

## Analyzing Translation Techniques Used for Culture Specific Items in the Indonesian Version of R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War*

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### Abstract

Translating literary texts that contain many Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) involves more than simply transferring meaning. It also requires preserving the cultural elements embedded in the text. This becomes particularly challenging because CSIs carry cultural references that often do not have direct equivalents in the target language. For this reason, this study aims to analyze the distribution of CSIs based on Newmark's (1988) CSIs categories, identify the translation techniques used in translating CSIs using Molina & Albir's (2002) framework, and examine the patterns of technique used in a novel. The data are retrieved from a historical-fantasy novel *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang and its Indonesian translation. Results show that the most frequent CSIs are the Organizations, Customs, and Institutions (OCI) category related to the literary text's theme, and the most used technique is Borrowing to preserve the original meaning of the CSIs. Nevertheless, although it was used less frequently, Literal Translation was applied evenly across all categories.

### Article History

Received: 15

September 2025

Accepted: 15 May  
2026

Published: 15 May  
2026

### Keywords

*Culture Specific  
Items; Translation  
Techniques; The  
Poppy War*

### How to cite:

Azzahra, A. A., & Priantoro. (2026). Analyzing Translation Techniques Used for Culture Specific Items in the Indonesian Version of R. F. Kuang's *The Poppy War*. *Humanus: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Humaniora*, 25(1), 16-25. DOI: 10.24036/humanus.v25i1.135778

## Introduction

Language and culture are closely connected. People communicate not only by using grammar and vocabulary, they also by showing their way of thinking, beliefs, traditions, and social habits. This is why translating texts, especially literary texts, is not only about changing words from one language to another, but also about transferring cultural meanings. Translators have to deal with words or ideas that are strongly tied to the original culture and may not exist in the target language, these are called Culture Specific Items (CSIs). CSIs can include names of places, food, clothes, traditions, historical events, social systems, and other categories.

In the field of translation studies, CSIs have been studied for many years on how translators deal with these culture-based words and what strategies or techniques they use to make the meaning clear for readers in another language. Many researchers agree

that the translator's choices can affect how the target readers understand and connect with the original culture. If translators keep the original words, readers might learn more about the foreign culture. In contrast, if translators change the words to fit the new culture, the readers may feel more comfortable but miss some cultural meaning. Furthermore, the translator has to decide between staying close to the source culture and making the text feel local is often discussed in translation research.

Newmark's (1988) classification of Culture-specific Items is used to identify and categorize the CSIs as unique linguistic features that reflect specific cultural contexts of a language into five main categories. The first category, Ecology (ECO), refers to terms associated with nature and the physical environment. The second, Material Culture (MAT), includes tangible elements of daily life such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation. The third category, Social Culture (SC), covers expressions related to work, leisure, and social classes. The fourth category, Organizations, Culture, and Ideas (OCI), encompasses terms connected to political, legal, religious, and artistic systems. Finally, Gestures and Habits (GH) consist of culturally specific behaviors and forms of body language. Together, these categories provide a framework for identifying and analyzing elements that are closely tied to a particular culture.

This classification helped to organize the cultural elements systematically based on their types, such as ecology, material culture, social culture, and more. By using this classification system, we were able to compare how each type of CSI was translated into Indonesian. The categorizations included the annotation label and the scope of each cultural item, making it easier to analyze translation patterns and strategies used by the translator.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Translation Techniques*

Translation techniques refer to the specific procedures that are applied by translator to solve the problems in cultural differences and meaning transfer from source language (SL) to the target language (TL) at a micro level that dealing with words, phrases, and sentences. Each CSI and its corresponding translation were examined to determine the specific translation technique applied. We analyzed the translation of CSIs in source text using Molina & Albir's (2002) translation techniques.

The translation techniques conducted by Molina & Albir (2002) encompass a range of strategies used to translate meaning from a source language into a target language. Firstly, Adaptation (AD) involves replacing cultural elements in the source text with their equivalents in the target language. Amplification (AMP) refers to adding explanations or additional details to make the meaning clearer, while Borrowing (BR) retains the original term from the source language. Calque (CAL) consists of a literal translation of a phrase, and Compensation (COM) introduces meaning or stylistic effects elsewhere in the text when they cannot be conveyed in the same place as in the original.

