

CULTURE-SPECIFIC LEXIS IN KASHMIRI ENGLISH FICTION: A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF THE HALF MOTHER

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Abstract

*This article investigates culture-specific vocabulary in Kashmiri English fiction through a 50 000-word corpus compiled from Shahnaz Bashir's novel *The Half Mother*. The corpus was analysed in AntConc (v4.x) using wordlists, keyword extraction with log-likelihood (LL) statistics, and 2–5-gram cluster analysis. A 156 264-word British English fiction corpus (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) served as the reference. The analysis reveals a stable set of lexical items denoting kinship, honorifics, and material culture such as traditional clothing, cuisine, and domestic artefacts. High normalised frequencies and very large LL values provide quantitative evidence of lexical nativisation, showing that Kashmiri English expresses local identity through an embedded cultural vocabulary.*

Introduction

English in South Asia has developed regionally nativised varieties shaped by colonial history, multilingual contact, and vibrant literary traditions. Indian English and Pakistani English have received sustained scholarly attention, but Kashmiri English remains under-described despite its wide use in education, media, and literature. Kashmiri authors employ English to narrate local life, yet no quantitative account exists of the words they use to convey Kashmiri culture.

Earlier commentaries are limited. Braj Kachru (2006) observed that educated Kashmiri speakers often prefer English terms such as widow, cancer, bathroom, and sex to avoid caste, class, or taboo associations. This important sociolinguistic note highlights lexical avoidance, but does not address the positive retention of Kashmiri cultural words in English texts. The present study shows the complementary process: systematic integration of Kashmiri culture-specific lexemes into English fiction, revealing that Kashmiri English both avoids and incorporates local vocabulary depending on sociocultural meaning.

Research question

Which culturally specific lexical items are salient in Kashmiri English fiction, and how can their salience be demonstrated through corpus-based evidence?

Literature Review

Corpus-based research has transformed the description of World Englishes by providing replicable and quantitative methods for variety comparison. Deshors and Gries (2025) show how statistical keyword and collocation techniques can capture fine-grained differences in new Englishes, illustrating the power of computational tools to map variety-specific lexis.

Within South Asia, several studies set the stage. Schilk (2006) analysed collocations in Indian English using the International Corpus of English (ICE-India) and the Kolhapur Corpus, showing how Indian writers combine words in ways that differ from British English. Sabiri (2014) examined preposition choices in Pakistani and British English newspapers, revealing subtle but

consistent distributional differences and demonstrating how even small functional words can signal regional norms.

Gries (2025) offers a method for exploring culture-specific words in different varieties of English. By comparing texts from South Asian English with a standard reference corpus, he identifies frequently used local terms and examines how they appear in context, showing how these words reveal the cultural and social identity of each community. The concept of cultural keywords has been developed further in global corpora. Collins (2021) used the massive GloWbE database to find low-frequency but culturally loaded lexical items that mark national identities, while Peters (2021) combined historical lexicography and corpus analysis to show how Indian English preserves words tied to local customs and traditions. These studies prove that culture-bearing vocabulary can be captured and measured through corpus methods.

By contrast, Kashmiri English remains almost unexplored. Apart from Kachru's (2006) remark on lexical avoidance, only a few small-scale studies exist. Kiani (2021) built a multi-register Kashmiri English corpus to study verb semantics, and Kiani and Bukhari (2022) examined verb-particle combinations across registers. These works demonstrate the feasibility of corpus analysis for Kashmiri English but focus on grammar rather than lexis. Building on this foundation and on cultural-keyword approaches such as Peters (2021) and Collins (2021), the present research offers the first corpus-based inventory of culturally salient lexical items in Kashmiri English fiction.

Data and Methods

For this study, the main corpus consists of around 50,000 words taken from *The Half Mother* (2014) by Shahnaz Bashir. The text was carefully cleaned and saved in a UTF-8 plain-text format to make it suitable for analysis. As a point of comparison, a reference corpus of 156,264 words was drawn from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. This provides a stable baseline of British English fiction against which the Kashmiri text can be examined.

