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## Subtitling For Pakistani Horror Films: A Translation Of Cultural Fears and Taboos In 'Dahlia' And 'Raat'

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### Abstract

Horror films provide a society's mirror to reflect on their various apprehensive concerns or rather what the society holds dearly and fears most. Due to the aforementioned culture and religion, movies like *Dahlia* (2018) and *Raat* (2015) based on Pakistani cinema depict these features in their movies. Thus, this paper aims at analyzing the subtitling process of such films, view the difficulties and successful approaches that were used in translating the culture with the focus on such aspects as fears and taboos. The research focuses on the way subtitling of *Dahlia* and *Raat* handles the religious and cultural aspects such as supernatural intervention and retribution that form part of Pakistani community's culture. The findings suggest that the subtitles experience a lot of difficulty in conveying the cultural background while at the same ensuring the program is understandable to an audience with little or no knowledge of Pakistan culture and traditions. Some of the Ts are localization and adaptation as well as domestication which seeks to address the gap between the source culture and the target culture. On this premise, the paper infers that subtitling plays a major role in translating the emotional and cultural aspect of horror films so that the viewer is able to appreciate better the culture that the movie depicts. That is why cultural variations play a significant role in how the translation is performed so that readers from all parts of the world will understand what is written without loss of meaning.

**Keywords:** Pakistani Horror Films, Cultural Fears, Taboos, 'Dahlia', 'Raat'

### Introduction

Culturally oriented fears and taboos have been portrayed for decades through horror films as a mirror thrown to its audience. Scholars such as Carroll (1990) suggest that horror genre's capability to instill fear and anxiety is inextricably linked to the culture/society depicted within the horror films. In the context of Pakistani cinema, films of horror/ supernatural like *Dahlia* (2018) and *Raat* (2015) are not only a form of entertainment but also mirror those facets which define the cultural conscience of a nation – its dream and fears, its taboos, and moral fabric. This paper seeks to discuss how subtitling of these films is done so as to know how those cultural markers are conveyed in a foreign language, the linguistic and cultural issues that are likely to arise in the process.

Dubbing is one of the major branches of AVT, since it helps to achieve the communication of the people of different languages and cultures. It is not just a translation of words and phrases

but entails an understanding and translation of the cultural aspects and proverbs, norms, and practices that may go unknown to the target people (Gottlieb, 2001). While translating the text of a Pakistani horror film, one has to take into considering the factors of language, religion, social culture and social taboo that is weaved into the script. As for the films *Dahlia* and *Raat*, they can be considered valuable examples in understanding how these elements are adapted and how subtitles interfere with the perception of the movies by audience of different countries. Despite the fact that horror films are not as popular as films of other genres such as romance or drama in the population of Pakistan, the horror films have been recognized as the type of movies that belong to the Pakistani culture. Pakistani horror films have been blended of both the western horror's and local folklore with the horror films narrating contemporary dark tales that embrace Pakistan's cultural and religious pluralism therefore entrenched (Rashid, 2018). Movies like *Dahlia* and *Raat* uses superstitious beliefs, which are present in Pakistani culture through myths and legends, and portrays them in a manner, which is acceptable to the today's generation of Pakistanis. These flicks reflect societal issues of the society of Pakistan especially the issues related with supernatural powers, next life and the result of going against religious as well as societal taboos. These themes are associated with Islamic culture that prevails in the Pakistani. Community where such conceptions as jinn, evil eye, and divine retribution are quite famous. In this manner, these fears depicted in horror films act as a form of cultural output in the society as a result of the moral issues that society experience. Also, these films often address the concerns of death, afterlife and the divide which is sacred and what is profane, which makes it almost impossible to adapt it for a 'non Pakistani' audience.

The process of subtitling of horror movies especially from one particular culture to another is not only translating the words but also translating the background culture of that story. This is even more complicated in the context of the Pakistani horror movies to decipher cultural phobic and taboo utterances expressed in language which is so closely linked to religious and social structures of the country (Nida, 2003). The subtitle is not only translating the literal meaning of the words but also meaning of the narrative elements, which may include religion connotations, culture value and beliefs which exist in Pakistan only.

