
Voicing the Margins: Translating the Cultural and Emotional Depth of Gurdial Singh's Fiction into English

Swati Suri¹Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, swatisuri293@gmail.com**Dr Navjot Kaur²**Ph.D. Supervisor, navjot1809@hotmail.com

Article Received: 14/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 16/06/2025**Published Online:** 18/06/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.384

Abstract: This research paper examines the process of translating the works of prominent Punjabi writer Gurdial Singh into English, highlighting the challenges faced by translators and evaluating the success of these translations. Gurdial Singh's literature is rich in cultural nuances, regional dialects, and intricate social themes, making it both compelling and complex to translate. The study identifies key obstacles such as the preservation of idiomatic expressions, the conveyance of emotional depth, and the adaptation of cultural references that may not have direct equivalents in English. Through a detailed analysis of selected translations, the paper assesses how effectively the essence of Singh's narratives is maintained, considering both linguistic fidelity and the impact on target readers. Additionally, it explores the strategies employed by translators, including the use of footnotes, contextualization, and stylistic adaptation, to bridge cultural gaps. By evaluating reader reception and critical reviews, the research aims to determine the extent to which these translations succeed in conveying Singh's voice and thematic richness. Ultimately, this paper contributes to the broader understanding of literary translation as a cultural exchange and highlights the significance of Gurdial Singh's work in the global literary landscape.

Keywords: literary translation, cultural challenges, translation strategies, regional dialects, reader reception.

Introduction: The field of translation and Translation Studies has experienced significant growth and recognition in recent decades. Once considered a peripheral activity, translation is now a highly visible and respected practice, deeply embedded in global cultural exchanges. As the field has evolved, it has expanded beyond the traditional binary relationship between national languages, literatures, and cultures. The last two to three decades have seen the rise of Translation Studies as an academic discipline, initially referred to as *Translatology*, and now firmly established with increasing scholarly momentum.

While translation has existed alongside literature for centuries, it is only in recent years that Translation Studies has been recognised as a distinct and flourishing academic field. Prof. Harish Trivedi, in his essay "*Translating Culture and Cultural Translation*," observes that a field becomes "well and truly established" when it begins to produce substantial academic resources, such as monographs, anthologies, and encyclopaedias. This is precisely what has happened in Translation Studies, with influential publications such as *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (edited by Mona Baker, 1998), *The Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English* (by Olive Classe, 2000), and *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (edited by Peter France, 2000), among others. These publications, along with the *History of Literary Translation into English* (a five-volume project by Oxford University Press), demonstrate the growing academic recognition of Translation Studies.

Before the emergence of these developments, translation was largely subsumed under the fields of linguistics or comparative literature. Historically, translation was viewed as a lesser pursuit, with translations often compared to the "original" in terms of linguistic equivalence, without much regard for the broader cultural context. As Susan Bassnett highlights in "*The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies*" (2002), translation was once seen as a secondary activity. She notes that the central questions in translation studies were once limited to practical concerns, such as "How can translation be taught?" and "How can translation be studied?" Those who saw themselves as translators often dismissed attempts to teach translation, while those who taught translation often lacked practical translation experience (Bassnett 123).

A major shift in Translation Studies occurred in 1990 when Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere co-edited *Translation, History and Culture*, a collection of essays that marked a turning point in the discipline. In their introductory essay, which served as a manifesto, they argued that the study of translation was moving beyond its formalist phase. Instead of focusing solely on linguistic equivalence, scholars began to explore translation as a complex cultural practice that encompasses context, history, and convention. Bassnett and Lefevere redefined the object of study in Translation Studies, emphasizing that the translation process involves more than just linguistic exchange; it is embedded in a web of cultural signs from both the source and target cultures

In the 1970s, translation was still a minor aspect of applied linguistics and literary studies, with little connection to the emerging field of Cultural Studies. At that time, the study of translation was largely concerned with finding linguistic equivalences, ensuring accuracy and faithfulness, and striving for "definite translation" (Bassnett). However, as the discipline progressed, scholars began to recognize that literary texts were not merely composed of language but were deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts. Language itself was seen as a vehicle of culture, and translation was understood as a more complex negotiation between cultures rather than a simple linguistic exchange.

