.

Naturalization which conforms the SL word first to the normal pronunciation, then, to the normal morphology of the TL was used by both human translator a lot.

Modulation which is occurs when the translator reproduces the message of the original text in the TL text in accordance with the current norms of the TL, because, the SL and the TL may be different in perspective was used with the same occurrence by both human translators.

Besides, descriptive equivalence which in which the meaning of the word is explained in several words was used a lot. Other strategies were used less than 5 times.

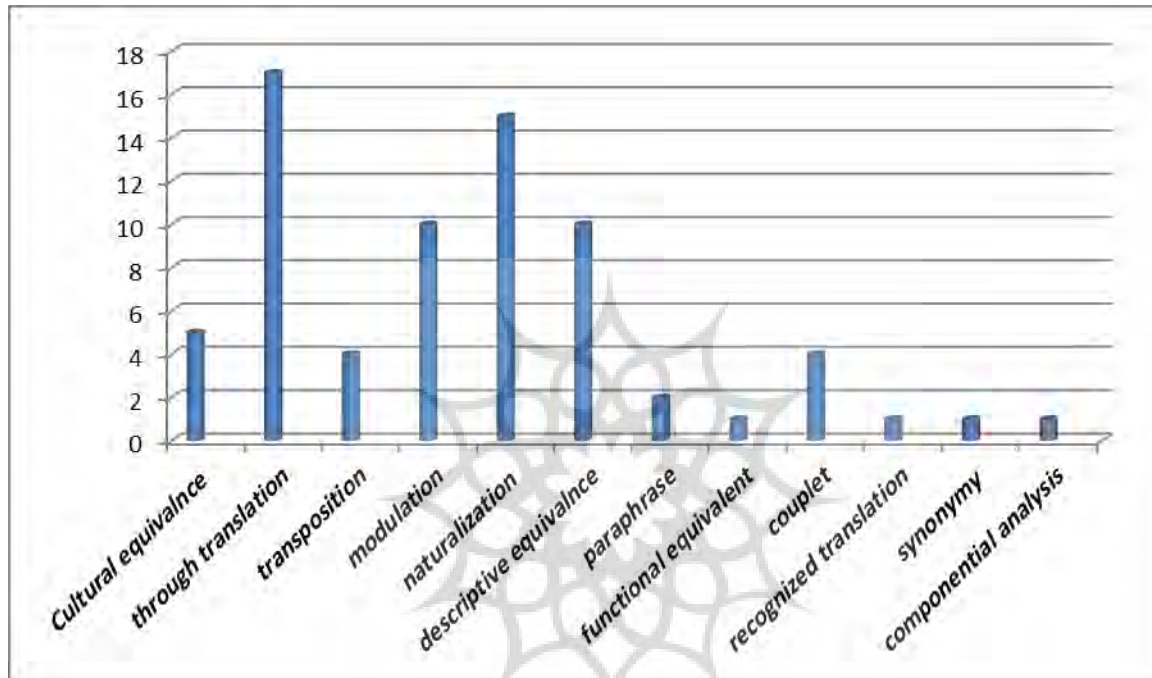
**Table 1**

*The frequency and percentage of strategies used by Ganji-Soleymanzadeh (HT1)*

Strategies	Cultural equivalence	Through translation	Transposition	Modulation	Naturalization	Descriptive equivalence	Paraphrase	Functional equivalent	couplet	Recognized translation	Synonymy	Componential analysis	Total
Frequency	5	17	14	10	15	10	2	1	4	1	1	1	81

<b>Perc entag e</b>	<b>6.17%</b>	<b>20.98 %%</b>	<b>17. 28 %</b>	<b>12. 34 %</b>	<b>18. 51 %</b>	<b>12.3 4%</b>	<b>2. 4 6 %</b>	<b>1.23 %</b>	<b>4. 9 3 %</b>	<b>1.23 %</b>	<b>1.23 %</b>	<b>1.23 %</b>	<b>10 0 %</b>
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**Figure 1**  
The frequency and percentage of strategies used by HT1