Several techniques focus on clarifying or modifying meaning. Description (DESC) explains cultural terms directly, whereas Discursive Creation (DC) produces a creative and sometimes unpredictable translation. Established Equivalent (EE) uses commonly accepted expressions in the target language. Generalization (GEN) applies a more general term, while Particularization (PAR) uses a more specific one. Reduction (RED) omits unnecessary details, in contrast to Linguistic Amplification (LA), which expands phrases, and Linguistic Compression (LC), which shortens expressions.

Other techniques involve structural or perspectival changes. Literal Translation (LT) renders the text directly, word for word where possible. Modulation (MOD) changes the viewpoint or perspective of the expression. Substitution (SUB) replaces linguistic elements, such as gestures or symbols, with others that function equivalently in the target culture. Transposition (TRAN) changes the grammatical category or word class, and Variation (VAR) modifies linguistic elements, often to reflect differences in style, tone, or dialect. Together, these techniques provide translators with flexible strategies for addressing linguistic and cultural differences between languages.

By adopting Molina and Albir's (2002) scheme of translation techniques, this study can systematically identify and classify the techniques used to translate Culture-Specific Items (CSIs). This model focuses on translation at the micro level. It analyzes specific words and phrases in the text. This is important because CSIs usually appear in the form of culturally loaded terms, historical references, and mythological concepts that require careful handling in translation. Molina & Albir (2002) also provide clear and well-defined categories which make the data easier to code and analyze consistently. In addition, the framework supports quantitative analysis. It allows us to identify which techniques are most frequently used in the Indonesian version of *The Poppy War*. Therefore, this scheme is suitable for examining how cultural elements are transferred from the source text into the target text.

Many researchers in translation studies have already discussed this problem, such as Kuswahono (2020), Purwaningsih et al. (2023), Akalin (2019), and Mamoon et al. (2023). They have classified data into culture-specific items categories and explained ways that translators can use to translate CSIs. They used the classification of translation techniques presented by Molina & Albir's (2002) into eighteen techniques to systematically organize.

However, most of these studies try to find out what techniques are used most often, but many of them do not look closely at how different kinds of CSI categories are translated using specific techniques as in the study by Zuo et al. (2023), which emphasized that different types of culture-specific items (CSIs) show in different translation strategies. Regarding that, this study takes a step closer to a deeper understanding by analyzing how different kinds of CSI categories are translated using specific techniques. This can help us see the translator's choices and understand how cultural information is changed in translation. As well, *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang is a special book that mixes fantasy with real Chinese history, politics, and culture, but there has not been much research about how the Indonesian translation deals with those cultural elements. Because of this, there is still a need for more research.

Taking this point further, this study has three purposes: (1) to find out how CSIs are spread throughout the novel, (2) to identify what translation techniques are used to translate the CSIs in the Indonesian version, and (3) to see the patterns of how these techniques are used in different types of CSIs. This research can help to understand how to deal with cultural words and ideas when translating books. It also shows why it is important to choose the right technique depending on the kind of cultural item being translated.

### ***Translating Culture-Specific Items***

Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) present a particular challenge in translation because they are closely tied to the cultural context of the source language. Culture-specific concepts are considered one of the most common sources of non-equivalence in translation, as they often lack direct equivalents in the target language (Baker, 2018). The

most important aspect is the concept. Baker (2018) stated that the word in the source language may represent a concept that is completely unfamiliar or does not exist in the target culture. In this situation, the difference occurs only at the level of language use, not at the cultural level. Therefore, the classification of a culture-specific item is determined by the presence or absence of the cultural concept in the target language, rather than by the availability of a direct lexical equivalent.

Due to these cultural differences or gaps, translators must carefully select appropriate techniques that allow the meaning to be transferred while preserving the cultural nuances embedded in the original text. In doing so, translators need to consider the cultural backgrounds of both the source and target languages and determine the extent to which the original cultural references should be maintained or adapted. This challenge is particularly significant in literary translation, where cultural references contribute to the authenticity of the narrative and the representation of the source culture. To address these challenges, translators apply various translation techniques. According to Molina & Albir (2002), a range of techniques can be used to translate culturally bound expressions so that translators can handle cultural differences while maintaining the intended meaning of the source text.