This realization led to a paradigmatic shift in translation theory: translation was no longer seen as a mere substitution of words or sentences between two languages, as suggested by linguist J.C. Catford. Instead, translation became a negotiation between two cultures, with the text functioning as a cultural artifact shaped by the language and cultural context in which it was created. Items that were once considered "culture-specific," such as the Indian words *kurta*, *dhoti*, *roti*, or *dharma*, were now understood as symbols of broader cultural systems, not easily translatable into Western equivalents like *shirt*, *trousers*, *bread*, or *deeds*. This broadening of the discipline reflects how translation has become a crucial mechanism in global exchanges, which Doris Bachmann-Medick describes as "global translatability."

The translation of literature from Indian regional languages into English has become a crucial area of academic inquiry, particularly in the context of global literary exchange. India, with its rich linguistic and cultural diversity, offers a unique terrain for translation studies, where multiple languages, traditions, and narratives intersect. Translating regional literary works into English not only broadens their reach to a global audience but also raises important questions about language, identity, power, and cultural representation. The process of translation, in this context, is not a mere linguistic exercise but a complex negotiation between cultures, histories, and ideologies. As Indian writers and translators navigate the intricacies of transferring texts from languages like Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Punjabi, or Kannada into English, they confront challenges related to preserving the essence of the original while making it accessible to readers from diverse backgrounds.

The interaction between the Punjabi and English languages began during the era of British colonial rule in India, which commenced in the mid-18th century. Initially, it was British colonial officials and scholars who undertook the task of translating Punjabi literature into English, primarily to deepen their understanding of the region's culture and society. These early translations were largely driven by academic and ethnographic interests, with the objective of documenting and interpreting the cultural, historical, and social realities of Punjab. Despite their colonial underpinnings, these translations played an instrumental role in introducing Punjabi literature to the Western world, paving the way for subsequent literary exchanges and cross-cultural dialogue.

The translation of Punjabi literature into English language gained momentum after 1960s and 1970s. This was the outcome of the efforts of driven by the efforts of notable writers and translators such as Mohan Singh, Sant Singh Sekhon, Amrita Pritam, Khushwant Singh, Shiv Kumar Batalvi, Kartar Singh Duggal, Dalip Kaur Tiwana, and Gurdial Singh, to name a few. These individuals were part of a larger movement dedicated to preserving and promoting Punjabi culture, and they were key players in the establishment of Punjabi-English literary translation as a distinct and valued field. Their work reflects the increasing global awareness of Punjabi literature and its relevance in the broader literary landscape, contributing significantly to the development of a robust body of translated works.

One author whose work has recently garnered significant attention in the field of literary translation is the esteemed Punjabi writer Gurdial Singh. Known for his deeply rooted depictions of rural Punjab, particularly the Malwa region, Singh's works provide a vivid portrayal of the region's social, cultural, and historical landscape. His storytelling is praised for its authenticity, capturing the complexities of life in a manner that is both grounded in local experience and universally relatable. As Darshan Singh Mani notes in his *Introduction* to the translated version of Singh's novel *Parsa*, "Like Hardy in England and R.K. Narayan in India, Gurdial Singh has given his stories a unique regional ambience" (v). This "regional ambience" is not just a backdrop but an integral part of Singh's writing, woven from the lived experiences of the people and the distinctive social and cultural fabric of the Punjab. However, it is precisely this authenticity, this strong connection to the Punjabi ethos, that presents a significant challenge in translating his works. Like many literary masterpieces that are deeply tied to a specific locale, Singh's stories often carry nuances, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references that are difficult to convey in another language without losing some of their essence. Thus, translating his work into English is not simply a linguistic exercise but a complex task of preserving the emotional and cultural depth of the original while making it accessible to a broader audience. In this regard, highlighting the difficulty in translating Gurdial Singh's works, Rana Nayar writes that:

...translating Gurdial Singh's fiction was an extremely gratifying though not a less challenging experience. Perhaps, it was so gratifying only because at every juncture it threw up new and entirely unexpected challenges.... There is something about Gurdial Singh's fiction which doesn't submit itself readily to an act of translation and least of all, to an English translation. (Tarsem and Sushil 112-113)

