Contextualizing Machine Translation: A Comparative Analysis of Iqbal's Selected Translated Poems

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ABSTRACT

In the rapidly changing world of artificial intelligence, machine translation plays a crucial role. Even professionals are relying on machine translations. However, no research has yet examined whether machine translation is superior to human translators in providing context-based translations, especially in translating literary genres. The present study investigates issues of contextualization in machine translation through a comparative analysis of Iqbal's selected translated poems, Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa. This qualitative research examines elements of contextualization in Iqbal's poems by comparing translations produced by a human translator and the Instagram machine translation feature. Contextualization, explained by Catford (1965), is used as a theoretical framework to analyse data. The findings reveal that Iqbal's poetry contains various contextual and intertextual references that a machine is not capable of translating. The study highlights that producing a contextualized, accurate translation requires a collaborative partnership between machine and human translators.

Keywords: Instagram Machine Translation, Human Translation, Contextualization, Intertextuality, Poetic Language.

INTRODUCTION

The current study deals with the phenomenon of contextualization involved in the process of machine translation. It is broadly acknowledged that context is crucial in translation (Irshad & Yasmin, 2022; Irshad & Yasmin, 2023). A single word cannot be translated separately without context. Language is a tool of communication that we use to convey messages, share information, express our emotions, thoughts, and ideas. We use language in different contexts. In recent years, translation studies have explored new directions brought by the use of modern technology. As technology advances, machine translation and AI-based translations have become integral parts of this field. The development of modern technology has significantly impacted the field of translation studies. On one hand, it can replace professional translators in terms of speed, but on the other hand, it lacks in providing contextualized translation (Kenny, 2022). The present study examines elements of contextualization in machine translations of Iqbal's selected translated poems, *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa*, produced by a human translator and the Instagram machine translation feature.

Literary translation is considered one of the most challenging types of translation because it enriches cultural, societal, and historical factors. The translator must maintain a balance between artistic and aesthetic contexts. When translating literary genres, recreating a written piece from one language into another presents many challenges. Here, the translator must take creative steps to produce meaningful, contextualized translations (Carbonell et al., 2006). In the digital age, where machine translations and AI-

based systems are seen as potential replacements for professional translators, it is important to examine whether machine translation systems are superior to human translators in every aspect. Machines often struggle to grasp the broader context inherent in literary genres, especially poetry.

In the past, we used the radio to get information, but as time went on, we began to watch television, which was more colourful and had both audio and visual features. And nowadays, with the developments of technology, mobile phones have become an indispensable source of use, and new updates are added to them regularly. There is a plethora of applications that we can use on mobile phones, among them, one of the most used social platforms is Instagram (Ayeoribe, 2025). According to Dan Frommer, Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms, which was discovered in 2010. Initially, it was launched for Apple and Android users, but with the advancement of technology, it has expanded to other platforms (Fadilah, 2017). Initially, it was just a photo-sharing and photo-taking application. In response to growing users' demands, it added features such as sharing images and videos, titles, likes, comments, Instagram Reels, Live, and Instagram Story. The latest update of this application, according to The Daily Mail, was revealed in June 2016, which allowed users to translate commentary and biographical text into their native language. Because now Instagram's community is not limited to native America. Now, internationally, more than 100 million people use this social platform. The purpose of such an update is to reduce linguistic barriers, and it has proven tremendously helpful in understanding linguistic differences. The translation feature can recognize linguistic differences, but occasionally it produces jumbled text (Kotze, 2023).

Hence, the focus of this study is on the translation results generated by Instagram machine translation (IgT). Translation is the process of rendering the source text into the target text by converting the desired language while preserving the intended meaning. To examine translation results, the researcher compares IgT with human-performed translation to highlight the issue of contextualization. The research examines the translations of Iqbal's poems *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa*, produced by the Instagram machine and a human translator. The study deals with the following research questions:

- 1. How effectively does an Instagram machine translation feature capture the cultural and contextualized information found in Iqbal's poems *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa*?
- 2. How does a machine translate intertextual references alongside contextual features?
- **3.** Why is there a need for collaboration between humans and machines to produce high-quality contextualized translations?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Machine translation refers to a process in which, once the system has been trained, a new source text is translated without any human involvement (Liu et al., 2025). On the other hand, Human translation in this context is different. It is up to the human to use the machine as a starting point. However, human takes responsibility for the final results.