For instance in *Dahlia* the main conflict revolves around the feeling of the supernatural, or rather the view of jinn as evil spirits in the Islamic culture. The themes and conversations of the movie often include Quranic verse and Islamic ideas that some of the cast and most of the audience will not understand. The translation of such references to subtitling becomes a problem, as the translator has to choose whether to convey the content literally, thus changing its sense in the eyes of the target culture (or simply to misinterpret it), or to interpret it in such a way that the target audience will not lose touch with the original meaning (which may be totally different from the translator's own point of view) (Venuti, 1995).

Likewise, *Raat* gives the message of moral retribution and divine justice from Islamic perspective with relation to sinful deeds. Schematization of Death and Afterlife: The movie is full of references to cultural imperatives that concern death, afterlife and the division of the clean and the dirty. Dubbing of such content presents a challenge of translating the cultural and religious context of the used language and the effect that such content bears on the viewers.

Closely related to the issue of translation, which I examine in section one of the main difficulties the subtitle faces when translating Pakistani horror films is the translation of religious and cultural references that are very important to the films' plot. These references are always very assumptions of Pakistani languages and cultures, thus making the translation process very sensitive as it is almost impossible to provide a literal translation without

making it very inconsequential in the process. For instance “Dahlia” where Islamic verses, prayers or chants are used as a way of fighting off evil spirits is quite popular. Not only do the subtitle need to translate the words effectively, but also has to explain cultural/religious practices that may be quite unknown in a non-Muslim context in the target language (power, 1997).

Cultural and linguistic differences are even wider as sometimes it is impossible to translate idiomatic expressions and certain terms which refer to specific culture only. The Pakistani horror movies utilize more of the local colors or the regional repertoire of idioms and phrases that are in consonance with the story setting. For example, in *Raat*, concerns of death and the afterlife are expressed in phrases that are particular to the culture of Pakistan’s Urdu speaking Muslim population. In such cases the subtitle is forced to look for ways and means to put down the meaning of such phrases and at the same time keeping in mind the mood and feel of the related movie (Baker, 2018).

Further, due to nature of horror films, the translation of subtitling must look at visual and auditory component of the movie since sight and Sound have effect in fear. This was in consideration to the adequate proximity and coordination of subtitles placed depending on the pace and mood of the movie. In the context of the contextual mode of horror films of Pakistan where dialogue is interrupted by moments of pause, music and sounds that enhance the horror of the audience, the subtitle has to put subtitles in a very specific and accurately synchronized manner with specific scenes of audiovisuals to make the horror impact of the film on the audience as effective as possible (Diaz Cintas & Remael, 2021).

The cultural influence is an essential factor to consider when it comes to subtitling the Pakistani horror films since it determines how the audiences elsewhere will take these productions. Translation is not just an-otherwordism of cultural fears and taboos but cultural inter-vention at its best. The fact that these elements can be described as visual or narrative can impact the viewers and their ability to comprehend the movie as well as their view towards the culture and society of Pakistan.

For instance, through subtitling of *Dahlia* and *Raat*, new and strange cultural elements of Pakistan maybe unveiled to the viewers, such as belief in jinn or their views regarding death ceremonies. All of these elements can be translated by the subtitle in a way that makes such cultural context easier for the audience to understand or more difficult. Furthermore, the subtitling of religion and culture taboo may also have an impact on the audience emotions toward the movie since the subtitling of those aspects might interfere or change the way of the audience appealing to the horror movies (Chiaro, 2009).

Also, the reception of Pakistani horror films may also be affected by the subtitling and the strategies that have been put in place to a certain extend. For instance, a subtitle who decides to go for cultural transplantation instead of the development of literal translation might come up with subtitles that make the film more comprehensible to a non-native viewer, but at the same time the modified cultural essence of the story might be lost. On the other hand, a subtitle who decides to be more literal may translate the cultural references in target language preserving cultural references however a new audience may feel uncomfortable seeing information that they do not understand (Venuti, 2008).