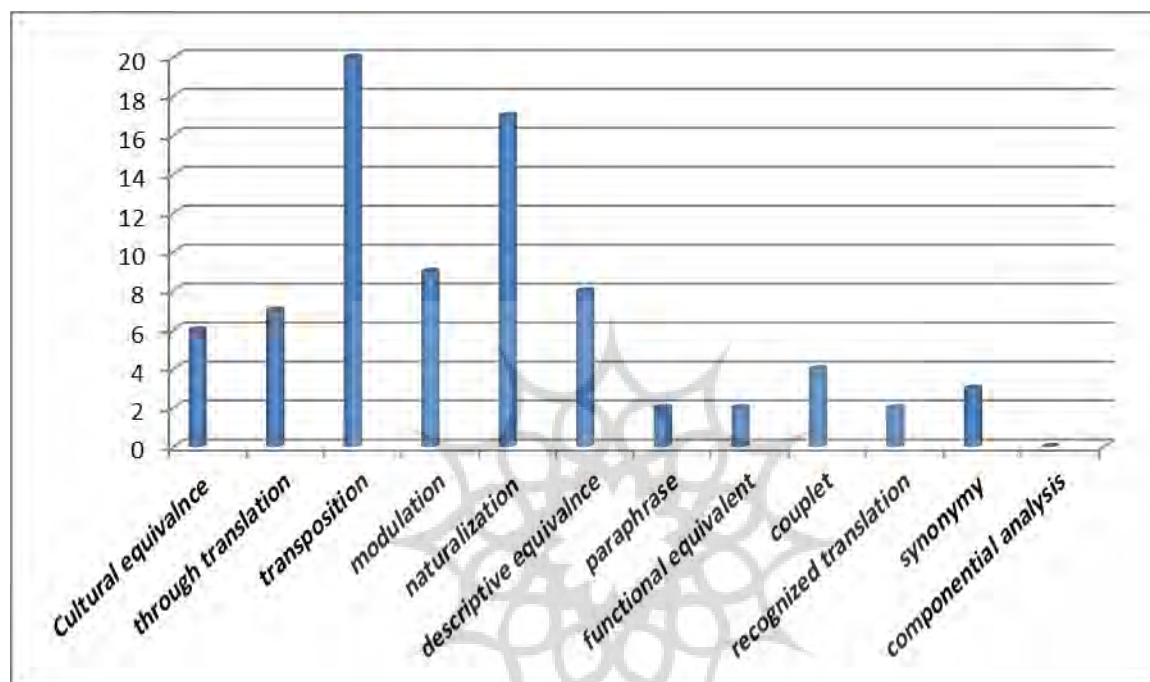
**Table 2**  
The frequency and percentage of strategies used by Ghabrayei (HT2)

<b>Strat egies</b>	<b>Cultural equivalence</b>	<b>Through translation</b>	<b>Transposition</b>	<b>Modulation</b>	<b>Naturalization</b>	<b>Descriptive equivalence</b>	<b>Paraphrase</b>	<b>Functional equivalent</b>	<b>couplet</b>	<b>Recognized translation</b>	<b>Synonymy</b>	<b>Componential analysis</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Freq uenc y</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>80</b>

<b>Perc enta ge</b>	<b>7.5%</b>	<b>8.75 %%</b>	<b>25 %</b>	<b>11. 25 %</b>	<b>21 .2 5 %</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>0 %</b>	<b>2.5 %</b>	<b>5 %</b>	<b>2.5 %</b>	<b>3.7 5 %</b>	<b>0%</b>	<b>100 %</b>
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**Figure 2**

The frequency and percentage of strategies used by Ghabrayei (HT2)



