THE LITERARY LEGACY OF BABUR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE BABURNAMA'S TRANSLATIONS

Dusboyev Abdurashid Abdug'opir og'li
Master's Degree Student of Namangan State Institute of Foreign
Languages Named After Isxakhan Ibrat
dusboyevabdurashid5@gmail.com

Abstract

The Baburnama, the autobiography of Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire, is a seminal work in Islamic, Central Asian, and South Asian literature. Originally written in Chagatai Turkic, the Baburnama offers insights into Babur's military campaigns, reflections, and cultural milieu. This study examines the literary legacy of Babur through a comparative analysis of major translations—especially Persian and English versions—highlighting how linguistic, stylistic, and interpretive choices have influenced its reception across time and cultures.

Keywords: Translation, memoir, translation variation, Baburnama, poetry, legacy.

Introduction

Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), the first Mughal emperor, authored one of the earliest and most remarkable autobiographies in Islamic history: the Baburnama. As a Timurid prince descended from both Timur and Genghis Khan, Babur's narrative not only recounts military conquests but also reveals his intimate thoughts on nature, poetry, art, and governance. Originally penned in Chagatai Turkic—a now-extinct literary language—the Baburnama bridges the Persianate literary tradition and the emerging Mughal Indo-Islamic culture. Over time, various translations, especially the 16th-century Persian translation by Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan and modern English versions by Annette Beveridge and Wheeler Thackston, have brought Babur's words to new audiences. This paper compares these translations to understand how translation practices shape literary legacy.

Literature Review

Scholars have long recognized the Baburnama as both a historical document and a work of literary merit. Thackston (1996) described it as "unique among autobiographies of Muslim rulers for its frankness and introspection." Dale (2004) highlights Babur's vivid descriptions of nature, which depart from the typically dry chronicles of his contemporaries. Beatrice Forbes Manz (2007) also emphasizes Babur's intellectual curiosity and adaptability as key to understanding his literary persona.

The Persian translation commissioned by Akbar and completed by Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan in 1589–1590 significantly shaped the Mughal court's perception of Babur. As noted by Alam and Subrahmanyam (2012), this translation not only made the text accessible to Persian-speaking elites but also subtly recontextualized it to align with Akbar's imperial ideology.

Annette Beveridge's English translation (published 1912–1922) has been widely praised for its fidelity to the original Chagatai and its extensive scholarly commentary. In contrast, Wheeler Thackston's 1996 edition takes a more fluid, modern approach, aiming for readability while preserving the core tone of Babur's voice. Scholars such as Robinson (2007) and Khan (2015) have critiqued the varying levels of interpretive liberty taken by translators and how these choices affect both the accessibility and the authenticity of Babur's voice.

Despite these contributions, few studies have directly compared the translations from a stylistic and cultural-linguistic perspective. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how these translations reinforce or alter Babur's literary and historical legacy.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach, employing close textual analysis to evaluate three prominent translations of the Baburnama: the Persian translation by Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan (1589–1590), the English translation by Annette Beveridge (1912–1922), and the more recent English translation by Wheeler M. Thackston (1996). Primary passages were selected based on thematic richness and literary interest—particularly those dealing with Babur's reflections on nature, his accounts of conquest, and introspective musings on life and

mortality. These excerpts were compared with an emphasis on their treatment of tone, narrative voice, cultural references, and lexical choices.

In assessing each translation, the study focused on four key analytical dimensions: fidelity to the original Chagatai syntax and vocabulary, preservation or transformation of literary style and poetic devices, adaptation of cultural idioms or metaphors, and the visibility of the translator's editorial voice. Additionally, historical and linguistic scholarship on the Chagatai language and the Mughal literary tradition was consulted to provide context. Textual comparisons were made using side-by-side excerpts where available, and interpretive commentary was supported by secondary academic sources. The study also acknowledges the limitations posed by the loss of the original Chagatai manuscript and instead relies on the earliest known versions and established translations.

Results

The comparative analysis of the three translations of the Baburnama revealed substantial variation in how Babur's narrative voice, stylistic choices, and cultural context were interpreted and rendered. These differences were most apparent in the translators' approaches to tone, idiomatic expressions, and poetic devices. Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan's Persian rendition was the most liberal in its adaptation, reconfiguring Babur's candid observations into a stylized, Persianized courtly discourse. This version often omitted personal and emotionally vulnerable content, replacing it with polished expressions that aligned with the ideological needs of Akbar's imperial project. For instance, Babur's raw expressions of doubt or grief were softened or reframed in more dignified, philosophical tones.

