



Translators as Cultural Mediators: Latin American Poetics and Its Representation in Modern Hindi Poetry

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Abstract:

Grounded in the reception of Latin American poets in the Hindi poetic arena, this paper examines how translators such as Kunwar Narain, Uday Prakash, and Mangalesh Dabral function as creative agents who recode foreign poetics into Indian literary sensibilities. Drawing on Hindi translations of Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, and Octavio Paz, the paper argues that these translators engage in various selective processes akin to algorithmic operations: filtering themes, adapting imagery, domesticating metaphors, and recalibrating rhythms to resonate with Hindi idioms and socio-political contexts. Rather than treating translation as derivative reproduction, the study situates it between poetic production and transnational influence. By framing translators as cultural algorithms, the paper rethinks influence not as linear transmission but as iterative transformation, highlighting the ethical, aesthetic, and ideological responsibilities embedded in acts of translation. This approach offers a human-centred counterpoint to contemporary discussions of algorithmic mediation, reaffirming translation as a historically situated practice.

Keywords: Cultural Algorithms, Translation as Mediation, Latin American Poetry, Transnational Poetics, South-South Solidarity.

As far as translation is concerned, the act of changing words from one language to another is considered the feature of a simple mind. In the literary arena, however, scholars find it to be a creative act that ensures not only the transmission of words; it transports perceptions, sensations, histories and worldviews. The figure of speech applied in the title, translators as *cultural algorithms*, needs to be theorised through adjacent frameworks: translation as selection, transformation, rewriting and circulation. To depict these translators as cultural algorithms is to comprehend them as structured, interpretive systems that process meaning through structured yet creative operations of selection, transformation and transmission. The algorithms are not mechanical here; they are cultural, historical and interpretive.

This paper analyses the translated works of popular poets like Pablo Neruda, Jorge Luis Borges, and Octavio Paz, to argue that these translators performed technical processes similar to algorithmic operations of filtering themes, adapting imagery, domesticating metaphors, and recalibrating rhythms. These operations are executed to resonate with Hindi idioms and socio-political contexts of the Indian subcontinent. Rather than treating translation as a mechanical exchange of languages, the study situates it between poetic production imbued with transnational influence of the source and target language systems, and a work of original creative endeavour undertaken by the translator. By framing translators as cultural algorithms, the paper rethinks influence not as linear transmission but as iterative transformation.

Walter Benjamin, in his notable essay, “The Translator’s Task” (1923), translated into English by Steven Rendall [“The Translator’s Task, Walter Benjamin (Translation)], famously suggests what translation means and what it means to be a translator. For Benjamin, the task of a translator is not to duplicate meaning for the target readers in a direct manner but to impart a deeper relationship between the languages (154). Similarly, this chapter aims to corroborate the role of Hindi translators who explored the dialogic connections between India and Latin America in the realm of poetry to form a deeper creative relationship.

As Benjamin argues, “all languages are different fragments of a greater intangible whole, which he claims to be the “pure language” (*Reine Sprache*). Translation grows to be the medium through which the latent bond between languages is intimated” (154, Dougherty 19). Therefore, the role of a translator is not fidelity to the poem only, but fidelity to the form, intention and linguistic essence of the original. As he puts it, a translation “issues from the original, not so much from its life as from its ‘afterlife’” (153). This brings us to his famous idea of translation as the “afterlife” (*Überleben*) of a text. Benjamin suggests that literary works are not static; they continue to live and evolve beyond their original creation. Translation is one among many ways a text survives across time and culture and develops as a Continuation and transformation of the original work (153).

