Translating the Untranslatable: A Study of Semantic Losses in Translating the Religious Thoughts in Iqbal's Selected Verses

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Abstract

This paper investigates the problems in translating the religious thought of Iqbal's poetry. It explores how different translators of Iqbal have failed to understand and capture the meaning of the original. The study is significant as it examines both foreign and indigenous translations of Iqbal's poetry. The researchers have analysed the selected verses from his poetry. After analysing the textual data, it is revealed that both indigenous and foreign translators have deviated from the meaning and sense of the original. Moreover, their translations have failed to grasp Iqbal's religious thoughts and as a result they reflect visible gaps when compared with the original. The study concludes with the understanding that Iqbal's profound philosophy, his plentiful use of metaphorical expressions and the cultural and religious references make his poetry untranslatable in the absolute sense and ultimately resulting in semantic losses in translating his religious thoughts expressed in his poetry.

Keywords: translation, untranslatability, meaning losses, religious thought, Iqbal's poetry.

Background to the study

Good poetry is often lost in translation and the situation gets worse when the translation involves religious dimensions and when the religions of the audience of the source language and the target language differ. The different strategies of translation such as domestication, foreignization,

formal and dynamic equivalences that are used, and syntactic and lexical choices that are made by translators impact the sense of the original thought in the target text.

Translator scholars in general believe that poetry loses its charm when translated. For instance, earlier Frost had once stated that the distinguishing feature of best of poetry is that it is lost in translation. Frost (as cited in Robinson, 2010, p. 24). Jackobson also supported this view and claimed that it is not only the meaning or content of a poem which has to be transferred in the translated text, but also its form and phonetic quality are equally important (as cited in Pirnajmuddin & Medhat, 2011). It is because of this inextricable connection between the form and content which makes the task of poetry's translation more demanding in general and that of religious poetry in particular as compared to other forms of literature such as drama or prose.

Historically, there has been a long debate over the issues involved in rendering a literary text, especially that of poetry. Mostly, the discussions hovered around the theoretical aspect of the possibility and translatability of poetry translation. Niknasab and Pishbin (2011) cite Catford who states that there are basically two schools of thoughts regarding the translatability of poetry: firstly, the Universalist approach which favours the translatability of poetry's translation by virtue of linguistic universals shared by the world's languages. Secondly, Monadists, on the other hand, are of the view that language community in general have their own distinctive ways of categorising and understanding reality which create problems in translation (Samuel & Samuel, 2007). This is also the main argument of the present work. The researchers argue that poetry is untranslatable in the absolute sense because of its inherent distinguishing features. This also applies to the

translation of Iqbal's Poetry that is loaded with his religious thoughts which are embedded in the Islamic and South Asian cultural context. These thoughts are usually well known and understandable in the local context, may not be easily understandable to the English readers. This ultimately results in the loss of meaning. Further, Iqbal's religious thoughts often explore complex philosophical concepts such as the nature of God, the human soul, and the purpose of existence. Translating these concepts into English is generally challenging as the translators find it difficult to have the exact equivalents for the philosophical terminology in English.

The researchers have taken the selected verses from Allama Iqbal's poetry in order to show that the deeper meaning associated with the original text cannot be transferred altogether.

Objectives of the Study

To identify untranslatability of Iqbal's religious thoughts in the renditions of his selected verses. This will highlight inadequacies in the translations of Iqbal's Islamic thought expressed in his selected verses.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in the sense that Iqbal is a great Muslim philosopher, thinker and poet. He is the representative of Islamic thought which he has expressed through his poetry. Understanding his use of figurative language and the message contained in his verses is essential for the translators as well as the readers of the translations. Therefore, it is important to highlight the untranslatability of Iqbal's religious thoughts in his verses and to pinpoint those areas where there are striking deviations from the original Islamic thoughts expressed in his poetry. This study is an

attempt to identify the gaps that exist between the original Islamic thought and the way the translators understood them.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative as it has analysed and interpreted the textual data. This involves the stylistic analysis of the translations of Iqbal's selected verses. Firstly, the selected verses have been closely read for the use of figurative language, words choices and the religious connotations associated with the text and the Islamic standpoint. Secondly, the translations of these verses have been juxtaposed with the original and various types of deviations and the phenomenon of untranslatability have been explored.