Born into a rural background, Singh's writing is rooted in the lives of the marginalized, drawing attention to the plight of the underprivileged and their struggle against social hierarchies. His literary career began with the publication of his first novel, *Madi Da Diva* (1964), which immediately captured the attention of both the general public and academics. Over the course of his prolific career, Singh authored ten novels, each continuing his exploration of rural Punjab's socio-economic and cultural landscape. His major works include *Madi Da Diva* (1964), *Unhoye* (1966), *Rate Di IkkMuthi* (1967), *Kuwela* (1968), *Adh ChandniRaas* (1972), *Aathan-Uggan* (1974), *AnheGhode Da Daan* (1976), *PauhPhutale Ton Pehlan* (1982), *Parsa* (1999), and *Aahan* (2009). Several of his works have been incorporated into school and university syllabi, reflecting their academic and literary significance.

Gurdial Singh's profound impact on Punjabi literature has extended far beyond the borders of Punjab, with his works being widely translated into several languages, most notably English. These translations have played a crucial role in introducing Singh's powerful storytelling and social critiques to a global audience. Prof. Rana Nayar, a distinguished scholar and translator has played an instrumental role in making Singh's works widely accessible to English speaking readers. Prof. Nayar's translations have successfully captured the essence of Singh's writing, maintaining the authenticity of the original while

adapting it for a wider audience. Through Nayar's efforts, works such as *Parsa*, *Madi Da Diva*, and *Anhe Ghode Da Daan* have been made available in English, broadening the scope of Singh's influence in the world of literature.

These English translations have garnered significant academic attention and have been studied in various university courses on postcolonial literature, translation studies, and South Asian literature. Singh's works have been recognized not only for their literary merit but also for their cultural and historical significance, offering insight into the complexities of life in rural Punjab. Through translation, his works have become important tools for understanding the intersections of culture, identity, and power in post-independence India. In addition to Prof. Rana Nayar's translations, there have been other scholars and translators like Ajmer Rode, Ravi Nandan Sinha, who have contributed to making Gurdial Singh's works accessible to international audiences. The combined efforts of these translators have ensured that Singh's literary legacy is not confined to the Punjabi-speaking world but reaches readers across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Translating Gurdial Singh's works from Punjabi into English poses a significant challenge, as it requires not only linguistic proficiency but also an in-depth understanding of the cultural, historical, and social contexts embedded in the original text. Prof. Rana Nayar, the primary translator of Singh's works, has been instrumental in making these complex narratives accessible to a global audience, but this task has not been without its difficulties. One of the most prominent challenges is the translation of regional specificity. Singh's novels are deeply rooted in the culture and social realities of rural Punjab, particularly in the Malwa region, which brings to the forefront the complexities of caste, class, gender, and rural socio-economic conditions. These themes, while rich in their representation of Punjabi life, are often difficult to translate without losing their cultural nuance. As Nayar has pointed out, capturing the essence of Singh's regional setting while adapting it for an English-speaking readership demands careful attention to language and context (Nayar, "Translating" 4). Here the translators' choice to add detailed prefaces and introductions reflects a thoughtful approach to cross-cultural communication, ensuring that readers from diverse backgrounds can engage with the novel in a meaningful and informed way. For global readers, understanding the intricacies of a particular cultural setting is crucial to interpreting the novel's deeper meanings. Without this context, certain references, themes, or character motivations might be lost. The prefaces and introductions ensure that readers don't miss these crucial aspects, thus facilitating a fuller reading experience.

The challenge of language and linguistic structure is another hurdle in translating Gurdial Singh's work. Punjabi, with its unique sentence structures, idiomatic expressions, and local dialects, presents significant barriers when translated into English. Words and phrases that are deeply rooted in the Punjabi language, often carrying cultural and emotional weight, may not have direct counterparts in English. Prof. Nayar's translations attempt to strike a balance between maintaining the original text's authenticity and making the work accessible to a broader, global audience. This often means finding creative substitutes or

offering explanations that convey the cultural context of the original, without over-explaining or disrupting the narrative flow. The translation of idioms and metaphors are so much infused in Singh's storytelling that it further complicates the process of translation. Idiomatic expressions in Punjabi, rich with local color, can be especially difficult to translate accurately. As Nayar notes, "the translator is often forced to make choices between preserving the cultural specificity of the source text and adapting it for readability" (Nayar, "Translating" 5).