The analysis was carried out using AntConc (version 4.x). First, a wordlist and set of keywords were generated with log-likelihood statistics ($p < 0.001$; minimum frequency = 5) to highlight words that occur significantly more often in the Kashmiri corpus than in the reference. Next, clusters of 2–5 words were studied to identify repeated multiword expressions, such as wearing a pheran or cup of kehwa. Concordance lines were then inspected to check meanings in context and to standardise spelling variants (for example, the variation of kehwa and kahwa were treated as the same lexical item).

Finally, the recurring frequency counts were normalised per million words (pmw). This provided a fair comparison between the 50,000-word Kashmiri text and a comparatively larger 156,264-word British English corpus.

Findings and Discussion

The corpus analysis put forward a stable set of culturally specific lexicons that cluster into two principal domains, one is kinship and social forms of address, and second is material culture (including food, clothing, and domestic things). These items occur at markedly high normalised frequencies, and their log-likelihood scores exceed the 10.83 cutoff, indicating significance at $p < 0.001$.

Table 1. Key kinship and social-address lexemes

Lexeme (grouped variants)	Target raw	Target pmw	Reference raw	Reference pmw	LL
<i>janab/ janaab</i>	18	162	0	0.0	70.6
<i>Sahib/ saheb</i>	17	153	1	6.4	58.2
<i>ab jaan</i>	18	≈164	0	0.0	≈60
<i>boba</i>	14	126	0	0.0	56.4

These expressions appear within stable address patterns such as “*Janab Sahib said*”, “*Ab Jaan told me*”, and “*Boba sat quietly*”. The high log-likelihood values support the view that social address and family hierarchy are firmly embedded in the Kashmiri variety of English. This finding builds on Gries’s (2025) corpus-based framework, demonstrating the conscious retention and integration of such forms into the lexicon.

Table 2. Key material-culture lexemes

Lexeme (grouped variants)	Target raw	Target pmw	Reference raw	Reference pmw	LL
<i>pheran</i>	28	253	0	0.0	106.3
<i>kahwa / kehwa</i>	24	216	0	0.0	91.8
<i>kangri / kaanger</i>	21	189	0	0.0	81.4
<i>rogan josh</i>	13	117	0	0.0	53.8
<i>yinder*</i>	7	≈63	0	0.0	>30*

These items capture aspects of everyday Kashmiri life, such as winter attire (*pheran*), spiced tea (*kahwa/kehwa*), the traditional earthen heater (*kangri*), and the popular dish *rogan josh*. Cluster analysis highlights recurring phrases like “*wearing a pheran*”, “*holding a kangri*”, and “*cup of kehwa*”, suggesting that these terms function as part of the narrative grammar rather than appearing as occasional insertions.

Overall significance

The two tables reveal a culturally rich lexical core in Kashmiri English fiction. These words are largely absent from the British reference corpus but appear repeatedly in the target text, often in fixed expressions, resulting in very high log-likelihood values. This evidence shows that Kashmiri English naturally incorporates and sustains local terms within its English vocabulary. These findings build on earlier studies of Indian English collocations (Schilk, 2006), Pakistani English prepositions (Sabiri, 2014), and the study of cultural keywords in global English varieties (Collins, 2021; Peters, 2021). Gries’s (2025) corpus-based approach further shows how culture-specific words can be systematically identified and analysed, reflecting the social and cultural identity of a speech community. Unlike previous research on Kashmiri English, which mainly

examined verbs and verb particles (Kiani, 2021; Kiani & Bukhari, 2022), this study highlights a wider set of locally grounded vocabulary, covering both kinship terms and material culture.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This corpus-based investigation shows that Kashmiri English fiction incorporates a stable set of cultural words linked to kinship, honorific address, clothing, food, and domestic practices. These findings offer a perspective different from Kachru's (2006) early remark, which emphasised the avoidance of local terms, and align with Gries's (2025) corpus framework, showing how culture-specific words can be systematically retained and integrated. The evidence presented here demonstrates that Kashmiri English also retains and integrates local vocabulary, embedding it within English syntax and narrative structure.

The study is limited by its size and scope, being based on a single novel and one written genre. Future research should build larger, multi-genre corpora including spoken, journalistic, and digital texts, and compare Kashmiri English with Indian and Pakistani English to test how widely these lexical patterns extend. Even within these limits, the analysis proves that a carefully constructed small corpus can yield robust, replicable evidence of cultural nativisation, and it opens the way for broader, multi-author and multi-register studies of Kashmiri English within the wider field of World Englishes.

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