Literature Review

Translation of poetry is undoubtedly a challenging task as it includes more losses than gains that which make it untranslatable (Abbas, 2018). However, linguists and translation scholars have defined untranslatability in different ways. Catford describes two kinds of untranslatability: linguistic and cultural. The former denotes the translation problems which arise from the differences in the Target Language (TL) and Source Language (SL); in case of cultural untranslatability, the TL culture offers no cultural equivalent for an SL item. Generally, untranslatability exists in both forms. Popovic (as cited in Bassnet) has also defined untranslatability similarly but has not categorized it in linguistic and cultural terms. According to him, in case of linguistic untranslatability, the linguistic items of the original find no adequate substitute in terms of structure, function and meaning because the linguistic and cultural system of the target language does not offer the

correspondent terms. He holds that translation is not simply the substitution or replacement of linguistic items in terms of lexicon or grammar, it is "the goal to "achieve... expressive identity" (Bassnet, 2002,p. 32). In the second case, the issue relates to the non-availability of adequate expression as the original like relationship between the subject and its expression in the target culture. This holds true to the current study as Iqbal's deeper philosophy, his excessive use of metaphorical expressions and the religious and cultural allusions make his poetic lines hard to render.

Translators also find it difficult to deal with words and thoughts of a distant time or when the author is dead. Bassnet (2002) states, that rendering a text written at a distant time is a challenging task for a translator. Secondly, a similar context in which the original text was written exist no more in its translation. It means that the more the poetic text is distant in time, the more complications in translating its content and form result. Therefore, if a translator focuses on retaining the formal and structural aspects of rhyme and metre, he is likely to sacrifice the meaning.

Similarly, words in a poem are not only significant for their meanings, but they are also crucial for their sound and music. According to Shamlu a poem reflects a specific instance of experience that brings with it its own musical expressions (as cited in Pirnajmuddin & Medhat, 2011, p. 5 or 1333). Venuti (2012) cites Schleiermacher, who argues that the tricky area in translating poetry is the interconnection between the musical aspect and the meaning of words. According to him, the musical component of poetic text and artistic prose is expressive of a higher meaning. He further states that a translation would look awkward if a translator only tries to save the melodic component rather than focusing on the deeper meaning of the text. In such cases, the translator is likely to keep the metre intact, but not

without neglecting the logical element. Such an attempt is usually useless because the naturalness of rhythm and tone, expressed in one language, is substituted by inept expressions in the other.

Another significant point is that languages are also different concerning meaning and syntax. Furthermore, historical factors also indicate that it is not always possible to replicate certain specific features of a piece of literature in a new language. According to Raffel (1959), current research in linguistics shows that modern languages are like proper systems in which all features are related. Moreover, languages change in terms of their lexicon, phonology, and how these words and sounds are combined.

Translatability also depends on similarities and differences between the languages involved in the translation. According to Nida & Taber (1964, p. 126) " the conflict between the dictates of form and content becomes especially important where the form of the message is highly specialized" as it is in poetry (as cited in niknasaf &Pishbin, nd, p. 2). However, the researchers argue that translatability does not mean the transfer of both form and content of a poem. In other words, content and form, which look like separate elements, are closely combined in a poem.

Finally, poets do use figurative language and deviate from the way language is ordinarily used. Tailanyo (2007, p.1) argues the figurative language is an "inalienable part of the text as a literary piece". This also holds true to Iqbal as he was not only a poet, but a great thinker and philosopher. His poetry is laden with a variety of poetic devices, cultural, religious and historical allusions. Moreover, his words are not simple, but a combination of several words, with a chain of meanings. This poses a great challenge for the translators to render his verses. Therefore, both indigenous

and foreign translators, sometimes fail to grasp the meaning and sense of the original. The researchers have given a detailed description of various deviations done by different translators.

