Web of Scholars: Multidimensional Research Journal
ISSN: 2751-7543
Volume 05 Number 03 (2026)
https://journals.innoscie.com/index.php/wos

Article

Poetic Transformation and Spiritual Transliteration: A Study of Connotative Shifts in Sufi Translation Based on The Works of R. A. Nicholson

Qahramonjon A. Ismoilov

1. Associate Professor, PhD on Philological Sciences, Kokand State University, Uzbekistan
* Correspondence: hero-2008@bk.ru

Abstract: This article examines connotative shifts occurring in the translation of Sufi discourse through the works of Reynold Alleyne Nicholson. It explores how poetic transformation and spiritual transliteration mediate mystical concepts and symbolic imagery. The study demonstrates that Sufi terminology embodies culturally embedded meanings that resist complete semantic transfer into English.

Keywords: Sufism, connotative shift, poetic transformation, spiritual transliteration, mystical symbolism, translation studies, cultural specificity, Reynold A. Nicholson, semantic loss, Persian poetry.

Citation: Ismoilov. Q. A. Poetic Transformation and Spiritual Transliteration: A Study of Connotative Shifts in Sufi Translation Based on The Works of R. A. Nicholson. Pioneer: Journal of Advanced Research and Scientific Progress 2026, 5(3), 455-457

Received: 10th Mar 2026
Revised: 21th Apr 2026
Accepted: 08th May 2026
Published: 20th June 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

1. Introduction

Translation has long been recognized as an act of intercultural negotiation rather than a mere process of linguistic substitution. This principle becomes especially significant in the translation of mystical literature, where lexical expressions frequently embody theological assumptions, symbolic traditions, and experiential realities inaccessible to ordinary language. Among the pioneers who confronted these difficulties, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson occupies an exceptional place [1].

Nicholson's engagement with Islamic mysticism extended far beyond philological inquiry. Through The Mystics of Islam (1914), Studies in Islamic Mysticism (1921), A Literary History of the Arabs (1907), his translation of Kashf al-Mahjub (1911), Selected Poems from the Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz (1898), and the monumental edition of Rumi's Mathnawi, he sought to introduce Western readers to the spiritual universe of Sufism [2].

Nevertheless, the transfer of mystical discourse from Arabic and Persian into English inevitably produced semantic transformations. Concepts such as fanāʾ, baqāʾ, wajd, tajallī, and maʿrifa possess connotative dimensions deeply embedded in Islamic spirituality. Similarly, poetic images including wine, tavern, beloved, moth, candle, and rose function as symbolic codes rather than literal descriptions [3].

The present study investigates how Nicholson's translations reveal two complementary mechanisms: poetic transformation and spiritual transliteration. Whereas poetic transformation adapts symbolic imagery into aesthetically intelligible English forms, spiritual transliteration preserves the original metaphysical content by retaining culturally specific expressions. Consequently, the study aims to demonstrate that connotative shifts are not deficiencies but inevitable manifestations of intercultural mediation [4].

2. Materials and Methods

The research adopts descriptive, semantic, comparative, and linguocultural approaches. The corpus comprises Nicholson's principal writings devoted to Islamic

mysticism. Particular attention is given to the translation of technical terminology and symbolic imagery.

A contextual analysis of recurrent mystical expressions was conducted. Lexical items including fanāʾ, baqāʾ, dhikr, wajd, maʿrifa, and tajallī were examined from semantic and cultural perspectives. Symbolic images found in Persian poetry were analyzed through interpretative methods.

Nicholson himself acknowledged the inadequacy of literal equivalence in mystical translation. In The Mystics of Islam, he described fanāʾ as the extinction of individual consciousness in Divine Reality rather than mere destruction (Nicholson, 1914, p. 17). Likewise, in Studies in Islamic Mysticism, he emphasized that mystical experience transcends rational categories (1921, p. 8).

His translation of Kashf al-Mahjub reveals a deliberate preference for transliteration. Instead of replacing key concepts with approximate English equivalents, Nicholson frequently preserved Arabic expressions, recognizing their semantic uniqueness (Nicholson, 1911, p. xiii).

Moreover, the symbolic language of Persian poetry was investigated through examples derived from Rumi and Shams-i Tabriz. Nicholson repeatedly argued that wine and intoxication represent spiritual ecstasy rather than sensual indulgence (Selected Poems from the Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz, p. 22). Thus, symbolic imagery was approached as a repository of collective cultural memory.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

The findings indicate that Nicholson employed two major strategies in translating Sufi discourse. The first strategy may be termed spiritual transliteration. By retaining Arabic expressions, he avoided the reduction of complex mystical meanings. Terms such as fanāʾ and baqāʾ remained semantically richer than their English counterparts "annihilation" and "subsistence." [5]

For instance, Nicholson defines fanāʾ as "the passing away of individual consciousness" rather than physical extinction (The Mystics of Islam, p. 17). Such interpretation preserves the spiritual dimension of the concept [6].