## Methods

The data for this study were collected from all twenty-six chapters of *The Poppy War* novel by R. F. Kuang and its official Indonesian translation. The English source text (ST) was obtained from the Kindle e-book version in EPUB format and converted into TXT, while the Indonesian target text (TT) was collected from the printed version of *The Poppy War (Perang Opium)* published by Gramedia Pustaka Utama in 2022 and translated by Meggy Soedjatmiko. The novel drew inspiration from Chinese history, particularly the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Nanjing Massacre. It blended military history, mythology, and dark fantasy. In addition, the book was translated into multiple languages, including Indonesian, and gained a strong global fan base.

Furthermore, to answer the first objective, which is identifying the CSIs in the text, we followed Newmark's (1988) classification to identify and categorize the CSIs. This classification helped us organize the cultural elements systematically based on their types, such as ecology, material culture, social culture, and more. By using this classification system, we were able to compare how each type of CSI was translated into Indonesian. All the data were transferred into a Google Spreadsheet for organization and systematic analysis. The Indonesian translation of each identified CSI was recorded and aligned with its English source counterpart in a spreadsheet.

Next, to answer which techniques are used to translate the CSIs, we compared the aligned ST and TT data in the spreadsheet and identified each technique used. Also, we analyzed the frequency and proportion of each translation technique used and identified the most commonly used, which we visualized through both a bar chart and a pie chart. Lastly, to identify the patterns of translation technique usage across the CSIs, a distribution table was created to calculate the frequency of each technique. The analysis examined which techniques were most and least frequently used, as well as how certain techniques tended to appear in specific categories of CSIs. By comparing these frequencies and tendencies, the study identified recurring patterns and then qualitatively interpreted how these patterns reflect the translator's approach in transferring cultural elements.

## Results and Discussion

### Culture Specific Items

In this section, we presented the analysis to answer RQ1: "How are the Culture Specific Items distributed in *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang?" We found that all five categories of Culture Specific Items from Newmark (1988) are found. As shown in Table 3 and Chart 1, the analysis of Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) shows that most of the cultural terms were related to organizations, customs, and ideas (OCI), with 49.51% of the total 2,646 items.

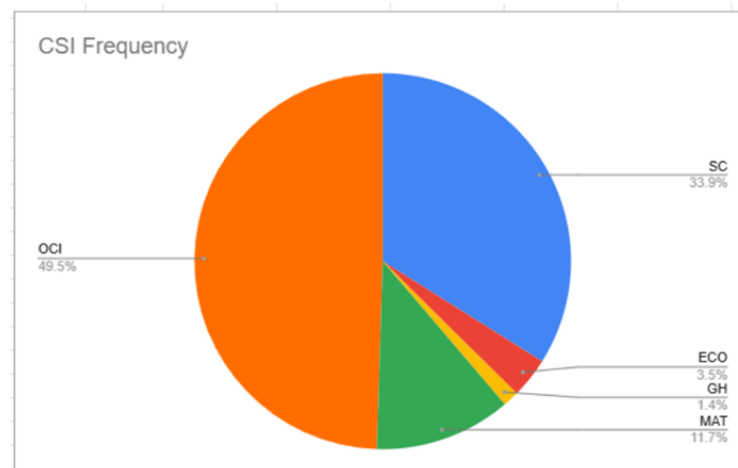
**Table 1**

*The Occurrence of Culture Specific Items*

| CSI   | Culture Specific Items                                                                   | Frequency | Proportion (%) |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| OCI   | Red Junk Opera > <i>Opera Sampah Merah</i><br>Zhuangzi's Annals > <i>Tarikh Zhuangzi</i> | 1310      | 49.51          |
| SC    | Pricelings > <i>Para Pangeran Muda</i><br>Academy > <i>Akademi</i>                       | 898       | 22.94          |
| MAT   | Keju primer > <i>Buku Pelajaran Dasar Keju</i><br>Incense Sticks > <i>Batang Hio</i>     | 310       | 11.72          |
| ECO   | The great sea > <i>Lautan raya</i><br>Wudang mountain > <i>Gunung Wudang</i>             | 92        | 3.48           |
| GH    | Dripping hot wax on her arm > <i>Meneteskan malam</i><br><i>panas ke lengannya</i>       | 36        | 1.36           |
| TOTAL |                                                                                          | 2646      | 100            |