Debates in translation studies and world literature form a dense, often contentious field where questions of language, power, culture and circulation intersect. What looks like a technical act- rendering text from one language into another- quickly becomes a philosophical and political problem once situated within global literary systems. One case in point is Lawrence Venuti’s pivotal work *The Translator’s Invisibility* (2012), which debates domestication and foreignisation. A translation strategy that reduces the foreignness of the original text, making an agreement towards the linguistic, cultural and stylistic norms of the target language (typically English), is known as domestication. The goal is fluency and transparency, so the translation reads as if it were originally written in the target language. Venuti argues that this strategy often leads the translator towards invisibility since the translated texts appear unmediated. He criticises such a process for its ethnocentric violence, as it results in suppressing cultural distinction and assimilates the foreign text into dominant cultural values (Venuti 1-2). Foreignisation, on the other hand, is an approach that retains elements of the source culture and deliberately resists the norms of the target language. It may involve unusual syntax, lexical choices or cultural references that signal the text’s

“foreignness.” Venuti sees this as an ethical and political choice, aiming to make the translator visible and to challenge the dominance of the target culture. It encourages readers to experience the linguistic and cultural differences of the original text (Venuti 20). Venuti’s framework builds on the initial ideas of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s famous dichotomy: to turn the reader towards the writer is foreignisation and to turn the writer towards the reader is domestication.

For Susan Bassnett, however, translation is a cultural negotiation in which the translator mediates between two different cultural systems. In *Translation Studies* (2014), she argues that language is deeply embedded in culture; therefore, any act of translation inevitably involves interpreting cultural codes, values and ideologies, not just words (Bassnett 22). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who gained distinction for translating Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1967) from French to English, attributes translation to an ethical practice grounded in what she calls “intimate reading,” a mode of engagement that requires the translator to attend closely to the linguistic and cultural specificities of the source text. Spivak insists on a deep immersion in the rhetoric, syntax, and texture of the original language, describing translation as “the most intimate act of reading” (Spivak 398).

For poets like Kunwar Narain, Manglesh Dabral and Uday Prakash, translation was not merely a linguistic exercise but a mode of poetic apprenticeship and transformation. Through translation culture, circulation and reading (often through English translations), these Hindi poets internalised Latin American sensibilities into their creative unconscious and evoked them within Hindi modernism. The emergence of Hindi poetry in the twentieth century cannot be understood in isolation from global literary currents. This interaction did not produce derivative imitation but rather a complex field of transcultural resonance, where shared concerns - time, identity, memory, alienation, and language - are refracted through distinct historical and cultural contexts. Rather than tracing direct lines of influence, it is more productive to view these convergences through the lens of translation as cultural negotiation and intimate reading

(Bassnett 22; Spivak 398). The Hindi poets' engagement with Latin American literature reveals how global modernist concerns are rearticulated within Indian realities, producing a uniquely hybrid poetics.

Manglesh Dabral, in a book review of Kunwar Narain's poetry collection, *Na Seemayein Na Dooriyan* (2017), wrote about him that translation was one of Narain's passions, which he considered an extension of his original writing; a process closely associated with his creative process. Narain was probably the first Hindi poet to introduce the reader to the great poets of world poetry, such as Jorge Luis Borges. While translating, Kunwar Narain never planned on handpicking the poets for his translations; he translated whatever poems he liked or felt necessary to be included in the Hindi repertoire. It was just a 'swantah-sukhaay' (for his own pleasure) effort (Dabral 1-2).

In his preface, Narain admits that 'even the best translation of a poem can hardly do justice to the original poem, and still, the process of translating in any mature language never stops.' For him, translation does not mean changing the linguistic clothes of poetry, but reaching its interior, which turns it into a poem, to that specific experience that makes it a specific creation.' It is widely believed that translating a poem tends to be a demanding task, and if something is lost in the process, it is the poetry itself. Some people even speak of untranslatability of poetry in the sense that if a translator remains loyal to the original, he or she risks being unfaithful to the target language or vice versa. Narain, a believer in 'Majjhima nikaay,' takes a middle path and says, 'some poems are so deeply immersed in the linguistic culture and environment of their respective languages that it becomes almost impossible to carry them faithfully to the language of translation (Dabral 2).