The second strategy involves poetic transformation. In Persian mystical poetry, wine symbolizes Divine Love. Nicholson observed that "the language of earthly passion is constantly employed to describe heavenly realities" (A Literary History of the Arabs, p. 350). Consequently, literal translation would destroy the symbolic framework underlying the text [7].

The image of the moth consumed by the candle exemplifies this phenomenon. Nicholson interpreted the symbol as representing self-sacrifice and annihilation in Divine Love (Selected Poems from the Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz, p. 37). Similar connotative shifts occur in the translation of rose, nightingale, tavern, and cupbearer imagery [8].

His commentary on the Mathnawi further demonstrates that these symbols belong to a centuries-old mystical vocabulary rather than isolated metaphors (The Mathnawi of Jalalu'd-din Rumi, Vol. I, p. 169).

Therefore, semantic transfer in Sufi translation inevitably involves transformation rather than equivalence [9].

Discussion

The present findings reveal that Nicholson's translational practice anticipated numerous principles later formulated within contemporary translation theory. His methodology closely resembles what modern scholars describe as foreignization. Rather than domesticating mystical terminology, Nicholson preferred preserving its cultural distinctiveness [10].

From a linguocultural perspective, transliteration functions as a means of safeguarding spiritual memory. Terms such as dhikr and maʿrifa embody experiential dimensions inaccessible through ordinary vocabulary. Consequently, lexical substitution would entail significant semantic impoverishment [11].

Poetic transformation, however, represents a different mechanism. Symbolic images are not transferred mechanically but reconstructed through aesthetic mediation. Nicholson's renderings demonstrate sensitivity to both poetic form and metaphysical substance [12].

Moreover, connotative shifts should not be interpreted exclusively as losses. In many cases, transformation generates new interpretative possibilities. English readers encounter Sufi imagery through conceptual frameworks unavailable within their native traditions. Thus, translation becomes an act of cultural dialogue rather than linguistic replication [13].

Nicholson repeatedly emphasized that mystical language seeks to express realities beyond ordinary speech (Studies in Islamic Mysticism, p. 8). This explains the prevalence of paradox, symbolism, and ambiguity. Such features challenge conventional notions of equivalence and underscore the creative nature of translation [14].

Accordingly, the concepts of poetic transformation and spiritual transliteration provide a theoretical framework for understanding the movement of mystical meaning across linguistic boundaries [15].

4. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that connotative shifts constitute an intrinsic feature of Sufi translation. Through his extensive engagement with Islamic mysticism, Reynold Alleyne Nicholson developed translational practices that balanced semantic fidelity with cultural authenticity.

His reliance on spiritual transliteration enabled the preservation of metaphysical concepts that resisted direct equivalence, while poetic transformation facilitated the transmission of symbolic imagery into English literary discourse. Consequently, translation emerges not as a process of duplication but as a form of intercultural interpretation.

Nicholson's legacy illustrates that mystical texts demand both philological precision and spiritual sensitivity. The translation of Sufi discourse therefore requires familiarity with theology, symbolism, and cultural memory. Ultimately, the interaction between poetic transformation and spiritual transliteration reveals the profound complexity underlying the transmission of sacred meaning across languages.

REFERENCES

[1] R. A. Nicholson, The Mystics of Islam. London, U.K.: Routledge, 1914.
[2] R. A. Nicholson, Studies in Islamic Mysticism. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1921.
[3] R. A. Nicholson, A Literary History of the Arabs. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1907.
[4] R. A. Nicholson, Selected Poems from the Divan-i Shams-i Tabriz. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1898.
[5] R. A. Nicholson, Trans., Kashf al-Mahjub. London, U.K.: Luzac & Co., 1911.
[6] R. A. Nicholson, Trans., The Mathnawi of Jalalu'd-din Rumi, Vols. I–VIII. London, U.K.: Luzac & Co., 1925–1940.
[7] J. A. Arberry, Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam. London, U.K.: George Allen & Unwin, 1950.
[8] A. Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam. Chapel Hill, NC, USA: University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
[9] W. C. Chittick, The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi. Albany, NY, USA: SUNY Press, 1983.
[10] W. C. Chittick, The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi. Bloomington, IN, USA: World Wisdom, 2005.
[11] S. H. Nasr, Islamic Spirituality: Foundations. New York, NY, USA: Crossroad Publishing, 1987.
[12] S. H. Nasr, Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations. New York, NY, USA: Crossroad Publishing, 1991.
[13] C. Ernst, Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam. Boston, MA, USA: Shambhala Publications, 1997.
[14] F. Attar, The Conference of the Birds, D. L. Pendlebury, Trans. London, U.K.: Penguin Classics, 1984.
[15] Jalal al-Din Rumi, The Essential Rumi, C. Barks, Trans. San Francisco, CA, USA: HarperCollins, 1995.