**Figure 1**

The Occurrences of Culture-Specific Items



This indicates that the novel focused heavily on political systems, military traditions, religions, and ways of thinking. In terms of findings, the frequency order of the Culture Specific Items (CSI) in this study is in line with studies by Kuswahono (2020) and Zahra & Indhiarti (2023). Their studies found that there are all five categories of Culture Specific Items, and the category of Organizations, Customs, and Ideas (OCI) is their most frequent category. Kuswahono (2020) and Zahra & Indhiarti (2023) concluded that

having OCI as their dominant category refers to the background of the stories, which are significantly related to culture and religion.

However, this contrasts with the studies by Permatahati et al. (2021), Setiawan (2021), and Puspita & Hartono (2020). The studies by Permatahati et al. (2021) and Setiawan (2021) reported that the "Organizations, Customs, and Ideas" (OCI) category is the second least frequent category, and the study by Puspita & Hartono (2020) found that the OCI category was the least frequent in their research, appearing in only 3.7% of the data.

Furthermore, in this study, Social Culture (SC) is the second highest, with 33.94%, showing that work, social activities, and social classes are also very important in the story. Material Culture (MAT) items, such as food, clothes, and objects, made up 11.72%. Ecology (ECO) and Gestures and Habits (GH) have the smallest numbers, 3.48% and 1.36%. It shows that nature and body language are included, but are not the main focus of this novel. Accordingly, Research Question 1 has been answered.

### ***Borrowing (BR)***

The borrowing technique is the most frequently used translation technique in the data, with a total of 1,143 occurrences (43.20%) of all techniques applied. Similarly, studies by Kuswahono (2020) and Purwaningsih et al. (2023) found that the Borrowing technique becomes the dominant technique used in translating CSIs. They argue that the purpose of the translator was to maintain the originality and naturalness of the story. The frequent use of Borrowing in the OCI category suggests that culturally specific institutional terms and organization names are often kept in their original form, probably because there were no clear equivalents in the target culture.

In the SC and MAT categories, Borrowing is likely used to preserve the original feel and authenticity of cultural items, practices, or tools. Meanwhile, the lack of Borrowing in the ECO and GH categories may indicate that ecological and behavioral elements are usually translated more directly or adjusted to fit the context.

**Table 2**

*Excerpt CSI translation using Borrowing Technique*

| Source text                                                                                                                                          | Target text                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Since infanticide was frowned upon in <u>Tikany</u> , the Fangs had put Rin to use as a shopgirl and opium runner since she was old enough to count. | <i>Berhubung pembunuhan bayi bukan sesuatu yang bisa diterima di <u>Tikany</u>, keluarga Fang memanfaatkan Rin sebagai penjaga toko dan pengantar opium sejak usianya cukup untuk melakukannya.</i> |

This narration was delivered by Rin, the main character, as she remembered her childhood in *Tikany*. '*Tikany*' was a fictional place name that was classified under the category of Organizations, Customs, and Institutions (OCI) of culture-specific items (CSI). This was because '*Tikany*' referred to an administrative rural town within the novel.

In the Indonesian translation, the name '*Tikany*' is kept the same without any changes. This shows that the translator used the Borrowing technique, where a word from the source text is brought into the target text without being translated. This method is often used for place names, especially when they are unique or do not have a clear equivalent

in the target culture. In this case, keeping the name '*Tikany*' helps maintain the fictional world and cultural details of the original story.

### ***Literal Translation***

Literal Translation is the second most used technique. It appears 523 uses (19.77%) and is spread quite evenly across all five CSI categories. This even distribution shows that the technique was flexible and useful for translating cultural terms that have the same or almost the same meaning in Indonesian. The high number in OCI shows that the translator tried to keep the original meaning of terms about institutions.