Translation and contextualization are crucial ideas in the transference of meaning between languages. To successfully transfer meaning, contextualization entails understanding the linguistic, cultural, social, and situational context of a source text. Ensuring translation captures both literal and cultural meanings requires interpreting idiomatic expressions and implicit meanings. In other words, translation is not only a transfer of ideas semantically, but it is communication of pragmatic meanings as well to make the speaker's intentions clear to the target audience. According to Knowles & Lo (2024), an effective translation always grasps the cultural and contextual meanings of the source text.

Translation researchers have conducted various studies to evaluate the quality of machine translation. For example, a study conducted by Popović et al. (2014) signified the key role played by human translators in improving MT output and proposing effective ways to enhance the results. In the same way, Fadila (2017)

highlighted the grammatical and contextual issues that existed in MT. Larasati (2019) also emphasized errors produced by machines in translation. The study focused on Indonesian translation produced by Instagram and Google Translate. The findings exposed a high frequency of terminology, grammar, and meaning-related issues in the target text produced by Instagram as compared to Google Translate. Thus, MT translates efficiently only when the source contains common vocabulary. The key objective of the present research is to analyze the issue of contextualization in literary translation, focusing on context and culture. Moreover, it also analyzes intertextuality, which is an important phenomenon in the process of translation (Irshad & Ali, 2016).

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The present research is a comparative analysis of two translations of Iqbal's popular book *Shikwa and Jawab-i-Shikwa*. The researchers compare two target versions of the selected poetry, one translated by Instagram's machine translation and the other by a human translator, Raja Sultan Zahoor Akhtar. The examples are extracted by using the well-known technique of purposive sampling and analyzed to investigate the translation accuracy regarding context, culture, and intertextuality.

Catford's (1965) idea of contextualization is used as a framework that states that language is not a separate entity but an element of a text that is deeply connected to the cultural and social aspects influencing its use. So, the contextualization of translation refers to the translation process where translators preserve the stylistic, artistic, and deep interpretations of a text according to the purpose and the audience. It is usually done by altering the vocabulary, grammar as well and style of the writing, aiming to grasp the overall context for the target readers. Briefly, it is a process of positioning a text in its particular context, whether it is social, cultural or situational (Yuxin, 2023).

Data Analysis and Discussion

A methodical, four-step procedure was employed to analyze the data. First, particular passages from Iqbal's poems, *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa*, both in their original and translated forms, were chosen. After that, a comparison was made between these chosen stanzas in the target language (TL) and the source language (SL). The investigation next turned to contextualization and intertextuality, analyzing how translations imparted or changed meaning, cultural allusions, and literary links. The main conclusions drawn from the comparative and contextual analysis were highlighted in the results and findings that were finally presented.

a) A quatrain from Shikwa

	Source text	Human translation	Instagram machine translation
2.	پھرے اور معلوم ہے تجھ کو کبھی ناکام	In planes and mountains, we traversed To spread the message was our task. On no occasion did we fail Thee That's the matter we ask.	Let your message roam in the mountains and the desert And I know that you will fail sometimes.
	دشت تو دشت ہیں دریا بھی نہ چھوڑے ہم نے بحر ظلمات میں دوڑا دنیے گھوڑے ہم نے	Planes and dessert spanning, We conquered rivers and seas And on our steeds, we galloped On oceans and their	not even leave the river We made horses run in the

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boundaries.

Table 2. Comparison of HT and Instagram MT

Interpretation

The following quatrain is taken from the 12th stanza of the poem *Shikwa*. The progress of Muslim supremacy in Western Africa, particularly along the Atlantic Ocean, is highlighted in this particular text. The intertextual expression "horses" is employed to exaggerate the event, highlighting the severity of the challenging acts undertaken by Muslims. The phrase *behre-e-zulmat* is used at the beginning of the verse to emphasise how serious the Muslims' actions were. The lexical choice *hum* "we" is significant because it carries a sense of inclusivity and unity, including not only himself but also other Muslims of his generation and those who have triumphed in previously unconquerable regions of the world. Muslim rule in Africa began with this event and later expanded.

The human translation presents the source text in an organized way, preserving the original flow of ideas. The use of poetic techniques such as rhyme and rhythm enhances the artistry and expressiveness of the translated text. In contrast, Instagram machine translation lacks coherence and poetic quality. For the machine, it is difficult to maintain the rhythm and structure of the original text, resulting in an irregular and incoherent output.