Analysis

I have taken the selected verses from Iqbal's poetry which have been rendered by different translators:

Verse no. 1.

"ہے اسکی طبیعت میں تشیع بھی ذرا سا"
"تفضیل علی ہم نے سنی اس کی زبانی"

The above couplet has been taken from the poem, *Zhuhd-o-Rindi* (Piety and Ecstasy) which has been translated by Khalil as under:

" He has accepted a little bit of Shiaism also "

"I have heard the greatness of Ali from him" (Bang-i-Dara, p.94)

Here, the word 'greatness is the translation of *tafzeel* , which according to *Shia* creed is used for the fourth Caliph, Ali. In other words, Ali is considered superior over all other companions of Prophet (Peace be upon Him). So, keeping in view the Shia's concept of Ali's preference over the earlier three Caliphs, the word greatness does not convey the actual creed. It should have been either *superiority* or *preference.*

Verse no. 2.

"وہ شمع بارگہ خاندان مرتضوی"

The above line has been taken from *ltija-i-Musafir* (The Traveller's Request), which has been rendered by Khalil as this:

"The candle of the audience of the Holy Prophet's descendants"

Here, the word *murtazwi* has been derived from the word *Murtaza* which in reality is associated with Hazrat Ali (RA), but the translator attributes it to the Holy Prophet (S.A.W).

Verse no. 3.

"کلمہ پڑھتے تھے ہم چھاؤں میں تلواروں میں"

The above line has been translated by Arbury whose artistic skills as a translator are beyond any doubt, but at some places, he has failed to understand Iqbal's line. Accordingly, the above-mentioned line has been rendered by him as under: -

In the shadow of our glinting swords, we shouted, "God is one!" (*Shikwah*, stanza no.6, p. 4).

In the above translation, the use of the wrong pronoun shows that the translator has failed to understand the actual meaning as the fighters were Muslims and the swords belonged to the enemies, as outlined in the source text. However, it creates ambiguity in understanding the real sense when the translator uses the pronoun *our*, and is therefore, inappropriate.

A similar, ambiguity also exists in the possessive pronoun/possessive adjective 'our' in stanza no. 8 (p. 8) of *Shikwah*

Verse no. 4.

"تیغ کیا چیز ہے ہم توپ سے لڑ جاتے تھے"

Then we hurled us on their cannons, took their sword points but for play.

Another inaccuracy is seen in the use of the word 'the Kaaba's shrine', in translating the following line.

Verse no. 5.

"ہے خوشی ان کو کہ کعبے کے نگہبان گئے"

Jubilant to see the guardians of the Kaaba's shrine depart (*Shikw*a, Stanza, 15, p. 12).

As apparent from the above translation, the translator seems to have understood that the shrine constitutes a part of Kaaba also spelled Ka'bah, whereas it is actually a sacred home of Allah and the centre of worship, to which Muslims turn their faces from all over the world.

Similarly, Arbury excludes Owais's original name in rendering the line below, and leaves only *Qarni*, which is his tribal name. One possible reason for the deletion of the first name may be that Western readers focus on the second name. However, in the present case, the word, is not part of his actual name which might not be enough to be recognised by the Western readers. Moreover, his rendition "رسم سلمان واویس قرنی کو چھوڑا" is not supplemented by the footnotes or endnotes and it has been translated as under:

Did we quit the path of *Salman*, ease from *Qarni* to learn? (*Shikwah*, Stanza no. 21, p. 16)

Verse no.6.

"امتحاں ہے ترے ایثار کا، خودداری کا"

Yet it can thy self-denial and thy pride to testing bring (*Shikwah*, stanza no 30, p.46)

The word "خودداری" - *Khuddārī* has been translated as 'self-denial' by Arbury, which does not convey the actual connotation, and is therefore not the accurate translation. Instead, self-respect' could have been adequate translation, being close to the original sense of the word. Likewise, he uses the noun 'pride' for the original word "ایثار" - *īthār* which does not correspond with the meaning of the original.