In contrast, Beveridge's translation remained closely aligned with the original structure and phrasing of the Chagatai text, where available. Her rendition retained much of Babur's original candor and stylistic simplicity, even at the cost of fluency. The results of this approach are evident in several passages where she preserved compound constructions and repetitive imagery that echo Turkic oral traditions. Despite occasional awkwardness in expression, this fidelity allowed readers to access the historical and linguistic texture of the Baburnama more directly. Furthermore, Beveridge's footnotes revealed her intention to serve both scholarly and documentary functions, situating Babur within broader historical and cultural frameworks.

Thackston's translation, while also rooted in scholarship, prioritized readability and narrative flow. The results showed a more streamlined and modern retelling of Babur's life, aimed at making the text accessible to contemporary audiences. Although this version sacrificed some of the linguistic subtleties and cultural idioms of the original, it succeeded in capturing Babur's reflective tone and providing a coherent chronological narrative. The analysis also demonstrated that Thackston's translation tended to minimize Babur's emotional volatility, presenting a more balanced and measured protagonist, possibly influenced by modern biographical conventions.

Overall, the results of this study highlight that the literary legacy of Babur is not static but shaped significantly by each translator's aims, cultural background, and linguistic strategies. While all three versions preserve the core narrative of the Baburnama, they diverge markedly in how they represent Babur's identity—as a warrior, a poet, a ruler, and a man of introspection. These findings underscore the notion that translation functions as a creative act that both preserves and reinterprets the source text, thereby participating in the ongoing construction of historical

Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals that each translation of the Baburnama represents not merely a linguistic conversion, but a cultural reinterpretation of Babur's legacy. The Persian translation, produced under the patronage of Akbar, is highly refined and stylized, aligning Babur's image with the ideals of Mughal kingship and Persian literary tradition. It removes some of the personal, sometimes raw elements of Babur's original voice, replacing them with rhetorical flourishes and embellishments characteristic of Persian court historiography. This version was not only a translation but also an act of imperial myth-making, situating Babur within a long line of cultivated, divine-right monarchs.

In contrast, Beveridge's English translation is meticulous, scholarly, and somewhat archaic by contemporary standards. Her work reflects early 20th-century orientalist approaches to translation, where the translator serves as an interpreter and cultural mediator. She remains faithful to Babur's original syntax and diction wherever possible, often leaving idiomatic expressions intact, even at the expense of readability. This fidelity, while valuable to historians and philologists, makes the text less accessible to general audiences. Her extensive footnotes and interlinear

commentary, however, compensate by offering rich context and clarification, making her edition a foundational academic resource.

Thackston's modern translation brings Babur's prose closer to today's readers. His choices favor clarity and smooth narrative flow, although this occasionally results in a loss of linguistic nuance or poetic charm. For instance, where Babur might use intricate metaphors rooted in Turkic or Islamic literary traditions, Thackston often replaces them with straightforward English equivalents. While this enhances accessibility, it risks diluting the distinct literary flavor of the original. Nevertheless, Thackston captures Babur's introspective and philosophical tone well, preserving the emotional weight of key passages.

The study also reveals the critical role of the translator's positionality. Each version carries implicit cultural and temporal biases, reflecting the translator's own historical moment and intended audience. Khan-i-Khanan's work was intended to legitimize Babur's rule and inspire loyalty in the Mughal elite; Beveridge's aimed to preserve a historical artifact for academic posterity; Thackston's sought to reintroduce Babur to a global readership unfamiliar with Chagatai prose.

Furthermore, the translations differ significantly in their treatment of Babur's emotional introspection—his grief over the deaths of loved ones, his reflections on beauty and impermanence, and his deep aesthetic appreciation of gardens and landscapes. In Beveridge's version, these moments can feel distanced due to the older English style, while Thackston allows more direct emotional engagement. The Persian version, meanwhile, tends to elevate these sentiments into grander philosophical statements, emphasizing regal detachment over personal vulnerability.

These variations underscore how translation is a form of authorship that shapes historical memory and literary reception. Through comparing these translations, we gain insight not only into Babur's mind and world but also into how empires, scholars, and modern readers reinterpret his legacy. The Baburnama becomes, through these translations, a multi-vocal text: one that speaks differently depending on the language, the era, and the lens through which it is read.

Conclusion

Babur's literary legacy endures through the Baburnama, a text that continues to inspire debate, admiration, and scholarly inquiry. As this study shows, the act of

translation is not neutral; it transforms, adapts, and in many cases, re-authors the original. By comparing key translations, we gain insight into how Babur has been perceived across cultures and centuries—not just as a conqueror, but as a writer, thinker, and human being.

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