## Research Objectives

1. To Identify and Analyze Cultural Fears and Taboos Depicted in the Pakistani Horror Films *Dahlia* and *Raat*
2. To Investigate the Challenges of Subtitling Cultural Fears and Taboos in *Dahlia* and *Raat*

3. To Analyze the Strategies Used by Subtitles to Convey Cultural Fears and Taboos in *Dahlia* and *Raat*

### Research Questions

1. What are the predominant cultural fears and taboos portrayed in the films *Dahlia* and *Raat*?
2. What are the key linguistic and cultural challenges faced by subtitles when translating the cultural fears and taboos from *Dahlia* and *Raat* into English?
3. What subtitling strategies are employed to translate culturally specific fears and taboos in *Dahlia* and *Raat*?

### Problem Statement

Another great example of cultural sensitivity is the reason for the horror films' success globally — to scare people and make suspense, using elements familiar to every nation. Hailing from Pakistan their films *Dahlia* and *Raat* includes cultural anxiety and its related cultural norms, religion and supernatural characteristic inherent in Pakistan films. When these films are dubbed for the International markets, the translation of these cultural idioms is not easier at all.

Language and cultural difficulties need to be dealt with so that these feelings of fear and the taboo topics are transmitted without losing their most important aspects or distorting the cultural environment. This is in view of the fact that extremities, trends or personal references which do not present a challenge to the Pakistani intelligentsia may be difficult to convey or may lose a lot of their meaning and essence in imparting an emotional appeal or understanding to other racially distant audiences.

Thus, this research paper's purpose is to explore the existing gap of knowledge regarding the ways cultural fears and taboos in Pakistani horror movies are detected, interpreted, and translated by subtitles. This paper aims at trying to find out some of the special difficulties that must be encountered by subtitles during this process and also to examine how they try to ensure that the cultural meaning and feel of the contents is not lost. As a result, this study of *Dahlia* and *Raat* will aim at increasing the knowledge of audiovisual translation by presenting how culturally specific genre works in non-Western cinema.

### Significance of the Study

The importance of this research paper does not stay limited to subtitling Pakistani horror films only. In this way, this research contributes to understanding the general processes of translation and representation of culturally significant motifs, as well as potential consequences of their adaptation for an international audience in the context of *Dahlia* and *Raat*. This list provides some insight to the audience regarding the level of understanding of cultural standards, beliefs and fears that are portrayed in these films.

### Literature Review

Horror is one of the largest genres in movie making which can and does mirror and distort culture phobias. Jancovich et al (2013) explain that horror cinema, more often than not, negotiates social concerns through shifting concern out into the external through the use of the monstrous or horrific. Regarding the Pakistani cinema, the films like *Dahlia* and *Raat* are examples of horror movies which reveal the scopes of the Pakistani culture and religious

concern. But not only do these films provide entertainment, they also are cultural artifacts that depict and problematize the norms' and taboos of the culture (Khan, 2018). That is why Pakistani horror films contain cultural and religious motifs that viewers of this country will understand and respond to. According to Khan (2018), cruel specters, evil spirits, moral recompense, and faith interreligious sentiments as key facets of Pakistani horror cinema since they mirror the social distress of the nation. *Dahlia* and *Raat* do this where they illustrate various fears associated with witchcraft and demise, vices associated with traditional beliefs and taboos respectively (Ahmed, 2020). Studies of cultural portrayal in Horror movies reveal that such movies mirror as well as offer comment on culture. For instance, in his article Henson claims that modern horror films are about fear and the topics which society consider forbidden drawing on examples of films that depict unrealistic situations but speak about real-life issues. In Pakistani cinema, these themes are more effective as these issues relate to the culture and religion of the people which makes it more sensitive and the emotions and psychology portrayed in the scripts and the messages gets enhanced (Bashir, 2017).