Semantic gap is evidently discernible in rendering the word "تگ و تاز" used in the source text as shown below.

Verse no.7.

"تا سر عرش بھی انساں کی تگ و تاز ہے کیا؟"

"Shall a mortal man aspire in our high firmament to sit? " (*Jawab-i-Shikwah*, Stanza,3, p.28).

Here, the poet states that the peculiar sound surprised all the angels as well as the heavenly creatures and they started inquiry as to how a man on earth could have an approach to the highest altitude i.e. the heaven. But using the infinitive 'to sit' in the translation seems to have no connection with the meaning of the original.

Verse no.9

"کچھ بڑی بات تھی ہوتے جو مسلمان بھی ایک"

(*Jawab-i-Shikwah*, Stanza, 13).

But to act as one, and Muslims—that would every bound exceed. (Arbury, p. 35)

The rendition of the preceding line is another example of semantic deviation as Iqbal does not feel happy about the disunity in the Muslim Ummah, and he emphasises the need for harmony, the only way to success.

He feels surprised over the sad fact that they are the believers of *tawhid*, but they are not united under a single flag. In Qur'an Allah says:

"واعتصموبحبل اللہ جمیعاً ولا تفرقوا"

"And hold fast to the Rope of Allah, and be not divided among yourselves" Quran 3:103.

Iqbal also desires for the same unity among Muslims. In contrast, the translation shows no connection with the original in terms of meaning. It looks as if Arbury has translated this line without comprehending the message encoded by the author. Consequently, his rendition "exceeding of every bound", deviates from the meanings of the original and fails to capture the Islamic message as intended by the poet.

Verse no.10.

"عقل ہے تیری سپر عشق ہے شمشیر تیری"

"Thou hast reason for thy buckler, and thy sword is Love Divine" (Stanza no. 36, page, 50).

In the translation of above line, the translator has used the word 'reason' for the word *Aql* and the word *sipar* has been translated as 'buckler'. What is debatable here is the word 'reason', followed by the preposition 'for' in the translation. If the source text is closely analysed, it reveals that it has been metaphorically used it in the meaning of 'wisdom'. In other words, he compares the wisdom of Muslims with the sharp sword, but the translator has taken it for the cause of or reason for some happening, which is illogical and which does not coincide the sense of the source text.

Verse no.11.

"ہم کو جمعیت خاطر یہ پریشانی تھی"

"ورنہ امت ترے محبوب کی دیوانی تھی"

" We Your people were dispersed, no solace could we find,"

"Or, would Your Beloved's following have gone out of its mind? "

This couplet has been taken from the third stanza of *Shikwah* (p.30), translated by Singh. After analysing the translation, it appears that he fails to transfer the actual sense, as the poet essentially intends to communicate that *tawhid* spread through Muslims in the world. In other words, they disseminated the message that Allah is one to the rest of the world like a fragrance which diffuses in all direction. However, the use of the expressions "out of its mind" and "no solace could we find" implies that the believers were agitated, troubled and had gone insane. This is totally opposite to the original meaning of the source text.

Verse no.12.

"کلمہ پڑھتے تھے ہم چھاؤں میں تلواروں کی"

"Under the shades of glittering sabres Your creed we proclaimed"

(Stanza no 6, p. 33 of *Shikwah*.)

Singh has also translated the above line and as the translation shows, the use of the word 'creed' is not understandable here. It does not correspond with *Kalima—a* specific term in Islamic injunction, which has exact wording *La Ilaha Illallah,* highlighting the Oneness of Allah. It negates everything that associates the right of worship to any other entity, intcluding the concept of the God in Christianity. Therefore, creed is not its faithful translation.

Verse no.12.