Today, Punjabi-English literary translation is a dynamic and evolving field, with an increasing number of contemporary translators and writers contributing to its growth. This process is not without its challenges, particularly when it comes to translating regional dialects. Punjabi, with its rich array of regional dialects, presents a significant challenge to translators, especially those unfamiliar with specific variations in the language. Dialects, such as Malwai that are widely spoken in the rural of Punjab contain phrases, idioms and metaphors that do not have direct equivalents in English language. When these expressions are mistranslated or rendered too literally, the meaning can be lost, leading to ambiguity or misrepresentation of the original text. Therefore, a deep understanding of the cultural and linguistic nuances of both the source and target languages is crucial for producing accurate and effective translations.

An illustrative example of this issue can be found in Rana Nayar's translation of *Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse* (2016), in which he translates the phrase "paharh wale paseon" as "from the direction of hills." In its original form, this phrase in Malwai Punjabi refers to the northern direction. Nayar's translation, while conveying the general sense of direction, loses the regional specificity of the original term. The discrepancy highlights the importance of dialectal knowledge, as demonstrated by Tarsem Singh's *Gurdial Singh: SandharabhKosh* (2014), which includes a compilation of Malwai words and phrases used by Gurdial Singh in his literary works. Such resources are invaluable for translators, offering guidance on how to preserve the cultural and linguistic subtleties that may otherwise be overlooked or distorted in translation.

Another challenge is the need to preserve the historical and social context of Singh's work, which deals with issues such as caste discrimination, rural poverty, and the impact of post-partition trauma. These issues, while deeply relevant to readers familiar with India, may require explanation for international readers. Yet, the translator must walk a fine line—explaining enough to provide context without over-explaining and thereby diminishing the narrative's power. Singh's works often serve as social commentaries, critiquing entrenched societal norms and exposing inequalities, and it is essential for the translator to ensure that these critiques are not lost in translation. Nayar's translations not only strive to convey the literal meaning of the text but also the emotional and political undertones, which are central to Singh's novels. As Nayar himself observes, "The translator's role is not just to transfer words, but to transmit the spirit of the original text" (Nayar, "Translating"6). This challenge becomes even more pronounced when dealing with the emotional nuances of the characters,

whose internal struggles and societal conflicts are portrayed with great depth in Singh's original Punjabi works.

Singh's use of local metaphors tied to agricultural life or village customs may not have direct equivalents in English, forcing the translator to make tough decisions about whether to adapt the terms, provide footnotes, or use English expressions that resonate with similar meanings. As Nayar highlights, maintaining the “authenticity of the original text while ensuring that the translation is readable to an English-speaking audience is a delicate balance” (Nayar, “Translating” 6). Translating these elements in a way that retains their emotional impact while ensuring they make sense to readers unfamiliar with rural Punjabi life is one of the most challenging aspects of the translation process.

Moreover, Singh's works are not merely narratives—they are commentaries on social and political realities, dealing with themes of oppression and marginalization. The ethical responsibility of the translator is therefore significant. Singh's critiques of caste, gender, and social inequality must not only be faithfully conveyed but also presented in a way that does not dilute the power of the original message. Nayar's task was not just to translate words but to ensure that the themes of social justice and human dignity that permeate Singh's work reached an English-speaking audience without distortion.

Translating Gurdial Singh's works into English is a complex and nuanced endeavor. Various organizations, including the European Society for Translation Studies, the American Translation and Interpreting Studies Association, and India's National Translation Mission, are crucial in addressing the challenges of translation. These institutions facilitate research, provide essential resources like bilingual dictionaries and translation software, and support translator training. Their efforts help resolve issues translators face, ensuring the ongoing development of translation practices.

A well established theoretical framework for the literary translation of Punjabi into English necessary. This framework should account for both linguistic differences and cultural nuances, ensuring accurate translations of idiomatic and culturally specific expressions. Continuous critical engagement with translations is also vital to assess their effectiveness and impact, ultimately improving the quality of Punjabi-English translations and preserving the cultural richness of Punjabi literature for global readers.