Subtitling culturally specific content poses certain issues, namely, when dealing with such concerns as fears and taboos that may not be translatable *ad litteram*. Writing in 2007 Díaz Cintas and Remael stated that subtitles are under pressure that they have to translate another culture by making sure that the audience gets its intended meaning but able to translate the content for the international market. This often involves decisions on how best to render culturally relation ate references and on how to carry over the affective tenor of the source texts (Gottlieb, 2001). In the case of *Dahlia* and *Raat*, subtitles are always in a dilemma to translate cultural fears/taboo that are rooted in Pakistani religion and culture. For example, when it comes to translating supernatural and meanings of religious putti or other similar values, a lot of caution has to be paid to ensure that they are not considered to have changed their meanings all together (Gottlieb, 2001). The subtitling procedure becoming as close as possible to the original material, while at the same time, serving as a medium that allows the audience who has no knowledge of Pakistani culture, to enjoy the movie (Munday, 2016).

In order to deal with all these challenges, the subtitles apply different techniques in order to express cultural differences. As noted by Karamitroglou (2000), subtitles impoverish the target text by adopting various forms of adaptation which may include the addition of glosses or even transformations of cultural allusions. These strategies are used in an attempt at maintaining the true meaning intact and at the same time trying to make sense of the intended message to the targeted public (p.751, Pedersen 2005).

While subtitling in *Dahlia* and *Raat*, subtitles could apply such strategies as localization or domestication in the case of translated culturally specific content. Localization entails transforming the material in order to reflect the culture of the target market while domestication entails changing the content by making it culturally recognizable (Nida, 1964). Both of these approaches assist in guaranteeing that the cultural phobia and taboos portrayed in the films are revealed to any audience whom might not be in position to understand the certain culture.

The effects of subtitling on the audience are a big focus of the programme. Chiaro goes further in his research in 2009 and established that the ability of subtitles in passing the cultural connotation determines the manner in which the foreign audience will perceive and understand the movie. The evidence mentioned above proves that great subtitles, which provide the viewer with an ability to cross the cultural divide, can strengthen the viewer's emotional interaction with the film, whereas when the subtitles are done poorly they may cause misunderstandings and weaken the viewed material's impact (Gottlieb, 2001).

In the case of *Dahlia* and *Raat* the choices regarding subtitling will definitely influence how the global viewers respond to the cultural phobias and vices portrayed in the movies.

Subtitling can help the viewers get even a better understanding of the cultural setting while, on the other hand, poor translation may lead to the loss of most of the emotion and culture of the films in question (Pedersen, 2005).

## **Methodology**

This research work utilized a qualitative research approach in order to examine the subtitling of cultural fears and taboos in Pakistani horror films. This investigation is well suited for the qualitative research as it enables the researcher to capture the cultural and linguistic dimensions that are vital in the subtitling process. As compared to the previous approach, this attention towards perceived and interpreted aspects of subtitling offer a detailed account of how cultural features are translated and apprehended.

Data for this study was obtained through a tape analysis of the two films *Dahlia* and *Raat* as well *Dahlia* and *Raat* with English subtitle translation. These films have been chosen on the basis of the fact that they are the most renowned Pakistani horror movies, and has vivid portrayal of culture's myths and socially tabooed rationalizations. The primary data consisted in the copies of the films and their English subtitles translations. To gain an overall understanding of the subtitling process the subtitling scripts were also looked at in order to determine how cultural universals were translated. Furthermore, qualitative questionnaires in form of semi-structured interviews were carried out with professional subtitle translators who ever worked on these or similar films. Such interviews proved to be rather helpful in terms of understanding the strategies used and the obstacles met when subtitling culturally-sensitive material.