"حیدری فقر ہے نے دولت عثمانی ہے"

(Stanza no. 20 of *Shikwah*)

Again, the translator is Singh and the religious connotative meaning, related to the word *faqr* causes confusion, as shown by the translation given below: -

You take neither Ali pledge of poverty; nor Usman path of wealth pursue' (Singh, p.80)

The expression 'pledge of poverty' appears to be an inappropriate translation of *faqr*, as it is not equivalent to the symbolic meaning of being virtuous in Islam. Furthermore, it refers to the pride and satisfaction one gains from true earned earning. The word *faqir* in its actual sense, implies that the person is virtuous, for the sake of human beings and as a result is rich in the true sense. In contrast, the one who accumulates wealth through unfair ways is despicable. In this sense, the expression 'poverty' as used in the meaning of 'beggary' in the target text apparently does not correspond to the actual meaning, as suggested by the poet in the ST. The translator, however, has explained it in the footnotes for the understanding of the reader for which he must be credited.

Verse no.13.

کیوں زیاں کار بنوں سود فراموش رہوں؟
فکر فردا نہ کروں محو غم دوش رہوں

(*Shikwah*, Stanza no.1)

Why should I suffer loss,

And abstain to quest what avail I may?

(Akhtar, p.3)

Akhtar has rendered the above couplet, who is one of the indigenous translators of Iqbal. A close analysis of the couplet reveals a visible difference in the length as the number of syllables is six in the first line and

ten in the second line. This inconsistency in rhythm is visible in the whole translation. which has impact on the smoothness and the flow that a reader could feel while going through these lines. In other words, a reader can feel the lack of rhythm in his translation which, in turn, puts a question mark on translator's knowledge of English prosody. Secondly, in some other places, the errors are clearly visible in the translation. For instance, his rendition of the subsequent line from stanza no. 24 of *Shikwah* gives an evidence of this argument.

Verse no.14.

قیس دیوانہ نظارہ محمل نہ رہا

No more he glimpse "Laila's" sedan.

(Akhtar, p. 49)

In this translation, as a tense marker, the verb 'glimpse' requires the inflection 's' after 'he', which is omitted in the rendition. This is an instance of morphological deviation. Though poets can exercise their poetic license and can make such deviations but in translations such freedom is less used by translators. Only recognized poets such as Iqbal himself can make such deviations in his poetry. A similar example is found in stanza no 27 of *Shikwah*:

Verse no. 15

My Heart's cravings are unfulfilled
Constantly the life blood drain;
My bosom is dagger gashed,
Strive hard with the cry of pain.

(Akhtar, p.54)

In this translation, the use of verb 'drain' that occurs in line-2 is confusing. It is unclear what drains out, the heart's cravings or the lifeblood,

draining out. Moreover, there is a semantic relation between 'My bosom' which the subject in line -3 and the verb 'Strive' in line-4, but there is no grammatical agreement between the subject 'My bosom' as the corresponding verb needs the affix 's' or 'es' after it. Therefore, 'strives' should have been used instead of 'strive'.

Akhtar commits almost the same mistake in his rendition of the first line of *Jawab-i-Shikwah* where his verb 'fail' does not have an agreement with his subject, 'passion'.

Verse no. 16

Passion streaming from the heart
Never fail to have effect.

(Akhtar, p. 66)

Verse no. 17

پر نہیں طاقت پرواز مگر رکھتی ہے
قدسی الاصل ہے رفعت پہ نظر رکھتی ہے
خاک سے اٹھتی ہے گردوں پہ نظر رکھتی ہے
But no! Blessed is its origin,
On heights its locus is set;
Though they have no wings,
Yet pierces through the sky.

(Akhtar, p. 66).

The translation of stanza-26 of *Jawab-i-Shikwah* needs to be clarified as there is a confusion in it.

Verse no. 18

دیکھ کر رنگ چمن ہو نہ پریشاں مالی
کوکب غنچہ سے شاخیں ہیں چمکنے والی
خس و خشاک سے ہوتا ہے گلستاں خالی
گل بر انداز ہے خون شہداء کی لالی

رنگ گردوں کا ذرا دیکھ تو عنّابی ہے

As soon the branches will be gay
With buds, with and beaming bright.

