



The Paradox of Connection: Superficiality in the Age of Technological Ubiquity in the Select Poems of Mangalesh Dabral

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Abstract

This paper examines Mangalesh Dabral's poems "This Number Does Not Exist" and "Skin" through the perspective of the paradox of connectivity in an era of technological omnipresence. It argues that Dabral addresses the increasing feeling of isolation stemming from the decline of genuine human interaction in a society more and more influenced by technology and fixation on superficial appearances. "This Number Does Not Exist" illustrates the diminishing availability of real connection in the face of technological progress, where digital relationships frequently lack the profound emotional depth of previous bonds. "Skin" investigates the shallowness that pervades contemporary interactions, where an excessive focus on external appearances erects barriers to true closeness and comprehension. Through an analysis of Dabral's metaphors, imagery, and linguistic choices, the paper illustrates how his poetry critiques a modern world in which the promise of connection results in a deeper, more isolating form of loneliness, underscoring the vital necessity for genuine human engagement that transcends digital platforms and superficiality.

Keywords: Mangalesh Dabral, Hindi Poetry, Technology, Modernity, Superficiality, Digital Age.

Introduction

Mangalesh Dabral is a renowned figure in contemporary Hindi poetry. He composes poems that resonate with the inherent anxieties and complex paradoxes woven into contemporary life. His poetic inquiries explore the themes of alienation that saturate our interconnected global

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environment, revealing the cracks that remain hidden beneath technological progress. Dabral's poetic approach is marked by its clarity and accessibility. "Mangalesh's poems are like fingertips that feel out the world and translate what they come across." (Joshi, 2025, para. 1) He utilized straightforward language and imagery derived from everyday experiences, making his poems relatable to a broad audience. However, beneath this apparent simplicity lies a profound understanding of the intricacies of contemporary life and the anxieties of our era. A consistent theme in Dabral's work is the critique of power dynamics and the dehumanizing consequences of political and economic influences. He frequently amplified the voices of the marginalized, drawing attention to the struggles of those who are neglected or exploited. His poetry effectively intertwines personal and political elements, merging individual narratives with broader societal issues. While firmly rooted in the current realities of India, Dabral's poetry also possesses a universal resonance due to its exploration of fundamental human emotions and experiences. His use of vivid imagery and a soft, melancholic tone creates a distinct space for contemplation and empathy. Some of his distinguished works include "Pahar Par Lalten" (Lantern on the Hill), "Ghar Ka Rasta" (The Way Home), and "Hum Jo Dekhte Hain" (What We See). Mangalesh Dabral provides a critical yet empathetic perspective on the human experience in the modern era. A critic remarks-"Mangalesh Dabral belonged, in Hindi poetry, to the generation of politically conscious and aesthetically excellent poets that follows Raghuvir Sahay, Shamsher Bahadur Singh, Kedarnath Singh, Kunwar Narain and Vinod Kumar Shukla." (K Satchidanandan, 2020, para. 3)

In "This Number Does Not Exist" and "Skin," Dabral analyzes the intricate and contradictory relationship between the human desire for connection and the isolating truths of a time largely characterized by the impact of technological omnipresence and a societal focus on superficiality. Dabral reveals the reality of a world where technology claims to bridge distances and nurture meaningful connections, yet paradoxically contributes to a more insidious form of loneliness. His poetry acts as a reflection on the gradual decline of genuine human connection in today's world.

Close Reading of "This Number Does Not Exist"

"This Number Does Not Exist" stands out as a sorrowful tribute to a fading time of authentic human connection. It was an era when interactions were not filtered through screens or digital channels but were instead tangible and grounded in real-life experiences. Technology has no doubt brought people closer but it is with an added layer of superficiality and therefore the paradox of being not alone but lonely. The poem's main repeated refrain, "This number does not exist" goes beyond its straightforward and practical implication in the realm of telecommunications, evolving into a powerful and resonant symbol of the diminishing accessibility to true and meaningful human relationships in our digital world. These days there is access to artificial intelligence which can also talk but it still lacks the human touch that is needed to feel supported and cared for. The speaker's relentless, nearly desperate, attempt to dial numbers is a symbolic act reflecting the persistent and essential human urge to reach out, forge connections, and create a sense of shared existence. This act, unfortunately, results not in hearing a familiar voice but an impersonal declaration of technological disconnection: "At the other end a strange voice says / This number does not exist" (Dabral, 2016, p. 149). This stark and discouraging truth emphasizes the fleeting and delicate nature of digital relationships, where virtual connections can be broken with alarming ease, online profiles may become inactive, and the once easily accessible presence of beloved individuals can fade into the intangible digital void without leaving any noticeable trace. This leads to increased alienation and delusion. The technological framework which was carefully crafted with the purpose to enable seamless communication and promote connection across great distances, ironically

turns into a daunting barrier which is a harsh and unsettling reminder of absence and disconnection rather than presence and authentic engagement.