The data analysis aimed at exploring the critical implications of the original films and their subtitled version in a multiple spaced way. First of all, a pilot was conducted with the aim of comparing the scenes and dialogues from the original films with their English subtitles. This comparison was purposed to compare whether or not general cultural fears and taboos were lost or altered in translation and to what extent. Coded data was subsequently analyzed thematically with a view of grouping as well as interpreting patterns of cultural fears and taboos. The first step in this process was a process of coding text: the text from both the films' dialogue and the subtitles, in order to look for patterns and identify what can be described as cultural content. Moreover, interviews were conducted with subtitles; the data collected was in form of transcripts was subjected to thematic analysis where the themes explored included challenges in subtitling and how they were dealt with. The analysis conducted here offered real-life lessons regarding the subtitling process. Last of all, a critical discourse analysis was performed to analyse in what manner the decisions for subtitling entailed a retention or alteration of cultural reference. This method also assessed if subtitles retained the essence of the intended impact of the films to the viewers in foreign countries and determine how they perceive cultural phobias and evils. By using these analytical techniques the researchers wanted to provide an effective assessment of the subtitling strategies when translating culturally sensitive content of Pakistani horror films.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Discussion**

Discussion of *Dahlia* and *Raat* shows how the body of Pakistani horror films constructs and negotiates cultural anxieties and phobias. Therefore, *Dahlia* demonstrates that supernatural is an outcome of cultural apprehensions of sibling betrayal and sin. For example, the episodes when *Dahlia* appears in the form of a mananita or turns into a vengeful spirit reflect the role of supernatural retribution in Pakistani culture. However, one famous scene is the one where

the character of Mr. Khan speaks saying, “Dahlia’s spirit will never be at peace until justice prevails,” which is based on culture that spirits do not let people get away with any wrong doings done on them.

In Raat the main centre of concern is the eve’s dread of black magic and spirit possession. Shahnaz gets possessed after she takes part in a black magic Bromilera third. This is evident from a scene where Shahnaz, possessed, says ‘The darkness will take its dues’, which is culturally unacceptance of the practice of black magic. Some acts or changes which signify her transformation involve dancing and speaking in an evil kind of voice and floating, shown by sub-titles as, “Shahnaz’s voice changes, now speaking in an ancient, eerie tone.”

The images belonging to supernatural theme and occult practices portrayed in these films show that Pakistani horror cinema is founded on culture’s fears and what is socially acceptable or not. In subtitling these elements the problems are in the translation of the culture related fears and taboos while making them comprehensible to the international viewer. The subtitling process entails making decision about what aspects of the films to translate and, thereby, potentially lose something of the cultural understanding, and what aspects it is necessary to convey to audience with no such losses and, at the same time, to maintain the cultural sensitivity of the subtitling process.

In order to make the audience familiar with cultural horrors that Dahllia and Raat portray, Pakistani horror films, the subtitles had to use strategies that would present modern Pakistani cultural phobias and superstitions accurately. In Dahlia, there was an example of descriptive translation because such terms as “jinn” were translated into the terms that can be comprehended by the viewers all over the world, the translation included that these are “supernatural beings from Islamic mythology”. There was also contextualization, which gave more information about the culture; for instance, when there was a scene where a ritual of sort was performed, a message appearing below the scene read, “Shahnaz performs a ritual where she chants pre-Islamic incantations to call for recalcitrant spirits.”

Subtitles were used for giving background information for example when Raat featured black magic there were subtitles indicating that ‘Black magic is the practice of invoking supernatural powers for evil doings.’ Another one was adaptation – sometimes, certain cultural components and perceptions were altered to reflect affairs familiar to people from different parts of the world. For instance, to create the intelligibility of fear, “jinn” was expounded as the “angry spirits seeking revenge”. Substitution was also used, for example, such words as “black magic” was sometimes translated with “dark sorcery” in order to keep the appropriate mood of the film.

Simplification was adopted in coming up with a step by step manner of describing something in culture for instance describing a ritual that uses a ceremonial dagger and chanting. The strategy of paraphrasing was used to enhance the cross-cultural understandings of the dialogue by translating culturally specific they used sayings like, ‘the spirit of Dahlia demands revenge for her premature death. Graphics from the film were incorporated to enhance the subtitles; images like paranormal activities of ghosts and then there were subtitles like ‘ the house has grown a neck’.