Likewise, studies by Akalin (2019) and Mamoon et al. (2023) are in line with this result. Based on the CSIs they selected, it is seen that the literal translation technique is used by the translators with a high percentage, and this method is heavily applied in the translation of the Organizations, Customs, and Ideas (OCI) category. In addition, the studies stated that the translators do not find the cultural elements between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL) to be significantly different.

**Table 3**

*Excerpt CSI translation using Literal Translation Technique*

| Source Text                                                                                                                                                        | Target Text                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| She <u>bowed low</u> to the Fangs and, like a filial foster daughter, expressed her thanks for the pains they had gone through to secure her such a stable future. | <i>Ia <u>membungkuk rendah</u> pada suami-istri Fang kemudian, seperti anak asuh yang berbakti, mengungkapkan rasa terima kasihnya atas jerih-payah mereka memastikan masa depan yang stabil untuknya.</i> |

This scene occurred when Rin's foster parents attempted to set her up for a marriage. Even though she did not want to go along with it, Rin decided to show respect by bowing to them. The phrase '*bowed low*' was translated into Indonesian as '*membungkuk rendah*,' keeping both the meaning and the original form. Bowing is a significant way to express respect, particularly to elders or those in positions of power. According to the classification of culture-specific items (CSI), this fell under the Gestures and Habits (GH) category, as it reflected a culturally significant action, for it is feared that the meaning may be distorted. Therefore, they chose this technique when they were convinced that the readers would appreciate, accept, and understand the literal version without distorting the meaning of the SL. By applying literal translation, the translators preserved both the original gesture's meaning and its cultural significance.

### ***Variation (VAR)***

There are only four instances of Variation (0.15%) in the MAT, SC, OCI, and GH categories, demonstrating how rarely the Variation technique is used. This category included food, clothing, tools, and physical items. The use of the Variation technique in this case may indicate that the translator selected a different item, even if it is not identical to the original. The minimal use of Variation suggests that the translator prioritized accuracy and fidelity to the source text over creative modifications.

**Table 4***Excerpt CSI translation using Variation Technique*

| Source Text                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Target Text                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The monastic orders were gone now, but the gods remained: numerous <u>deities</u> that represented every category from sweeping themes of love and warfare to the mundane concerns of kitchens and households. | <i>Ordo-ordo monastik sudah tak ada lagi sekarang, namun para dewa masih tetap ada: sejumlah <u>ilah-ilah</u> yang mewakili setiap kategori dari tema-tema yang menghanyutkan seperti cinta dan perjuangan, hingga persoalan-persoalan dapur dan rumah tangga yang biasa-biasa saja.</i> |

This part of the story showed the belief system of the people in Nikan after a time of political chaos. Even though the monastic orders no longer existed, the gods were still worshipped. These gods included powerful ones connected to major aspects like love and war, as well as lesser gods for everyday things like cooking and housework. The Indonesian translation of the word '*deities*' is translated into '*ilah-ilah*,' Because it relates to a belief system of the people, this item was categorized under the Organization, Customs, and Institutions (OCI) category within the Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) categorization.

The translator employed the Variation approach in this case. The translator decided to use '*ilah-ilah*,' which has a more formal tone and is sometimes used in religious or philosophical contexts, for '*gods*' rather than the more widely used phrase '*dewa-dewa*.' While maintaining the original meaning, this decision gave the Nikan belief system a deeper and more meaningful tone. This discussion offers a clear answer for Research Question 2.

### **Translation Technique Patterns**

In this section, we presented the analysis to answer RQ3: "How were the patterns of translation techniques used to translate culture-specific items (CSIs) in the Indonesian translation of *The Poppy War* by R. F. Kuang?" The findings in Table 3 show how often different translation techniques were used in translating culture-specific items (CSIs). These CSIs were divided into five categories: ECO (Ecology), MAT (Material Culture), SC (Social Culture), OCI (Organizations, Customs, and Ideas), and GH (Gestures and Habits).

Some studies have examined culture-specific items (CSIs) using Molina & Albir's (2002) translation techniques, but these studies rarely explain the distribution patterns. However, we found two studies by Aditya & Basari (2013) and Zuo et al. (2023) that identified and described such distribution patterns.