The contextual and intertextual aspects of the source text are successfully conveyed in the human translation, creating an accurate image of flying over mountains and plains to spread a message. Conversely, the translation provided by the machine appears ambiguous. The MT is unclear as it suggests that your message wanders through deserts and mountains and discusses the expected failures, which is not the correct interpretation. Similarly, the MT cannot adequately translate every element of the text, such as intertextuality, resulting in a less refined and more literal translation. The machine's effort to translate poetic elements, for example, "like horses running in a sea of darkness," does not produce a translation as fitting as a human one. It indicates that the MT by Instagram is unable to replicate the poetic spirit, expressiveness, and literary impact of the ST as crafted by the human translator. It shows the machine's incapability to translate the contextual meanings appropriately.

b) A couplet from Shikwa

	Source text	Human translation	Instagram Machine translation
1.	تو ہی کہہ دے کہ اکھاڑا در خیبر کس نے شہر قیصر کا جو تھا اس کو کیا سر	Uprooted the gates of	Only you can tell who has won the arena in Khyber.
	کس نے	Who were they who reduced it to nothing The proudest capital of Caesar?	Who did anything to the city of Qaiser?

Table 1. Comparison of HT and Instagram MT

Interpretation

Shikwa is a poem written by Allama Muhammad Iqbal in the Urdu language and published in 1909 in his book Bang-e-Dara. Shikwa centers around the idea of "complaint to God" for the fall of the Muslims. The poem's main theme is that God has not fulfilled his promise of shielding the prophet's followers from decline and loss. Iqbal recited this poetry for the very first time in Lahore at a poetry gathering organized by Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam. This poem is enriched with poetic beauty and depth of thought.

The above couplet is taken from the 9th stanza of the poem *Shikwa*. The couplet includes intertextual expressions like *ukahara dare khyber* and *shehre qaiser*. Here, the poet complains to Allah about the Muslims' worst situation. He recalls the situation of Muslims and states that he is aware of who evacuated the gates of Khyber and who took control of the city of Qaiser. The translator must understand these references to transfer the contextual message. The whole message is about the magnificent and glorious history of Muslims. However, there is a difference between translated versions produced by a human and the Instagram machine. The differences occur at various levels, i.e., *content accuracy, contextual appropriateness*, and *intertextual references*. With specific references to the *fierce valour* that uprooted the gates of Khyber and the reduction of *Caesar's proudest capital to nothing*, the human translation renders the source text more accurately. In contrast, the Instagram machine translation introduces the idea of "winning the arena in Khyber" and substitutes a less precise phrase, such as "Who did anything to the city of Qaiser," for the original. The human translation preserves the poetic and historical context by making references to particular historical figures and events, such as "the gates of Khyber" and "Caesar's capital". Although it tries to portray a sense of action and conquest, the Instagram machine translation lacks contextual and historical nuances.

Ukhara Dar-e-Khyber is associated with the historical Islamic event known as the Battle of Khyber, which took place in 627 AD. It emphasises the Muslim conquest, especially the valour of Hazrat Ali (RA). In Islamic history, the Battle of Khyber is a notable victory. Khyber is the name of a fort occupied by Jews. Jews criticized the progress of Islam, telling the Prophet (SAW) that their fort was unconquerable and they would teach the lessons to the Muslims. Hazrat Ali was instructed by the Prophet (SAW) to conquer the fort. Three courageous Jewish warriors approached him, but Hazrat Ali killed them. Many Jews fled towards the Fort to isolate themselves in this situation. However, he attacked the gate and destroyed it. On this, the Jews dropped their weapons and ran away (Irshad, Ali & Usman, 2019). The second phrase, shehar gaiser ka jo tha usko kia sar kis ne? also refers to the Muslim conquest. The non-Muslim king of Byzantium, Qaiser of Rome, was concerned about the growth of the Muslim empire. Syria was a Roman Empire colony at the time. When the Prophet (SAW) became aware that Qaiser's army was gathering in Syria on the ninth day of Hijri, he ordered all Muslims to stand with him in this attempt. He travelled with 30,000 soldiers to the Syrian border, where they remained for three weeks until the Muslims were forced to withdraw from the neighboring areas. As a result, Muslims conquered the Byzantine army without engaging in fighting. This occasion is recognized as pivotal in establishing the Muslim state (Dalvi, 2012). The intertextual elements found in the original Urdu text, such as references to historical people and events, are skillfully translated by humans. The interpretation provided by the Instagram machine translation is very general, losing the ability to preserve the intertextual elements and historical context.