The poem effectively juxtaposes the technology-driven state of disconnection with a nostalgic and idealized memory of a bygone era which was a time when human interactions were primarily marked by immediacy, warmth, and genuine recognition. The speaker nostalgically reminisces about a time when “at this number I used to reach people / Who said: of course, we recognize you / There is space for you in this universe” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149). This evocative recollection evokes a sense of belonging, unconditional acceptance, and the reassuring comfort of being seen and acknowledged for one’s true self, a sharp and painful contrast to the present reality of being confronted with a disembodied and impersonal voice announcing the non-existence of a longed-for connection. The simple yet impactful phrase, “There is space for you in this universe,” addresses a fundamental and universal human longing for validation, a desire to feel valued, and a secure sense of belonging within a community. These are the feelings that are becoming hard to achieve in the fragmented and impersonal social landscape of contemporary life. The past provided a promise of being recognized and acknowledged as a vital part of the human experience, which is a sorrowful contrast to the current reality of confronting the cold and indifferent finality of digital insignificance.

The alteration in the nature of physical interactions further highlights the increasing feelings of separation, doubt, and an underlying tension that infiltrates the realm of human connections in today’s society. The poem juxtaposes a time “Where at the sound of footsteps doors would be opened” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149) invoking a sense of instant hospitality and effortless bonds, with the current necessity to “ring the bell and wait in apprehension” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149). The warmth and unconditional welcome that once defined past encounters have now been supplanted by a cautious expectation that mirrors a rising discomfort and the likelihood of disappointment in our efforts to engage with others in a world where physical presence no longer assures an immediate or authentic interaction. Even when the contact is finally made after the anxious wait, the meeting is frequently laden with a sense of strangeness, transformation, and the unsettling possibility of disconnection: “And finally when one appears / It is possible that he might have changed / Or he might say I am not the one you used to talk to” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149). This insight underscores the fleeting nature of connection in a rapidly changing world, where individuals and their relationships are in a state of constant flux, making the preservation of meaningful connections difficult. The assertion, “This is not the number where you would hear out your grief” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149), further stresses the decay of close emotional support systems and shared vulnerability in a society that relies more and more on superficial digital interactions. It implies that the new and dominant forms of connection, while providing a façade of communication, are fundamentally ill-suited to meet the emotionally intricate demands of the human heart.

The remark that “Wherever I go numbers maps faces seem to be changed” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149) conveys a disconcerting sense of disorientation, instability, and the fleeting essence of identity, place, and human connection in the fluid and ever-evolving landscape of contemporary life. The sheer multitude of “other numbers are available more than ever with and without wires” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149) initially seems to present a boundless opportunity for connection and communication across geographical divides. However, Dabral effectively challenges this hopeful perspective by revealing the significantly reduced quality and transactional essence of these technologically mediated exchanges: “But a different kind of conversation on them / Only business only transactions buy-and-sell voices like strangers” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149). This stark and discouraging depiction uncovers a fundamental shift away from authentic human interaction, characterized by empathy, understanding, and shared emotional connection, towards a more impersonal form of communication, where relationships

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are just reduced to their practical purposes, stripped of their warmth, spontaneity, and emotional richness that defines a true and meaningful connection. The chilling imagery of “voices like strangers” emphasizes the deep sense of alienation and emotional detachment that can persist and even thrive amidst a plethora of digital exchanges, highlighting the superficiality and absence of genuine intimacy that frequently underpin technologically mediated communication.

The depiction of “Old diaries are scattered in the gutters / Their names slowly fading in the water” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149) acts as a representation of the waning importance and gradual disappearance of personal narratives and cherished memories that were the concrete records of past relationships in a modern society that prioritizes the transient present and the fleeting exchanges of the digital age. The physical documentation of former connections, the handwritten narratives of shared moments, and the tangible remnants of personal history are carelessly thrown away and ultimately forgotten. Their intrinsic value and emotional significance is swept away by the unceasing current of the now. This metaphor highlights the superficial nature of digital communication, which lacks the depth, permanence, and tactile quality which the traditional means of interaction had. This leads to a feeling of disconnection and also facilitates a weakening of the ties that link us to our past, and a reduced sense of continuity in our relationships with others.