Manglesh Dabral further writes that most of Narain's translations are excellent, extremely readable and unputdownable. Various poems sound so innate and flawless as if they

were written in Hindi rather than carried from some alien language. Narain tries to maintain the diction and structure of many poems, and in some poems, as in “The Cyclical Night” by Borges, he even retains the creative scheme of meter consistent with the original Spanish. This might have resulted in being mechanical at places, but such experiments go well with the job of a translator (Dabral 3). Narain legitimately thought of himself as a part of the great brotherhood of world poets.

Latin American poetry entered the Hindi literary spaces around the 1960s, and this entry must be understood within the broader framework of postcolonial literary circulation and the emergence of what scholars call “world literature networks.” The global recognition of writers like Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges intensified after the 1960s, especially with Borges’s International Formentor Prize (1961) and Neruda’s Nobel Prize (1971), which significantly increased translation and global dissemination. For Hindi literary culture, this period coexisted with the consolidation of *Nayi Kavita* (New Poetry) and post-independence modernism, creating a fertile ground to observe global influences. World literature emerged as a system of circulation rather than origin. As David Damrosch argues, world literature is constituted when texts “circulate beyond their culture of origin” (Damrosch 4). This is crucial in understanding how poets like Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz and Jorge Luis Borges entered Hindi literary consciousness not directly, but through mediated translation networks. Simultaneously, Pascale Casanova highlights that global literary circulation is shaped by unequal power structures, where certain languages, to a large extent English, function as central mediators (Casanova 80). That is why Latin American poetry reached Hindi largely through English translations rather than direct Spanish-Hindi exchange.

One of the most important historical links between Latin American Poetry and Indian literary culture is the reputation of Octavio Paz in India. Paz served as Mexico’s ambassador in India from 1962 to 1968, during which he reportedly engaged with Indian intellectual and

literary circles (Stavans 112). This marks a rare instance of South-South literary exchange, purely bypassing the Western interposition. During his stay in India, Paz completed his poetry collection *Ladera Este* (East Slope), which reflected dominant Indian philosophical influence (Paz, *Selected poems*, xxi). He interacted with Indian writers and artists, facilitating direct intercultural dialogue (Stavans 115). The 1960s also saw the international rise of Latin American literature, often called the “boom,” which significantly increased global translation and circulation (Franco 196).

The comparative framework that brings Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, and Octavio Paz into dialogue with Hindi poets such as Kunwar Narain, Manglesh Dabral, and Uday Prakash emerges from the broader history of post-1960s literary circulation and translation. Rather than functioning as a simple transfer of themes or stylistic imitation, this encounter reflects what translation theories describe as a process of cultural and epistemological transformation, in which poems are reinterpreted within new linguistic and philosophical contexts. In this sense, the entry of Spanish poetry into Hindi literary space enabled a reconfiguration of poetic concerns: metaphysical abstraction was internalised as lived experience, political intensity was rendered through subtle and everyday imagery, and the unified lyrical subject gave way to fragmented dialogic selves. The following comparative readings of some specific poems validate how these transformations occur at the level of language, imagery and thought, revealing translation not as deviation but as a creative reconstitution of poetic form and sensibility.

Jorge Luis Borges, in his poem “Borges and I,” constructs a division within the self, writing, “I live, I let myself live, so that Borges may contrive his literature” (324). The poem distinguishes between the lived “I” and the public, textual “Borges,” thus presenting identity as a constructed and mediated phenomenon rather than a unified essence. This destabilisation finds an equivalent in Kunwar Narain’s exploration of the self as inherently plural in his poem

“Self.” In this poem, Narain writes, “Main apne bheetar kai logon ke saath rehta hoon,” which translates as “I live within myself with many others” (58). Unlike Borges’s ironic bifurcation, Narain’s formulation suggests an internal plurality rooted in philosophical reflection. The self is not divided into two but composed of multiple presences, aligning with Indian traditions of layered consciousness. Together, these poems demonstrate how identity is reimagined as fluid and composite rather than singular.