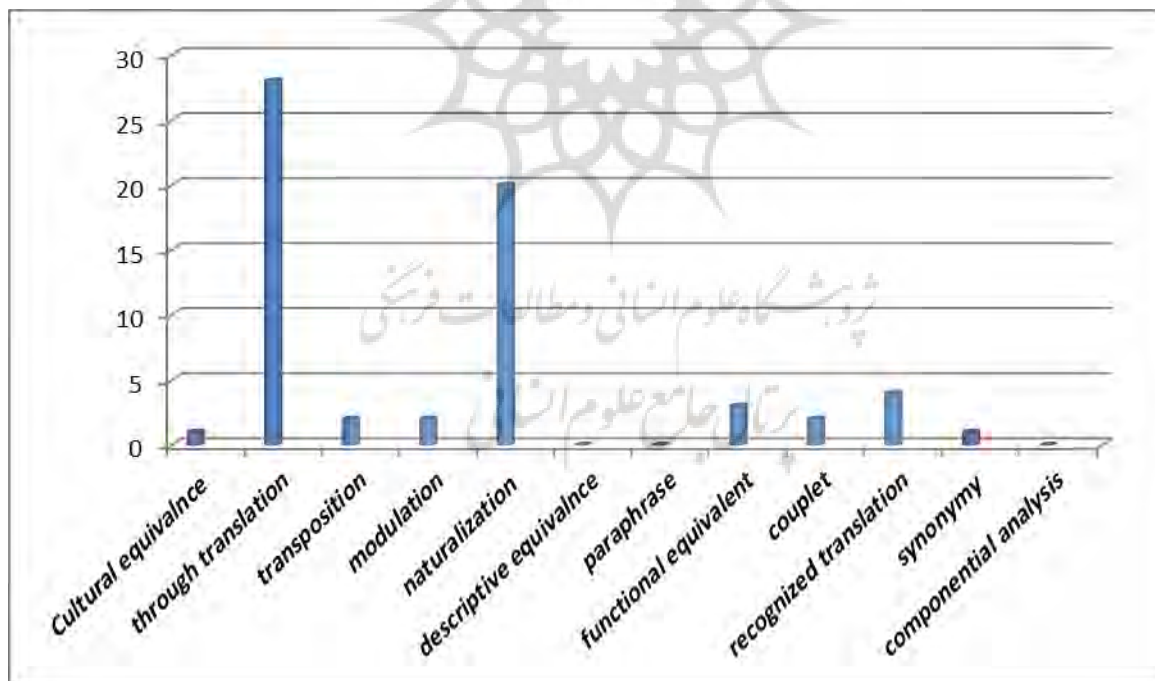
It should be mentioned that HT1 used 80 strategies to translate culture-specific items and HT2 used 81 strategies to translate them. HT1 used Through translation 18 times as the highest used one while Naturalization with 11 times occurrence was the second one. However, Componential, Synonymy, Recognized and Functional were the lowest.

It should be noted that in case of Machine translation; 63 strategies were used to translated Culture-specific items while most of the chosen examples were translated literally and word by word or according to Newmark by using Through translation strategy. Three other strategies which were used by MT as well were Naturalization, Recognized translation and Transposition. However, since Through translation and Naturalization were used 75%, the final translation was not comprehensible enough and it cannot be called as a successful translation.

Therefore, machine translation and HT1 were to some extent similar in using the highest strategies which were Through translation and Naturalization but HT2 used them 32% and MT used them 75%. However, MT and HT2 were different in applying the Strategies as HT2 used Transposition as the highest used strategy but MT used Through translation and Naturalization as the highest (Table and Fig. 3)

**Table 3***The frequency and percentage of strategies used by MT*

Strategies	Cultural equivalence	Through translation	Transposition	Modulation	Naturalization	Descriptive equivalence	Paraphrase	Functional equivalent	Couplet	Recognized translation	Synonymy	Componential analysis	Total
Frequency	1	28	2	2	20	0	0	3	2	4	1	0	63
Percentage	1.58%	44.44%	3.17%	3.17%	31.74%	0%	0%	4.76%	3.17%	6.34%	1.58%	0%	100%

**Figure 3***The frequency and percentage of strategies used by MT*

This study examined culture-specific items in the Persian translation of ‘The kite runner’ by machine and human translation to determine which strategies were use most frequently and what the difference between them is. Once culture-specific items were collected and paired with their English translations, the occurrence of each strategy was tabulated to determine its



frequency. The conclusions drawn based on the analysis of the corpus of study. The translator should achieve the same effect on the reader of the target text as the source text has on the source reader. The translated text must convey both literal (primary meaning) and possibly the same idea or feeling associated with it (connotation or secondary meaning). He or she can achieve this by seeking equivalence. This project examined the use of suggested strategies for translation from English. The evidence suggests, however, that religious, cultural and literary differences make it difficult for the machine translation to achieve complete word-for-word parity and that the translator must have a broad knowledge of the literature and traditions of both the source and target languages.