Concerning accuracy, contextual appropriateness, and preservation of intertextual elements, the human translation performs better in this instance than the Instagram machine translation. Because human translators are better able to comprehend poetic devices, language nuances, and historical and cultural circumstances, their translations of the source text are more accurate in context. Despite its best efforts, Instagram's machine translation falls short in terms of accuracy and depth when translating poetic language in a way that preserves intertextual elements and makes sense in context.

c) A couplet from Jawab-e-Shikwa

	Source text	Human translation	Instagram machine translation
3.	چاہتے سب ہیں کہ ہوں اوج ٹریا پہ مقیم	To be at the top is the, Heart's desire, of each one amid you!	Everyone wants me to be based on Surya.
	پہلے ویسا کوئی پیدا تو کرے قلب سلیم	First, produce such a soul, Who can make the dream come true?	At least someone should give birth to him first. Qalib Salim.

Table 2. Comparison of HT and Instagram MT

Interpretation

Jawab-i-Shikwa (Response to the complaint) was published in 1913 in Iqbal's book "Bang-e-Dara". It is the form of God's reply. This poem is written as a reply to the poem Shikwa, "complaint. The direct response from God in this poem is that the Muslims, who are his followers, are the ones who have drifted from the path, not he. At a political rally outside Mochi Gate in Lahore in 1913, Iqbal recited Jawab-i-Shikwa to raise funds for the Turkish government's fight against a Bulgarian uprising, which was a precursor to the khilafat movement.

The above-mentioned couplet is taken from the 21st stanza of the poem Jawab-i-Shikwa. The use of the expression auj-e-suraya means the height of the Pleiades. Pleiades is the name of the star mentioned in Surah Najm of the Quran. In the context of this poem, this expression gives the sense of "extreme height". The second expression, qalb-e-saleem, means a heart with a sound conscience. In Iqbal's portion of art, it is given a meaning of "a heart with deep love of Allah". In this stanza, Iqbal narrates the condition of contemporary Muslims. He said, "You prefer to fight with each other, although your predecessors were forgiving each other. You make blunders and are curious about the blunders of others. Whereas your forefathers were overlooked and forgiven. As it turns out, everyone in this world desires to thrive at the greatest level, but to be at the top, first, he has to produce such a soul. With bravery and devotion, your forefathers occupied much of the world, but in contrast, the truth is that you lack the same bravery as your forefathers" (M. Yasir, 2025).

The human translation, with more sophisticated and colloquial language, refers to the aspiration to be at the top as the heart's desire. On the contrary, the Instagram machine translation takes a more literal and straightforward approach, conveying the sense that everyone wants "me to be based on Surya". The machine fails to give an accurate translation. The phrase "to be at the top as the heart's desire" is used in the human translation, which gives the desire for success and expresses emotion. The Instagram machine translation loses the meaning found in the original Urdu text. The human translation communicates a sense of aspiration and the need for a soul capable of comprehending the dream while preserving the poetic and contextual elements of the original text. Often, contextual elements appear to be lost in the Instagram machine translation. It doesn't match the original text. The final phrase "Qalib Salim" seems to be a mistranslation. The original Urdu text's poetic, historical, and contextual elements are successfully preserved in the human translation, which emphasises the need for an experienced person to realize everyone's dream of greatness while also expressing the universal desire for greatness. Although it attempts to deliver a similar message, the Instagram machine translation is unable to maintain the subtle and contextual elements. The inclusion of Qalib Salim and the reference to Surya appear to be errors, suggesting that the Instagram machine did not fully capture the poetic and contextual subtleties of the original text.

The human translation displays a more nuanced understanding when it comes to translating poetic language, contextually retaining the emotional depth and contextual subtleties found in the original work. Though it conveys the essence of the message, the Instagram machine translation is not precise enough to accurately capture the poetic content. Human translators are excellent at capturing the nuance and richness of poetic language.

d) A quatrain from Jawab-e-Shikwa

Source text		Human translation	Instagram machine translation
4.	اس نئی آگ کا اقوام کہن ایندھن ہے ملت ختم رسل شعلہ بہ پیرابن ہے آج بھی ہو جو براہیم کا ایماں پیدا آگ کر سکتی ہے انداز گلستاں پیدا	To this new fire, are the fuel, Old nations like faggots on a pyre	Where is the fuel of this new fire? The nation is finished. Rasul is covered with the flame.
		Disciples of the last "Messenger" Are swilled in its fire. Even if today the faith Of "Abraham" is made to glow. Out of the Infidels' fire, A garden of blossoms will grow.	Even today, if Brahim's faith was born Fire can create a style of garden.