In accordance with dialogic equivalence, it was an attempt to translate the intent and the tenor of the conversation. For instance, the subtitle “The dark forces are restless and demand retribution” was quite appealing to depict the disturbing dialogue of Shahnaz in Raat. Last of all, the cultural aspect was relevant; translators to subtitles avoided using any cultural taboo in the translated texts and also made sure that what was portrayed in the films was as culturally correct as possible. Through operationalizing of these strategies, subtitles was able to manage the difficulties presented by culture-saturated in Dahlia and Raat and ensure that

the film's themes and plots were translated to viewers in other parts of the world without losing cultural essence of those films.

### Subtitling Strategies

subtitling Strategy	Description	Example from Dahlia and Raat
Descriptive Translation	Provides detailed explanations of culturally specific terms and concepts.	"The jinn are angry because of the betrayal."
Contextualization	Adds additional context to explain cultural practices or beliefs.	"Shahnaz conducts a ritual involving ancient chants to summon dark spirits."
Footnotes	Includes explanatory notes to give background information on cultural references.	"Black magic is a practice of invoking supernatural powers for malevolent purposes."
Adaptation	Modifies cultural references to be more relatable to international audiences.	"Angry spirits seeking revenge" instead of "jinn."
Substitution	Replaces culturally specific terms with equivalent terms that are more familiar to the target audience.	"Dark sorcery" instead of "black magic."
Simplification	Breaks down complex cultural concepts into straightforward descriptions.	"A ritual involving a ceremonial dagger and chanting."
Paraphrasing	Rephrases culturally specific dialogue to retain meaning while making it accessible.	"The spirit of Dahlia seeks justice for her untimely death."
Visual Context	Uses visual elements from the film to support the subtitles.	Subtitles such as "The house seems to have a life of its own" paired with scenes showing supernatural occurrences.
Dialogic Equivalence	Maintains the tone and intent of the original dialogue in the subtitles.	"The dark forces are restless and demand retribution" to capture the ominous tone of Shahnaz's dialogue.
Cultural Sensitivity	Ensures translations respect cultural taboos and accurately convey the significance of practices.	Careful translation of ritualistic elements in Raat to avoid misrepresenting or trivializing cultural beliefs.

### Conclusion

The subtitling of Pakistani horrors films Dahlia and Raat thus poses a task that is at once complex yet significant and pertinent to the translation of culturally particularized western anxieties and forbidden into a language that shall be intelligible to an internationalisms



audience. These films clearly present archetypal cultural fears within their supernatural and occult fantasy genres, which deserves special treatment when being subtitled to maintain their cultural specificity but at the same time being understandable for audiences who are not familiar with these cultural feature.

Picking on *Dahlia* and *Raat* only shows how these films depict important social phobias like vengeful spirits or black magic discourage through their incorporation in the story. It was suggested that the application of quite specific subtitling procedures was the source of eradicating the culture gap: these were descriptive translation, contextualization, and adaptation. Such means made it possible for the international audience to understand the cultural implications of the references and participate in understanding of the films.

Descriptive translation and contextualization regarding culture-specific meaning and practices were good in explaining special and rather idiosyncratic terms and practices of the country, whereas adaptation and substitution made these terms and practices more familiar for the readers. Simplification and paraphrasing were both significant in order to explain the abstract cultural ideas on TPO; moreover, the addition of visual context aided the subtitles by further explaining the film's imagery to the viewer. This means that Dialogic equivalence helped retain the acrimony of the conversation while making sure that Cultural equivalence ensured that the cultural aspects of the movies were translated tactfully and appropriately.

To summarize, both *Dahlia* and *Raat*'s subtitling forms as a valuable contribution to global communication as it enhances the multicultural entertainment selection by presenting the viewers with the original cultural experiences and emotions. Through these strategic processes, subtitles are therefore capable of communicating the complex cultural geography of Pakistani horror films to global audiences thus increasing the audiences' appreciation and interpretation of these rare cinematic pieces.

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