**Table 5***Distribution of translation techniques in each CSI*

| No | Translation Techniques | ECO | MAT | SC  | OCI | GH | Total |
|----|------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-------|
| 1. | BR                     | 35  | 48  | 349 | 711 |    | 1143  |
| 2. | LT                     | 32  | 115 | 107 | 243 | 26 | 523   |
| 3. | EE                     | 4   | 68  | 103 | 160 | 1  | 336   |
| 4. | AMP                    | 4   | 26  | 179 | 27  | 1  | 237   |
| 5. | MOD                    | 4   | 12  | 67  | 117 | 3  | 203   |

|       |      |    |     |     |      |    |      |
|-------|------|----|-----|-----|------|----|------|
| 6.    | AD   |    | 7   | 41  | 20   | 1  | 69   |
| 7.    | TRAN | 9  | 11  | 23  | 16   | 1  | 60   |
| 8.    | CAL  | 1  | 2   | 10  | 9    |    | 22   |
| 9.    | RED  | 1  | 5   | 7   | 5    | 1  | 19   |
| 10.   | GEN  | 2  | 11  | 3   |      |    | 16   |
| 11.   | DESC |    | 3   | 7   |      |    | 10   |
| 12.   | LA   |    | 1   | 1   | 1    | 1  | 4    |
| 13.   | VAR  |    | 1   | 1   | 1    | 1  | 4    |
| Total |      | 92 | 310 | 898 | 1310 | 36 | 2646 |

Based on the distribution table of translation techniques, it can be concluded that the Social Culture (SC) category is the most evenly used of various techniques, with high frequency, with a total of 898 occurrences. It is in line with a study from Maasoum & Davtalab (2011), which found that the most common categories of cultural terms in the source data are organization and material culture. This is because the organizational terms are frequent due to the themes in the data, which are culturally dense and require careful translation.

Literal Translation (LT) was the technique with the most evenly distributed use, with a balanced frequency across all CSI categories (ECO, MAT, SC, OCI, and GH). This implies that LT is an adaptable method that functions well in a range of cultural settings. On the other hand, although Borrowing (BR) is the most dominant technique, it has an uneven distribution. As can be seen that it was completely absent in GH.

The findings from the distribution table aligned with the earlier analysis from Zuo et al. (2023), which emphasized that different types of culture-specific items (CSIs) show in different translation strategies. The high frequency of Borrowing (BR) in Organizations, Customs, Institutions (OCI) and Social Culture (SC) categories reflected the earlier observation that Borrowing was mostly used to maintain the original institution, politics, belief systems, and cultural identity, particularly for food, housing, and philosophical concepts that were difficult to translate directly. This supported the idea that translators often chose BR when no equivalent existed in the target language. Meanwhile, the wide and balanced application of Literal Translation (LT) across all CSI categories reinforced the earlier finding that Literal Translation (LT) is a flexible and frequently used strategy, especially for common expressions, names, and terms that had functional or linguistic parallels in both cultures. Consequently, the third Research Question has been thoroughly answered.

## Conclusion

This study highlights the importance of selecting appropriate translation techniques to maintain cultural meaning. The findings show that the most frequent Culture-Specific Items (CSIs) in *The Poppy War* are Organizations, Customs, and Institutions, followed by Social Culture, while Gesture and Habits appear least frequently. Borrowing is the most dominant translation technique, followed by Literal Translation, where Variation appears least often. However, Borrowing is unevenly distributed and does not appear in the Gesture and Habit category, while Literal Translation is more evenly applied across all CSI categories. These findings suggest that translators do not rely on a single strategy but adjust their techniques depending on the type of CSI, indicating a flexible and context-sensitive translation approach. The results contribute to translation studies by showing how cultural elements in a literary text, particularly a

novel, are negotiated in the Indonesian context and by providing empirical evidence of technique distribution across CSI categories. However, this study is limited to one novel and focuses only on identifying techniques without examining readers' reception or the translator's perspective. Future research may explore how readers interpret translated CSIs, compare translations in other languages, or investigate the translator's decision-making process to gain a deeper understanding of cultural transfer in literary translation.

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