Table 2. Comparison of HT and Instagram MT

Interpretation

Jawab-e-Shikwa's 25th stanza holds elements of displeasure and hope. The poet begs the reader to put aside grievances regarding brutality and the destructive tide of contemporary society, which has the potential to destroy everything in its path. The orthodox Muslim states, whose citizens are passionate supporters of the unity of the Muslim Ummah, are especially vulnerable to the new civilization. The famous explanation of Prophet Ibrahim, who was thrown into a gigantic fire by Nimrod for spreading Islam and demolishing idols, is mentioned in the poem. Because of his faith in Allah Almighty, the fire turned cold and harmless, transforming it into a garden where he spent forty days. His firm faith in Allah Almighty made this possible. Iqbal hopes that modern Muslims will own the same unwavering faith and conviction as the Prophet Ibrahim, which will shield them from the evil forces that are trying to weaken them (Umar1, 2019).

The expression "aqwam-i-kuhan" means the people of ancient days. In translation, Raja Sultan Zahoor Akhtar uses the phrase "old nations". However, the machine translates it as the nation is finished. The context and structure of both versions are different. The last two lines contain an intertextual element by referring to Prophet Ibrahim, who was thrown into a huge fire by Nimrod just because he preached Islam and destroyed the idols. But his strong belief in Allah saves him from the fire. Iqbal thus hopes that if modern Muslims adopt the Prophet Ibrahim's strong faith and beliefs, they will be impervious to evil forces that are trying to weaken them.

The human translation conserves a more formal and poetic tone by using poetic language, "Disciples of the last Messenger," which is used to deliver the historical and religious background. The translation imagines a garden of flowers emerging from the fire and suggests that "Abraham's faith" may be glowing. The poetic and figurative language used in the human translation is absent from the machine translation. In comparison to the human translation, the phrase "fuel of this new fire" is awkward and vivid. Associated with

"Abraham," the Instagram machine is not producing any reference to the past. And the expression "Fire can create a style of garden" lacks the complex imagery found in the human translation.

When discussing contextual and intertextual features in the light of contextualization theory, the analysis highlights that the human translation accurately conveys the religious aspects of the original text. It preserves the poetic quality and awareness of the context of the text. In contrast, machine translation struggles to convey the same subtle meaning. This translation is more direct and lacks any indirect religious allusions. It provides a basic understanding of the content but fails to fully communicate the richness of the source. Even with significant advances in machine translation, human translators still excel at translating the language and textual references of poetry.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the present research reveal that Instagram's MT performance struggles to render cultural and textual details in Iqbal's poetry accurately in the TT. It summarizes the themes but lacks a deep understanding of idioms, cultural references, and context. The richness of the original text is often lost in MT, especially in the case of poetic language and cultural sensitivities. MT usually cannot grasp the deep-rooted contextual meaning, as MT tools are not adequate for cultural texts.

The study emphasizes that managing contextual features alongside intertextual references challenges machine translation, especially with Instagram's translation feature. Machines often overlook intertextual cues and context-dependent expressions. Consequently, the translations generated by automated systems tend to be less effective at capturing the intertextual nuances present in the original text. This can lead to a failure to fully recognize or convey intertextual references, which are crucial for understanding the layered meanings in literary works.

The research focuses on the significance of collaborative work done by humans and machines during the process of translation. MT is fast and works efficiently; however, human translators effectively handle the contextual, cultural, and pragmatic aspects of source texts. MT is limited in its performance, which indicates the significant role of humans in translating literary texts. Human involvement in machine translation can result in high-quality translations. Despite its advantages, MT at its own is unable to completely communicate the cultural, intertextual, and contextual aspects of a literary text.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the problem of contextualization in MT by conducting a comparative analysis of selected translations of Iqbal's poems, *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa*. The study concludes that MT is incapable of understanding the cultural, contextual, and intertextual elements of these poems (Bassnett, 2014). Although machine translation has its advantages, it is not as efficient as human translators who are more skilled in interpreting cultural nuances, complex contexts, and intertextual references (Venuti, 2012). The research sheds light on the shortcomings of MT and the importance of collaboration between human and machine in producing accurate, faithful, and contextually rich translations.

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