The speaker’s desire for a different and more genuine form of connection emphasizes the isolation that continues to endure and even grow despite the seeming omnipresence and ease of access to technology. “Whenever I go, I desperately dial a number / And ask for the voice that used to say / The door is open you can stay here / Come along for a while just for the sake of it any time in this universe” (Dabral, 2016, p. 149). This sincere longing for a familiar voice that once offered unconditional acceptance, true companionship, and a sense of belonging underscores the human yearning for authentic connection which is a need that largely remains unfulfilled by the transactional exchanges enabled by technology. The notable phrase, “just for the sake of it,” highlights the inherent worth of connection for its own sake, free from any ulterior motives. It is a type of purely human interaction that appears rare and challenging to nurture in the predominantly utilitarian social fabric of today’s world.

Dabral’s work is infused with the sense, as Robert Duncan put it, that ‘the drama of our time is the coming of all men into one fate.’ But the work is equally inhabited by the hurdles. This tension is also the core of Dabral’s artfulness—his polemics lean to the side, obliquely, burdened by something more gravely consequential than his singular desire. Consolations are few. (Slate, 2016, para. 8)

It suggests that Dabral’s work carries a strong sense of awareness regarding the true essence of humanity and thus seeks to aware people that the complete dependence on technology can lead to hollowness in the mind and hearts of people. The interconnectedness of beings is not to be forgotten. One should to be able to see beyond the individual consciousness and recognition of all despite their differences is essential. The “tension” between the ideal of a shared fate and the reality of obstacles is what makes Dabral’s art compelling. Dabral does not hide or sugarcoat the dark realities of life rather forces the readers to face it and change it.

Close Reading of “Skin”

Dabral’s poem “Skin” explores the widespread and deeply rooted superficiality that influences most part of human interaction in this contemporary society that is fixated on outward appearances and the carefully crafted presentation of self. The poem’s recurring theme, “only

the skin is visible everywhere” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92), sets forth a grim and disturbing reality where the true depth of inner substance, the intricacies of character, and the authenticity of human experience are obscured and overshadowed by emphasis on the external. The metaphor of the skin transcends its literal biological connotation to symbolize the superficial and misleading layer of existence. Skin here is the outward display and meticulously constructed facade that dominates perception, shapes social interactions, and dictates value in the contemporary society. The strong declaration that “all universe made of skin” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) implies an all-encompassing shallowness that infiltrates nearly every facet of human life and where outward appearances have tragically become the primary measure of individual worth, social status, and in fact the essence of human interaction.

The impact of “whose wandering and spinning images the TV / displays night and day” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) amplifies this widespread fixation on the superficial. Television is a powerful medium of mass communication which actively sustains and enhances society’s emphasis on outward appearances, incessantly inundating viewers with idealized and unattainable representations of beauty and success. This, in turn, solidifies a cultural mindset where importance is mainly placed on surface aesthetics and carefully curated outward representations, rather than on the inherent qualities of authentic inner self. The phrase, “everything dedicated to the skin” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) highlights the disturbing reach of this superficiality, which seeps into nearly every aspect of contemporary life, from personal grooming habits and consumer habits to the very nature of social interactions and personal relationships. The satirical illustration of the abundance of “various kinds of cream unguents foam towels / falling from the sky” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) effectively critiques the relentless consumerism that is fervently driven by the pervasive societal quest for flawless and eternally youthful skin.

Dabral makes a point that this intense and frequently obsessive preoccupation with the superficial layer of human establishes a significant and insurmountable barrier to the nurturing of authentic and meaningful human connections. The remark that “men and women are seen trading / desirable skin” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) depicts human relationships as transactional dealings primarily based on physical allure, lacking the deeper emotional, intellectual, and spiritual bonds that form the foundation of genuinely authentic relationships. Therefore there is always a hollowness in these kinds of relationships. The portrayal of love as merely “love’s the name of a layer of love” and spirituality as “spirituality is like spirituality’s crust” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) further underscores the concerning absence of depth, genuine engagement, and authentic experience in fundamental aspects of human existence. The grim statement that ‘only the periphery is spread out everywhere’ reinforces the notion that we are relegated to interacting with the surface of things, perpetually engaging on a shallow level, and unable to experience true human connection and understanding.

The ease with which “an ugly / thought hides easily beneath a beautiful surface” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) chillingly highlights the inherently misleading nature of relying solely on external appearances and the considerable challenge of accurately discerning true character, sincere intentions, and genuine inner qualities in a world overwhelmingly fixated on the artfully constructed facade. The pervasive and unrelenting focus on external beauty and superficial allure can effectively conceal inner distress, negative motives, a fundamental lack of empathy, and a profound absence of genuine character, thereby significantly obstructing the establishment of authentic connections rooted in mutual understanding, sincere trust, and shared vulnerability. Even the seemingly esteemed figure of the “crowned god” appears “wearing / a divine skin” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92), indicates that even the most seemingly virtuous and respected individuals can also be perceived and judged primarily through the constraining

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lens of superficial appearance, potentially obscuring their true essence, the complexities of their being, and the possibility for authentic connection beyond the external.