In his poem, “The Art of Poetry,” Borges asserts, “Time is the substance I am made of” (Borges 94), collapsing the distinction between being and temporality. Time becomes an ontological condition rather than an external measure, reflecting Borges’s metaphysical concerns. Similarly, in Kunwar Narain’s poem, “Time,” his time rearticulates this abstraction in experiential terms: “Samay koi vastu nahin hai/ veh anubhav ki tarah behta hai” (“Time is not an object/ it flows like an experience”) (102). While Borges conceptualises time philosophically, Narain renders it phenomenological and lived. This shift demonstrates how translation transforms abstract metaphysics into interior experience and ethical reflection (Borges 94; Narain 102). Narain was also fond of quoting Borges: “Life is, I am sure, made of poetry.” As mentioned by his son Apurva Narain in the introduction to his book *No Other World* (Narain xi).

Pablo Neruda, in his poem “Walking Around,” expresses existential exhaustion in the line “It so happens I am sick of being a man” (73). The poem captures alienation within modern urban life. Such an existential crisis is evident in Manglesh Dabral’s poem, “Ghar ka Rasta.” He transforms his existential crisis into a quiet displacement: “Main ghar lautna chahta hoon/ lekin raasta badal gaya hai” (“I want to return home/ but the path has changed”) (35). The dramatic intensity of Neruda’s poetry becomes a subdued estrangement in Dabral, where loss is rendered mundane. This shows a shift from overt existential despair to reflective, localised alienation.

In his poem, “The Street,” Paz writes, “A long and silent street. I walk in the darkness” (89), presenting a symbolic landscape of existential solitude. Uday Prakash, however, in his *Tirichh*, redefines this solitude within socio-political anxiety: “Andhere mein aadmi apni hi aawaz se darta hai” (“In the dark, a man fears his own voice”) (52). The existential isolation of Paz becomes historically grounded fear in Prakash, reflecting political and social instability. This shows how translation enables the fusion of philosophical and socio-political concerns (Paz 89; Prakash 52). In “Between Going and Staying,” Octavio Paz writes, “Between what I see and what I say...” (Paz 147), emphasising the gap between perception and expression. Similarly, in “Auratein” by Uday Prakash, this echoes his epistemological uncertainty: “Jo dikhta hai/ veh sach nahin hota” (“What appears/ is not the truth”) (“Auratein” 31).

All the poets were part of a much larger movement in Hindi poetry that proved to be non-provincial and opened itself to other continents. Through their translations, they engaged with global voices such as Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz not merely to clone them into Hindi but to recreate them within Hindi cultural and poetic foundations. Their poetry is evidence of the active nature of translation, which redesigns both the source and the target institution. We have come across translators who were not simply translators but ardent and impassioned students of world poetry. First and foremost, they were poets who believed in the universality of all indigenous poetic experience and formed a greater brotherhood of world poets. The translators thus act as cultural mediators who build a bridge between two cultures and let them connect and converse.

These comparative readings ultimately challenge the idea of influence as a one-way transmission. The creative conversations between these poets show us that translation is not just imitation but transformation. What travels across languages is not the form alone, but a set of possibilities - philosophical, emotional and political - which get reshaped into new contexts. Borges’s fragmented self becomes Narain’s inward plurality; Neruda’s intensity becomes

Dabral's quiet dislocation; Paz's abstraction becomes Prakash's historically grounded unease. In this sense, translation produces a space where meaning is neither preserved nor lost, but reconfigured. As Paz suggests, every text is already a translation, implying that literary creation is relational. Hindi poetry, therefore, does not merely absorb Latin American modernism but reconstructs it, grounding it in its own linguistic and cultural realities. The result is a poetics that is simultaneously global and local. One that reveals literature not as isolated traditions, but as an ongoing shared process of rewriting.

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