Conclusion

The translation of Gurdial Singh's fiction into English is far more than a linguistic act, it is a complex cultural negotiation that demands sensitivity, depth, and ethical responsibility. As this study has shown, Singh's narratives are densely woven with regional dialects, caste-inflected realities, emotional intricacies, and symbolic idioms that do not easily transfer into English without considerable loss or reinterpretation. Translators like Prof. Rana Nayar have employed strategies such as footnoting, prefaces, contextualization, and creative lexical choices to preserve the authenticity of Singh's voice while making it

accessible to global readers. These efforts illuminate the translator's role as a mediator not just between languages but between social worlds, cultural values, and historical memory.

Ultimately, the process of translating Singh's work reveals the deeply ethical nature of literary translation, particularly when dealing with stories of marginalization, caste oppression, and rural subaltern life. The challenges encountered in rendering such texts into English reflect the broader tensions of postcolonial translation: how to remain faithful to the rootedness of the original while ensuring comprehensibility and resonance in the target language. This paper affirms that successful translation must balance fidelity with fluency, and cultural specificity with global legibility. As Singh's works continue to cross linguistic boundaries, they not only bring rural Punjab to the world but also enrich the discourse on translation as an act of justice, preservation, and resistance.

Works Cited:

- Bachmann-Medick, Doris. "Introduction: The Translational Turn." Translated by Kate Sturge, *Translation Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, pp. 2–16, doi:10.1080/14781700802496118.
- . "The 'Translational Turn' in Literary and Cultural Studies: The Example of Human Rights." *New Theories, Models and Methods in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013, pp. 213–34. www.academia.edu/4893234/The_Translational_Turn_in_Literary_and_Cultural_Studies_The_Example_of_Human_Rights.
- Baker, Mona, editor. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. Routledge, 1998.
- Bassnett, Susan. "The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies." *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*, Multilingual Matters, 1998, pp. 123–40.
- . "Translating Terror." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2005, pp. 393–403. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3993830.
- Kaur, Kulveer. "Punjabi-English Literary Translation: Challenges and Possibilities." *Translation Today*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2023, pp. 135–52, doi:10.46623/tt/2023.17.1.ar7.
- Lefevere, Andre, and Susan Bassnett, editors. "Introduction: Proust's Grandmother and the Thousand and One Nights. The 'Cultural Turn' in Translation Studies." *Translation, History and Culture*, Pinter, 1990, pp. 1–13.
- Nayar, Rana. *Gurdial Singh: A Reader*. Sahitya Akademi, 2012.
- . *Translating Gurdial Singh's Works into English: A Translators' Challenge*. 2000.
- . "Gurdial Singh: A Storyteller Extraordinaire." *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1–2, 2016, pp. 229–46. www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7_sp/files/sitefiles/journals/volume13/13.1.2_Nayar.pdf.
- . "He Gave Voice to the Marginalized." *The Tribune*, 17 Aug. 2016, www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/he-gave-voice-to-the-marginalised/281137.html.

---. "The Novel as a Site for Cultural Memory: Gurdial Singh's Parsa." *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, Sept. 2012, pp. 233–54. www.global.ucsb.edu/punjab/sites/secure.lsit.ucsb.edu.gisp.d7_sp/files/sitefiles/journals/volume19/no2/Nayar.pdf.

Singh, Gurdial. *Alms in the Name of a Blind Horse*. Translated by Rana Nayar, Rupa Publications, 2016.

---. *Earthy Tones: A Selection of Best Punjabi Short Stories*. Edited and translated by Rana Nayar, Fiction House, 2002.

---. *The Last Flicker*. Translated by Ajmer S. Rode, Sahitya Akademi, 1993.

---. *Night of the Half Moon*. Translated by Pushpinder Syal and Rana Nayar, Macmillan India, 1996.

---. *Parsa*. Translated by Rana Nayar, National Book Trust, 1999.

---. *The Survivors*. Translated by Rana Nayar, Katha, 2005.

Snell-Hornby, Mary. *The Turns of Translation Studies: New Paradigms or Shifting Viewpoints?* John Benjamins, 2006.

---. "What's in a Turn? On Fits, Starts and Writhings in Recent Translation Studies." *Translation Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2009, pp. 41–51, doi:10.1080/14781700802496225.

Trivedi, Harish. "Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation." *In Translation – Reflections, sRefractions, Transformations*, John Benjamins, 2007, pp. 277–87.