This is clear here that the buds and the branches will blossom and effloresce in the spring season but the phrase or expression "beaming bright" which is preceded by the word "buds" is semantically not understandable because buds shoot or sprouts, they do not beam. It would have been more appropriate if the translator had used the word 'star' between the words 'with' and 'beaming', instead, but it has not been used. In fact, the ST shows Iqbal's optimism that the golden period will again return with all its glory in the near future. This is apparent from the last two lines where he says that the redness of the flowers (گل) and the bright color of the sky (گردوں). However, an important point to note here is that the translator might have omitted it unintentionally, but it may be a printing mistake. However, whatever the case may be, these are unjustifiable errors.

Akhtar's has used some collocations in the translation which appears incorrect in English usage. This is another shortcoming from which Akhtar's translation suffers. For example, this is exhibited in his translation of the second last line of Stanza-3 (p.6), which reads like as follows:

Verse no. 19.

بوئے گل پھیلتی کس طرح جو ہوتی نہ نسیم

But then no breeze its aroma stretch

As a matter of fact, the translation is debatable for several reasons. Firstly, being a singular subject, the noun breeze needs the verb with the inflection 'es' in order to show the present simple tense. However, the translator has used the base form or the bare infinitive here. Secondly, 'spread' could have been a better choice if used in place of the verb "stretch" as the last word of the sentence as the fragrance of flowers is spread not stretched by the breeze. "Stretch" does not collocate with the word aroma

and this causes problem as the two words have different shades of meaning. Therefore, it is not appropriate lexical choice to be used here.

In the same way, the word 'Thouself', used as a reflexive pronoun in the rendition of stanza 19 at page 38, is not used in English. The translation lacks the true Urdu equivalents at different places and the lexical choices made by the author do not seem appropriate.

Conclusion

The present research aimed at exploring the phenomenon of untranslatability in Iqbal's poetry. Firstly, the researchers have already discussed that Iqbal's philosophical and ideological standpoint which he has expressed using various poetic devices make his poetry almost untranslatable. A detailed analysis of translations of selected verses from his poetry carried out by local/ foreign translators has shown that they have failed to translate the religious allusions, philosophical thought as well as the profuse Islamic metaphors associated with the original text. Most importantly they have failed to comprehend the religious thought and message contained in his selected verses. As a result, lexical, semantic and syntactic deviations were identified in these translations. Secondly, the study has shown that apart from subtlety of language, the time interval between the original text and the translation is also significant factor because the immediate context in which Iqbal wrote his verses was not available to the translators who rendered his verses decades after his death. Furthermore, in poetry translation, there is no way to come up with outright formula or answers as we do in mathematics due to the complexity of language. Therefore, it is not possible for the translators of the same ST to yield precisely the same translation products, though similarities could be expected. This holds true in regards to the present study as the three

renditions of Iqbal's poesy has revealed dissimilarities because the translators have picked diverse lexical and syntactical choices depending on their individual interpretation and understanding of the ST. Nonetheless, their renditions, occasionally, show some similarities.

We may partly agree with Frost's view regarding the translation of poetry. According to him, poetry is best only when it is lost in translation. However, Benjamin's (1923) argument is also worthy to note as he claims that even the higher level of a text, is translatable though its meaning may not transferred completely. Benjamin's remarks refer to sacred writing in which deviation can distort the spirit of the original. Therefore, the translator must be careful to maintain this connection intact. As the present study deals with Iqbal's two popular poems, Shikwah and *Jawab-i-Shikwah*, which is replete with the sacred Islamic canons that were in vogue in the golden past, but do not exist anymore. This became the starting point for Iqbal who vehemently expressed his voice in the form of complaint (*Shikwah)*. He was optimistic that the lost glory can be restored and the Muslims would again enjoy dominating the world. This is possible only if they obey the commandments of Allah and their actions speak louder than their words. In fact, Iqbal gives the remedy in the second part i.e. *Jawab-i-Shikwah* for the shacking belief of the Modern-day Muslims. But we conclude this research with the understanding that Iqbal's translators have tried their best to translate him, though their translations have shown semantic gaps and a loss of emphasis which provide ample evidence for the untranslatability involved in translating Iqbal's Islamic thought.

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