The poem delineates a contrast between the prevailing superficial “skin” that defines modern perception and a different type of “skin” that encapsulates the essence of authentic human experience. This “other skin that doesn’t sprout / out of a living wakeful pulsing body / becoming its beauty / that doesn’t breathe / whose hair don’t stand on end / that doesn’t feel pain” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) symbolizes a lifeless, artificial fragility that defines real human existence. It is the “skin” that fails to mirror the inner life and the intricate range of human emotions as well as the shared human experience that underpins true and meaningful connection.

The sharp and opposing reference to “Kabir’s dead skin / whose deep breath burns iron turning it into ash” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) acts as a powerful and enlightening counterbalance to the lifeless superficiality that dominates the contemporary world. Kabir’s “dead skin,” although lacking biological vitality, bears the substantial weight of profound spiritual experience, transformative insight, and a life lived with steadfast authenticity and profound depth. This stands in stark contrast to the inherent lifelessness and widespread superficiality of the “skin” that regrettably prevails in today’s world, a “skin” that lacks the ability for deep emotional connection, genuine empathy, or transformative influence. Dabral reflects that modern life is marked by a “skin” that “never hears when called out / that doesn’t spout blood doesn’t rend the heart when touched” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92), sharply emphasizing its incapacity to genuinely engage with true human emotion, empathize with suffering, or experience the raw reality of shared human fragility.

The observation “sorrow lies on the surface / a river of thick skin disappearing into the sea of wrinkles / washes away fragrant toilets towels unguents” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92) further highlights the superficial and ultimately insufficient interaction with the fundamental truths of genuine human suffering. Sorrow is an essential and unavoidable aspect of the human experience which remains tragically externalized and is unable to penetrate the dense and unyielding layer of superficiality that characterizes modern life. The soothing and visually appealing of “fragrant toilet towels unguents,” is emblematic of the societal obsession with external cleanliness, superficial aesthetics, and transient attempts to cover up the inevitable signs of aging and decay. But these material things are futile and insignificant in the face of deeper emotional realities, simply swept away by the relentless flow of human experience and the unstoppable passage of time.

The lines, “this is our skin-suffused time this is our abode / our thoughts dance upon it / look at a poetry devoid of disease grief decay death / it lies here drying up like skin” (Dabral, 2016, p. 92), provide an unsettling evaluation of the fundamental human condition in a time shaped by superficiality and a pervasive evasion of the messy truths of genuine existence. The current era is portrayed as “skin-suffused,” signifying that human beings are drenched and defined by this overwhelming focus on the external and the superficial.

Dabral hints that even the deepest reflections that we can make, the core of our inner experiences and our ability for self-examination, merely “dance upon it,” unable to see through the real truths, face the intricacies of human existence, or relate to the genuine realities of our collective human frailty. The haunting and deeply impactful image of “a poetry stripped of disease grief decay death” lying “drying up like skin” acts as a potent and scathing critique of a society that fervently attempts to cleanse, romanticize, and evade the challenging, unifying elements of human life that connect us in shared vulnerability and compassion. This sanitized

and superficial form of poetry, akin to the lifeless “skin” it depicts, lacks the essential vitality of lived experiences, the raw genuineness of human feelings, and the ability for authentic connection becoming a dry and lifeless portrayal of a world fixated on fleeting surface appearances and the evasion of a more significant engagement.

Conclusion

Mangalesh Dabral’s poems, “This Number Does Not Exist” and “Skin,” present an investigation of the intricate and contradictory paradox of connection in a contemporary era characterized by the overwhelming presence of technology and a deeply rooted societal focus on superficiality. While technology initially appears to effortlessly connect us across extensive distances and modern culture relentlessly advocates an unreachable and idealized external image, these impactful poems expose the gradual yet significant decline of true human closeness, the rising frequency of superficial exchanges, and the loneliness that tragically arises from a fundamental absence of authentic and meaningful interaction with one another. Both poems offer a fresh perspective of seeing ordinary things in an extraordinary way, which is the skill of Mangalesh Dabral. Together, these two compelling poems act as an urgent reminder of the essential and lasting human yearning for genuine and unmediated connection that transcends the misleading superficiality of technological interfaces and the transient allure of mere outward appearances, urging us to look beyond the surface, nurture empathy, and to actively pursue genuine engagement with the complexities and vulnerabilities of the human spirit. Dabral’s verses stand as a powerful and lasting critique of a modern existence where the very promise of widespread connection results in the dark pit of alienation and artificiality.

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Bio-note

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