### Discussion and Conclusion

In general, about 80 instances of culture-specific items as well as their respective translations were studied and significant conclusions were extracted concerning the results. Based upon the descriptive statistics shown above, Literal Translation, Naturalization and Transposition were the most frequently used strategies for translating culture-specific items in both human and machine translations which is in itself the answer to the first research question. Also, the least frequently applied strategy by the two Iranian translators was Compensation and Note equivalence as Iranian and Afghani' culture are close. So, an interesting point was that the two HT and MT under study were somehow similar in the most frequently employed strategies which included Literal Translation. According to the data collected, numbers and frequencies determined, and describing each TT based on Newmark categorization and the answers to the research questions were revealed. It was proved that all the three TTs belonged to cultural translation, demonstrating that since the culture of the source text and target text look like, the foreign elements of the ST were so frequent in the TTs. It is worth noting that both HT and MT have dealt with about more than 60 cultural items. According to the results obtained, it is noticeable that the three translators have tried best to decrease the amount of omitting culture-specific items, but rather to provide additional and explanatory information they have felt necessary to make them clear and comprehensible as much as possible for the Persian readers. Though by no means comprehensive, this study can help novice and future translators to become aware of some useful strategies to cope with the difficulties of translating cultural cases, and to deal with them more efficiently. Also, this study can present the translators with the most appropriate strategies to translate these items, so as not to decrease or spoil their sense and effect in the receptor text.

Online MT can be used for the purpose of learning from school to tertiary level because it has the characteristics of educational technologies that can help students, especially for students who want to pursue a foreign language. MT is commonly used to understand a second language text and express their ideas. MT has been shown to accelerate the translation work and very time saving. MT use in translation actually shortens some steps as used in the human translation. One no longer need to search for words, flipping page after page which is certainly time consuming then write back. Instead, the software can easily translate the content and quality translation results with word choices. In the era of globalization, the dominance of such information is a value added for individuals and the organization. Information can be obtained from a variety of languages throughout the world. With the availability of MT, such information can be obtained easily and cost effective without high investment. On the other hand, if a translation done by a professional translator, translation based on a per page basis would certainly be very costly and compared to the use of MT which involves a very minimal cost. Confidentiality is also one of the characteristics found in the nature of MT-aided translation. MT usage ensures information

translated is protected whereas; the submission of documents which holds sensitive information may risk leakage if given to a human translator. The software in MT has been designed for use in universal fields. MT is very suitable for use in science, literature, language and linguistics, and others whereas; human translation only covers specific areas of expertise. Undoubtedly, MT has many benefits that can help students transfer information into preferred language. It is necessary for them to be more cautious when doing translation work since there are areas that cannot be translated as cultural aspects associated with the accuracy of meaning which cannot be produced by machine translation consistently. One can only obtain information in the form or essence of the draft document and it is not necessarily fully accurate. This is because MT is only capable of conducting literal translation of the words without understanding the actual information in context that may need to be corrected manually later. Another flip side of MT is that it cannot handle ambiguities that exist because it was created under the laws of systematic and formal rules of the language and certainly could not translate words based on experience, emotions, values, and mental outlook compared to human translation. However, online machine translation systems are continuously undergoing development, and the outputs might be improved in the near future to help students' learning more effectively

Besides, it is not always easy for a human translator to translate culture-specific items due to its various meanings, it can deceive a translator in transferring into the receptor language since it is not only has primary meaning. Regarding the above discussion, it is concluded that the Through translation and Naturalization strategies were used most frequently in Persian version of *The kite runner* by two human translators and also machine translation. It is also concluded that the essence of original was not lost in translated version due to closeness of Iranian and Afhani 's cultures . The translated version kept the real beauty and creativities of the original work. The terms that are transformed and localized are able to give an impact of the author's real work and the readers of the target text can get the same flavor as that of original text. The terminologies used in the translated text match the levels of the readers' brain. The regretful theme of the source text is kept to a great extent in the human translated version of the novel too. The findings of this study may help the instructors who teach translation to make the debate of translation studies far away from substituting lexical and grammatical equivalences. It is also effective for researchers and practitioners in translation studies to pay more attention to the culture as a significant aspect of language. The results can be useful for translators in criticizing and evaluating translation, or improving their works to translate books, news, or articles particularly from English to Persian. Furthermore, it helps translation students improve their translation abilities in doing their assignments or in their future careers. The findings of this study would help analysts realize once again that translation is not only a matter of transferring lexical items from one language to another, but a product of a decision-making process undertaken by the agents of the act of translation. Furthermore, analysts would determine the discursive and culturally manipulative structures prevalent in the translated versions by examining the findings of this study.

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